

COMMON JUMPING FAULTS

Developing the Rider's Position

by Frank Madden

The Warm Up

The rider should let the horse warm up in a natural state, concentrating on the horse's natural balance, as well as on impulsion and straightness. During the warm up period, the rider should find his balance in conjunction with the movement of the horse, while the horse is getting comfortable with his own natural balance. The rider's body will, at this time, be slightly in front of the vertical.

Next, the rider, while thoughtful of position and location of the leg, addresses the length of stirrup. The stirrup length should be slightly longer, for a more open angle at the knee. This allows for a more intensive schooling of the horse on the flat and during cavalletti work. The longer stirrup creates an easier position for the rider to gain comfort and use the full axis of the seat and weight.

The warm up period provides an opportunity for the rider to go through a checklist. A systematic evaluation of the balance of the equipment, the adjustment, and maintenance of the spurs, the whip, the adjustment of the bit, the length of martingale, and checking the girth is done at this time.

During the warm up period, the rider should become comfortable with the common sense use of the eyes. This means noticing and being aware of many things, including using the ring around the jumps and staying away and at distance from other horses. It also means glancing at the poll from time to time to heighten the rider's awareness of his own horse.

Most importantly, during the warmup, the rider must begin to adjust and make use of all of the aids with balance and clarity.

Equitation

The definition of *Equitation* is simply "good riding in any situation; both good situations or difficult situations."

The rider needs to recognize that in order to influence the horse he or she must evaluate the horse's natural impulsion. Some horses have a natural abundance while others have an incredible lack of impulsion. Many are unsteady. *Impulsion* is defined simply as the horse's desire to want to go at all moments and in all situations. How does the rider test the horse's desire to want to go? When the rider takes contact with the mouth, the horse's reaction to the contact will show itself within the impulsion.

The rider needs to have the ability to manage the horse's tempo of beat while using the ability to use the hand correctly for consistently regulating speed of rhythm. I like to see the rider create contact and gain control over maintaining activity of the horse's beat. Each gait has its proper rhythm or beats. For the walk, four beats, the trot, two beats, and three for the canter.

A rider needs to recognize not only how to use the driving aids but also how those aids influence the horse's impulsion. A rider's legs must be educated enough so that he can maintain calming, steady pressure with them while exerting very little influence on the horse. The rider also adds pressure with the leg in order to have the horse move from that pressure, whether it is forward or lateral movement.

The rider must feel comfortable with the proper use of the spur to sharpen the horse's reaction and timing to the leg. One of the simplest exercises to test this response would be maintaining contact to the mouth while making transitions at the walk, into the halt, and forward back to the walk. I consider this putting the horse up to the bit and being able to keep him up to the bit. Both rider and horse need to understand this in each gait, as well as within the transitions between the gaits.

Another exercise that's very simple, which tests a horse's impulsion and causes the rider to check his or her tempo, is to flex the horse's nose to the left or right without interrupting their rhythm.

When the rider has influenced the horse's desire to go forward enough, he or she may begin to influence the horse's natural longitudinal and lateral balance. This must be established and maintained in any degree of longitudinal and lateral work, in your flat work, cavalletti work, and ultimately while schooling over fences. With these basic fundamentals understood by first the rider, and then the horse, the horse is placed in a much greater position to succeed with his presented tasks.

Riding fundamentals, in theory, need to be somewhat understood so that the rider has an idea as to how major and minor position faults will impact them and their horse. I believe that developing a balanced seat on a rider is the first and last thing to their riding. Correct balance must be achieved both in and out of the saddle with comfort being equal in both. Gaining control over the rider's balance in all situations (for example, being at speed, and through turns), will then give all of the other aids, both natural and artificial, the ability to be used at any strength and with accurate timing.

The Seat

Learning to ride in a forward seat is vital. This is ultimately the rider's competition seat. Different ways to describe this seat are: *half seat*, *two point*, and a *forward seat*. All of which say the same thing: "riding with the motion of movement."

