



ARE YOU PERFECTLY POSITIONED?

WORDS: JORDAN WILLIAMS

Poetry in motion – the jumping rider. Successful riders spend years developing the ultimate position, giving due regard to creating a pleasing picture while all the time remaining effective, in order to maximise their overall performance.

But what are us mere mortals to do? Those of us who compete week in week out, for pure enjoyment, in reality may not even realise we have developed bad habits. We are just mystified when our result is not as good as we would like!

Most position faults are greatly exaggerated by jumping. There are a few common positional faults which occur more often than others, so here we will identify them and offer some solutions worth trying to stamp them out for good!

The Hunchback of Notre Dame:

Today more than ever most riders have to have a real job to support their expensive hobby. All this extra work means many of us are forced to exercise and train our horses after work. Following a long day at the office, most people are mentally if not physically tired and the typical equestrian just can't bring themselves to worry about their riding position after all that. This can easily be habit forming and, speaking from experience, it is a very difficult habit to cure yourself of, more especially when you ride alone and have no voice of reason on the ground. A poor position, along with spoiling your overall appearance, makes your back and seat less than effective.

A typical slack position in this instance usually involves a rounded back and drooping shoulders. The reason this happens is because generally the rider is so busy focusing on the horse, they unwittingly watch the horse at the same time, causing them to look down. This rolls the shoulders forward without you suspecting a thing! Next the rider will relax even more, collapsing the stomach and softening and rounding their back. It is the horse who should round his back, not the rider! This lack of correct position results in a weak rider or passenger, who is perpetually ahead of the horse's movement.

Being ahead of the horse is not ever a good plan. It only takes a stumble or other unexpected thing to happen, and you will end up on the ground. When jumping, a rider ahead of the horse can mean the horse lands more heavily in front, or cause him to drop a hind leg and, along with that, a rail.

The remedy for this problem is relatively simple but requires discipline to execute - control where you are looking!

It is sometimes a huge help to have a nagging conscience on the ground to remind you of this fault, as concentrating deeply on your horse will mean you can easily revert without realising it. This type of reminder can be given by anyone handy – not necessarily an instructor at an exorbitant hourly rate! I have used my husband, who has absolutely no comprehension of how to ride, but can tell me if I am looking down. (Refer to the article on divorce – this is likely if you disagree with him, remember he is looking objectively on and trying to assist you!!)

Another useful exercise involves a line of small 'bounce' fences (less than a full stride between each jump). If you pick a point up ahead of the line and focus on it, your position will improve markedly. ***Just remember to always look up where you are planning to go – I have heard it said many a time, if you look down, you will end up down there!***

Four or five obstacles are probably enough for this exercise and, as with all jumping exercises, it isn't ever about how high you can jump. In fact, your first fence is perfectly acceptable if it is a pole on the ground and trotting is fine to approach the line. Pick your focal point beyond the end of the grid. The fact that the horse has to bounce over the jumps will (a) keep you awake and, more importantly, (b) help you keep the correct upper body position so you don't bounce out of the saddle. It is not necessary for you to look down at the horse or the jumps, hopefully his eyes will take care of that!

Rocking Chair Grannies:

Picture the quintessential granny in her rocking chair – bottom right at the back, legs well forward, rocking gently to and fro. While I realise many horses do resemble a rocking chair and, a 'rocking horse ride' is highly prized, unfortunately age is not a prerequisite for some riders adopting this position in the saddle. In this position, the rider looks like they are sitting in a chair. While the back is straight, the rider is sitting completely on their seat bones; thighs close to horizontal and their feet and lower legs are well forward. The result is the opposite of being ahead of the movement; here the rider is behind the horse, constantly pushing the horse forward. It is a fault particularly common in riders with a dressage history, who have been encour-

aged to send their horse forward with their seat but never had their position corrected.

