



PHOTO: JULIE WILSON - RIDER: MARY HANNA

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**How often do the assessments of your dressage test say "Horse not straight"? Straightness is one of the basic principles of schooling and is one of the factors judges both in the showing and the arena take into account...but is it the horse or you that isn't straight?**

Horses cannot move straight, whether on a straight line or bending along a circle,

unless we riders assume the responsibility for being straight ourselves. When your horse seems to be crooked or his hindquarters drift off to one side or the other, check your own body position before you apply aids to correct the horse's position.

Do you really know where your body is as you move through space? You may feel 'straight' as you stand and walk. You may have a mental picture of yourself with your back straight and your shoulders square. The

# Get it Straight -

## MORE ON LEG AIDS...

reality, however, may be that you carry one shoulder a little higher or a little farther forward than the other. One foot may point straight, the other at an angle. You may literally lead with your chin. Or you may pull your chin toward your chest in a way that tilts your eyes down. Or, like many people, your shoulders slump because you sit slumped in a chair for most of the day.

When riders have incorrect posture on the ground, they often 'feel' straight when they mount a horse even though they are sitting crooked.

**CHECK YOUR STRAIGHTNESS**

- Stand in front of a mirror and look to see if your hands hang at the same height; whether one hand hangs a little more forward or back than the other; if you are toeing out with one foot; or for any other indicators that your posture is not 100 per cent correct.

- Then stand sideways to the mirror and assume a posture that feels like your riding posture. If your lower back is hollow, you probably tip forward onto your pubic bone when you are in the saddle. If your lower back is flat or rounded, you probably collapse your upper body to some degree.

- If you look in the mirror and see both hands hanging evenly by your sides, try this little experiment. Stretch one arm for about 20 seconds. Do some shoulder rolls. Bring the arm across your chest, take the elbow in your other hand, and gently pull to stretch your shoulder

weight evenly from left to right so you feel equal weight on both seat bones. Imagine your nose, chin, belly button, and spine in alignment with your horse's spine.

- Keep in mind that the middle of your saddle may not necessarily be the middle of your horse. Sometimes, a crooked horse will move the saddle off centre. If you sit crookedly or put uneven weight on your seat bones or into your stirrups, you will move the saddle off centre. Even if the saddle slips to one side of the horse's midline, you must still sit in the middle of the horse.

- Practice putting equal weight on both seat bones when you are off your horse, too. Sit in a firm chair or on a large exercise ball and practice how it feels to maintain your straight upper body posture while weighting and unweighting each seat bone without dropping your shoulder. This will help you develop 'muscle memory' and overcome bad habits that may be holding back your progress.

In the beginning, getting equal weight on both seat bones may feel 'crooked' to you. I sometimes ask riders to pick their seat up out of the saddle and shift to the right or left in order to get their weight centred on the horse's back and equally on both seat bones. Your brain senses this is 'wrong' and it can take hours in the saddle to retrain your body's perception of where it is in space. Most people have a stronger or weaker side and this causes the unevenness when mounted.

*Be observant about your position, be patient, and just keep putting in time in the saddle.*

and upper back.

- Now hold the arm above your head, take the elbow in your opposite hand, and apply pressure until you feel a gentle stretch. Let your arms hang at your sides again. Do you see a difference in length now? Usually you will, which shows how much tension we can carry in our bodies without even realizing it. This tension can cause uneven weight in your seat bones.

Feedback about your upper body position from an instructor or a ground helper is invaluable when developing straight posture. Videotaping your riding sessions is an excellent way to notice subtle postural habits that may be affecting your riding. Slow the motion and pay attention to the position of your upper body, the position of your lower back, the position of your legs, the position of your seat from left to right (viewed from the back) and to whether or not your hips are following the horse's motion.

**SPREADING THE WEIGHT**

Once you develop a feel for 'straightness' in your upper body, you need to develop a feel for 'equal weight' on both seat bones. Beginner riders typically sit more heavily on one seat bone than on the other.

- As you sit on your horse in a 'neutral' position, distribute your

Again, feedback from a ground observer is helpful. Pay attention to your horse's feedback, too. If your horse starts out moving straight but then begins to carry his head or hindquarters off the track, evaluate how your position changed. Try a position correction and observe how it affects your horse's position.

Uneven weight on your seat bones can affect any gait. However, it becomes obvious at the canter. When I ask someone to put more weight on their inside seat bone at the canter, they often lean in that direction or drop their shoulder on that side.

If your horse is bowing to the outside or does not want to turn to the inside, you must literally pick yourself up and reposition your weight slightly to the inside. Some riders brace in their inside stirrup at the canter, which pushes their weight to the outside. Instead, think of kneeling on the ground with your inside knee to lengthen your thigh and bring your inside seat bone deeper into the saddle.

If your horse is crooked, it becomes more important than ever that you are straight and do not allow the horse's crookedness to put you wrong. Continuing to work in a forward manner while staying straight fixes many problems, but it takes time to retrain muscles to give up old habits. Be observant about your position, be patient, and just keep putting in time in the saddle.