The forward seat needs to be learned with the correct length of stirrup, never being too long. The rider needs to feel comfortable using the stirrups to stand out of the saddle. Some great exercises for this include working the rider on a lunge line with their hands on their hips, behind their back, or with their arms out and to the side. This would be an exercise and test of their balance in the forward seat. Making transitions while in the two-point is also an excellent exercise.

The next seat used in riding is the seat that we use to influence the horse. The terms that can be used for this seat are a *full seat*, *three-point riding* or a *deep seat*. This is where the rider needs strength and control to keep their upper body on or close to the vertical plane. It is absolutely crucial that the rider can attain and maintain this position despite anything a horse might throw at them from aggressive movements, moments of heaviness or stiffness, and even during moments of submission. Some exercises to achieve this position would be working without irons and developing the control and strength needed to maintain this seated position. I find that most riders gain this control quickly in the walk and trot but usually struggle at the canter. This is the most exciting gait for the horse and becomes difficult for green riders to manage. Whether it be on the lunge line or free riding, I would advise continued work without stirrups, and have the rider do a great deal of transitions. This will tax the position enough that it will gain the independence needed.

When this position is used in conjunction with the hands, the rider is "riding against the horse and his movement." This is how we slow horses down and collect them, how we lift horses to lighten them, and how we move horses from side to side to supple them. This inflicts a great amount of resistance to the horse in order to make sometimes subtle and sometimes dramatic changes to the horse's carriage to the degree that a horse will begin to evade by questioning his desire and ability to continue to maintain active movement forward.

The next use of the seat is done in conjunction with the legs, or any of the driving aids. We call this "riding behind the motion." Keeping the upper body in a position close to (or even slightly behind) the vertical becomes a very strong position in keeping the horse active and moving. This is necessary, especially in collected and extended work.

The strength and independence of a rider's seat and upper body while used in conjunction with hands and legs is what ultimately teaches a horse self-carriage. That is when a rider becomes worthy of standing in the stirrups, getting up into the forward seat; where the horse and rider are working as a pair, both in balance.

The Legs

Rider's legs are aids that influence the horse's forward activity and the lateral movement of (mostly) the haunches. It is of absolute importance for the rider's leg to be in a position where it allows the horse to listen, yet keeps the rider in balance. That position is with the rider's heel being directly beneath their hip and the stirrup leather lying on a vertical line. The grip on the rider's leg, when they are in the seated position, should be on the lower, back part of the calf, encouraging a somewhat relaxed knee. All of this is important in order to attain lightness in the horse to the rider's leg.

With this position of the leg, the rider has what is referred to as an "educated leg." An educated leg has the control, skills, and knowledge to begin educating the horse to the leg through the use of spurs.

A common fault in a green or uneducated leg would be a *braced leg*. The braced leg occurs when the lower leg of the rider is ahead of the girth and is driven forward. Other leg faults would be a leg that is too far back, a busy or swinging leg, and pinching at the knees with almost no use of the lower leg.

Correcting these problems begins with the correct placement of the stirrup on the ball of the foot. This allows the rider to flex his heels downward. It is also important that the rider's stirrup is not too long. This allows riders to maintain weight in their stirrups, permits their heels to drop down, and enables them to use their weight to get into a two-point position. As a result, the rider's leg will find its most stable and effective position. Aided by this position and the correct spur (as well as the adjustment of it), the rider's leg can then send very subtle or aggressive messages. These cues, along with accurate timing, school the horses to both go forward and sideways.

This educated leg is produced by placing required reactions in all environments; from the simplest reactions from the halt into the walk, to shoulder-in work, counter canter work, riding gymnastics, showing, to even schooling natural and water jumps.

Contact and Hands

A rider's hands are usually the first aid that a rider gravitates towards. Other than smooth and steady hands, and the position of the hands, I believe it should be the last thing that we work on with intermediate and advanced riding. Greater attention needs to be placed on the seat and legs in order to achieve good or even educated hands in a rider.

A rider's hands, used correctly, have the means to change a horse's speed, length of stride (in terms of collecting), and move the horse's shoulders left and right. They should also be able to lift and lighten the horse's balance from his forehead so that the rider can maintain the independence of his upper body while maintaining the contact with the horse's mouth.