In the chair position, what happens is the rider is using the seat rather than the leg as the main driving aid. This means that the rider is behind the movement of the horse, which causes even more problems when you are jumping. The rider is likely to try and catch up with the movement by throwing their weight forward at the fence, usually at exactly the same time the horse is attempting to balance himself as he takes off.

The rider needs to go back to the basics to remedy this problem.

The aim of this exercise is to make the rider adopt the correct jumping position. Using a series of about four cavalletti, set at a suitable trotting distance, the rider should approach at rising trot and then hold a two-point position through the line. You can extend this exercise by raising the cavalletti settings gradually.

While this may seem like kindergarten stuff, it is not so easy for a rider stuck in the lazy-boy recliner position to get out of the saddle. In the first instance you may find the rider sitting in the saddle and still trying to use their seat to help the horse over the poles. This is a classic case of practice makes perfect and a patient instructor should ensure that the basics are mastered well before allowing the rider to progress to cantering courses.

Windmill Legs:

An insecure seat is never helped by a loose and flapping lower leg. It is near on impossible to communicate effectively with your horse if your legs are flying around wildly. So the only other option you have is to try and balance as well as communicate with your hands. These riders will generally sit atop their horse, gripping for dear life with their thighs and pivoting off their knees. When the horse takes off at a fence, the heels come up and the lower leg shoots backwards. Without any useful lower leg, their only hope of salvation lies with their hands, which will be buried deep in the horse's neck or white knuckled on the reins. ***Effective and steady legs are the anchors that allow you to***

remain balanced on your horse.

Aside from the fact that all this activity up top will drive a sensitive horse insane and you are unwittingly sending mixed messages in the aids department, this is not the safest position for a rider to be in. The rider is ahead of the movement of the horse. The horse is off balance when he lands, which could lead to him stumbling or having to speed up in order to get back ahead of the rider.

The following is a handy exercise to cure the swinging lower leg. Set up two small jumps at slightly greater than a right angle. Using an open rein (think wide rein) to make turns over two low jumps, you will quickly learn that you can't use your hands as a crutch. Without them to balance on, you have to keep your lower leg in the correct place and use it to maintain your balance, or you'll fall forward. Holding your hand away from the horse's neck removes it as a point of balance.

Approach the first fence on a straight line at the trot. Sit quietly and let the jump come to you. Wait for your horse to take off; don't get ahead of him by trying to anticipate this. When he does leave the ground, think about pushing all your weight down into your heels and, at the same time, open your inside rein and turn your horse left towards the next fence. Jump this exactly like the first one. Then open the right rein and complete a figure eight by returning to the first jump again.

As well as encouraging better leg position by making it impossible to balance on an open rein, your legs are also finding themselves in the right position so that your turns are successful. The outside leg needs to hold the horse in on the turns while the inside leg, on the girth, will stop him falling inwards.

This exercise serves two purposes; you get the idea of balancing correctly on your lower leg and it also removes the tendency to rush at the fences.

Your overall performance in any jumping event is critical to achieving a good outcome, so remember to perfect your own effective position first and then the horse will eventually follow your lead.

HATTON HORSE FLOATS

"Excellence in Horse Travel"



Hatton Horse Floats have been manufacturing and distributing premium horse transport throughout New Zealand since 1995. Hatton Horse Floats are proud manufacturers of New Zealand horse floats that stand the test of time. We pride ourselves in our expertise to build quality horse floats that provide the best and reliable transportation. We have designed a range of floats with the purpose of satisfying both the budget and diverse needs of our clientele.

With over 60 years combined experience in the equine industry and with our engineering expertise we recognise the importance for safe horse transport. Hatton Horse Floats are proud to have our name on our product.

We have developed and structured our own design in the horse float industry to satisfy all kinds of horse enthusiasts throughout New Zealand.



P: (03) 312 0474
E: sharon@hattonfloats.co.nz
www.hattonfloats.co.nz

62 Birchdale Place, Ohoka, RD 2, Kaiapoi 7692
A/hours Lyn - 0272 067439

STYLE - SAFETY - COMFORT