It is crucial to have the correct length of rein and the correct line to the horse's mouth. The length of rein should constantly be checked and adjusted, dictated by the angle of the rider's upper body and the balance of the horse.

Every horse's neck and rider's arms are of different lengths. There are some guidelines that should be used to find the correct length of rein and placement of the rider's hands. Most importantly, a rider's hands should not be too low. A safe place would be a few inches above the withers. The second reference point used as a guideline is to maintain contact with the hands slightly in front of the withers. Those two reference points end up creating a slight bend through the rider's elbows. This allows the rider to increase or decrease the pressure to the horse's mouth while keeping the independence of the upper body. The pressure placed on the corners and the bars of the horse's mouth can range from light pressure to extremely strong and resistant pressure, all the while trying to maintain some degree of elasticity in the rider's arm.

The rider's thumbs are turned so as the closed thumb and fingers are turned upward, just inside of the vertical. This, along with the slight bend in the elbow, will protect the elasticity when the horse's mouth has been taken.

Riding a horse properly with seat and legs, keeping him up to the bit, and maintaining contact with the rider's hands will eventually lead into educated hands. The result is traveling on the bit and demonstrating acceptance to all the aids.

Many of the faults that I find with riders and the way they use their hands stem from their panic in trying to place a horse in a frame. In most cases, the result is totally false. With their lack of attention to seat and legs, they begin to compromise the correct position and placement of their hands with the horse's mouth. Typical short cuts include the rider with too low and separated hands sliding the bit from side to side. Another common mistake is over bending the neck. This can quickly lead to the horse that becomes over flexed and results in the balance being too heavy on the forehead. Often, this occurs to the point that the horse over bends to the degree which he uses to escape the bit. I see this as more of an epidemic problem in today's riding, as opposed to the high headed, above the bit horse of yesteryears.

I find that correcting the problems mentioned starts with disciplining the rider in maintaining the shape and location of the hands while he or she is being taught how to better use the seat and legs. This needs to be practiced in all three gaits as well as in the collected, working, and strong speeds at each gait, both while seated in the saddle as well as out of the saddle. The ultimate goal for a rider is to create a forward going, adjustable, straight, and light horse, so that you have total harmony and rhythm with your horse.

Common Faults

There are many other common position faults in riding that are found in very specific situations. Over time, these errors can become chronic and difficult habits to break.

The rider's eyes, I believe, should be used properly to help maintain balance while looking ahead, locating the best footing, the best route, and the best way to stay away from others. Riders should also learn to use their eyes two different ways. *Looking* is one and *glancing* is another. Glancing should be used as the rider takes interest in the horse's poll. This will help determine the balance of the horse and the amount of flexion exhibited by the horse.

I believe one of the best ways for people to use their eyes properly is to place them in busy environments. Rings with jumps, lessons with other riders, and making different patterns and turns will give the riders the incentive to learn and practice looking ahead.

Another chronic problem is that riders do too much with their hands and upper bodies when they jump. Some refer to this as *jumping ahead of the horse*, *ducking*, and *throwing the body*. This problem stems from too long of a stirrup and too long and quick of a release. As a result, the rider ends up compromising the angle and quickness of the upper body. This will cause the horses to jump from off of their forehand and to become quicker and flatter in their jumping style. The end result is that the horses will become like the riders, by being ahead of themselves.

I believe the corrections can be quite simple. Beginning with a single cavalletti on the ground, I would want to see a rider trot and canter it with very little movement of their torso and hands. A lot of them then discover just how little they need to do to allow the horse to do his job and use himself.

Another good exercise to break this habit would be cantering a line of jumps adding a stride or two in order to change both the balance of the horse and/or rider. This will place the rider into an environment that will require him to use a much slower and shorter release with his hands. In turn, this will calm down the rider's position and will begin to retard the horse's flat and quick jump, which had been produced due to this rider's habit.

Often, when riders develop the habit of jumping ahead of the motion, their lower leg becomes compromised as well by wanting to slip back too far. This can inadvertently excite, drive, or even spur a horse forward at the absolute wrong moment, making it impossible to school a horse over jumps against, behind, or even with the motion.

One of the more major position faults is when a rider is left behind the horse as they are leaving the ground. This is one of the major position faults for a rider because it inflicts the most amount of discomfort to a horse when being asked to do his job, which is jumping a fence. In severe cases of being left behind, riders not only punish a horse's back and loins with their seat and weight but can also punish a horse's mouth with their hands as they get left behind. In learning new exercises, I feel it is very important that riders use a milder or conventional bit so that when this sort of situation arises, the horse becomes less of a victim to the rider's mistake.

Getting left behind is usually due to a horse's poor ridability or a rider's sense of timing. A cure for getting left behind would be checking the rider's length of stirrup, making sure it is not too long, then making sure the rider's upper body is not too erect or even behind on the approach to the jump. This would also be an appropriate time to school a rider to become comfortable grabbing the mane, which is a bit of a crutch but it is the better of two evils and should be used at any level of riding in an emergency so as not to punish the horse.

There are many different ways in jumping horses to release their mouths, and there are many different ways to teach young riders on how to release the mouth. With beginner and intermediate riders, I think it is very important that they learn how to release a horse's mouth part way up the crest of the neck so they can develop a good sense of timing and learning how to give freedom to the horse.

This release, done over time, often becomes an exaggerated "over release" in the sense that it gets too long and too quick. This is the early stages of jumping ahead of the motion. With that being said, we need to begin teaching a shorter, slower release that will prevent the rider from ending up ahead of the horse, will keep the rider in a better balance and able to manage the horse's performance, and will become the early stages of influencing the horse's jump before flight, during flight, and after. This will lead us to an in-hand or automatic release that gives us total control of the horse's direction, speed, and thrust. Without learning the more advanced releases, you'll end up with a chronic very long, very quick—almost a throw away—release. This can be seen more prevalently in the hunter divisions.

Whether you are riding a hunter, jumper or equitation horse, it becomes a necessity to be able to have total control of their balance. To fix the over release, I find it very helpful to have riders work on small circles over jumps, small figure eights over jumps, or even a bending line of three very short strides where their shorter release has to constantly manage the horse's speed, line, and balance to perform the three strides properly. That needs to be done in both directions.

Another good exercise would be to jump an oxer into a line and add strides to a vertical at the end of the line, or even trot out. It becomes very important for riders to recognize that horses don't mind being asked to jump with steady and even firm contact while in flight of the jump. It is not at all the same thing as hitting a horse in the mouth. The bottom line is that a proper release by a rider should be slow, smooth, and—most of all—natural.

The last position fault for me involves seeing a rider come into the ring with no spur and no stick, have the horse stop at the first fence, and then give the horse a pat. The next worst would be the rider with the spur and with the whip failing to use both with the stop or the cheat. Next would be the rider with the spur and whip trying to use them and not knowing how. Last would be using them when they are not needed.

We spend a lot of time studying our natural aids. We need to spend equal time studying our artificial aids: the spur and the whip. I think it is very important that riders start with shorter, lower spurs and carry a short stick over rails on the ground or low jumps, as well as on the flat, in order to learn the use of those aids and the timing of them. For example, riders leaving their reins to use their stick at a spooky jump three or four strides away will soon learn that they are dealing with a run out because they left their reins too early, as opposed to a stop. That is when the lesson of using the stick when the horse leaves the ground needs to be taught. It is also very important to tell students that if they are unable to prevent problems with their riding, they must have the tools, the skills, the timing, and the guts to correct problems.

In Conclusion

The most important thing for us to remember about common position faults is that those faults directly equate to poor or incorrect riding. As I explained earlier, the word *equitation* means good riding, whether it is while dealing with subtle influences over the horse or very dramatic ones. In the end, good riding and horsemanship combine to create a forward, straight, balanced, and supple horse. When our horses are comfortable with our riding, we then become able to communicate with them in ways that minimize each other's faults and make the most of our strengths.