

Fitness Tip for Riders: Steps to Better Posture & Hands

Part 1: A Straighter Back

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Riders who are searching for better posture and hand position can sometimes feel like they are looking for the Holy Grail. Whether a person is standing on the ground, seated in a chair or sitting on a horse, good body usage is very tied to good posture. When the human frame is properly aligned, it can work efficiently. When it is not, it creates compensating patterns, or workarounds to achieve what is asked. Patterns repeated over time become muscle memory. Movement, stimulation of the muscle, and loading of the tissues over time creates strength patterns which may re-inforce the postural alignment issues.

It is a little like the case of the chicken and the egg. After a while, it can be difficult to tell how much of the riding habit comes from body shape, and how much of the body shape comes from life and riding habits. After a long time, bones can even fuse or become shaped to the posture they have become used to. Your grandmother's advice not to slouch or you would get stuck that way, is basically true if given enough slouching, and enough time.

For example, a rider with shoulders that roll forward and down may also discover that they tend to drive and sit with a slouch in their upper body. Because such a slouch tips the rider 'on the forehand', the body has to compensate by leaning the shoulders back. The rider's head often looks like it is poking forward, and a hollow is created in the lower back. The forces and pulls through the back tend to drive the pelvis to a tipping forward, which virtually shuts down the lower abdominal and lower back supporting muscles.

A rolled forward pelvis loses the ability to follow the horse's motion correctly, because the seatbones are poked out behind rather than under the rider. The same rider often has a tendency to have rather straight arms because the thrown back shoulders force them to reach for the reins. The spine is kind of crumbling or collapsing downward with increasing curvature or bend in all three sections (neck, upper back (thoracic), lower back (lumbar)).

Some other effects of a slouching posture with leaning back shoulders and hollow back are:

1. Loss of effectiveness in the legs (they have no 'anchor' for strength because the lower core muscles are not providing a strong base in the pelvis).
2. Lower back pain (the lumbar vertebrae experience far too much motion as the motion that was meant to be absorbed by the upper back and pelvis, is transferred to the one area that still has movement)
3. Tension in the shoulders (the poking forward neck and rolled forward shoulders puts weight on the upper trapezius muscle between the neck and shoulders, which much then contract and even thicken and develop stiffness to continually hold up the head and keep the body upright)
4. Loss of ability to have a driving seat and clear half halts (the pelvis is locked down with seat bones escaping backwards, and core muscles are disengaged)
5. Tendency to pull the horse's mouth toward the rider to achieve contact (pushing the hands toward the horse feels really awkward because the arms are so straight)
6. Tendency toward not very good contact: straight arms with locked elbows cannot softly follow the horse's motion. To compensate for having rigid connection with the horse's mouth, the rider sensitive to their horse's mouth tends to then have loose fingers in an attempt to be soft. The result is contact with the horse's mouth that must feel like Morse Code to him- intermittent, and hard to know what's coming next. Certainly not a contact that encourages the horse to reach for the bit and bring his energy up over his back toward the bit.

The first figure shows a rider in a slightly collapsing position. This client is a competent rider who Events. She has struggled with this position for many years, and was poorly set up for good posture by some poor hunter coaching at an early stage which taught her to hollow her back. A natural

predisposition toward the slouching upper back/shoulders also sets her up for a natural tendency to collapse in the saddle, if the problem is not addressed.

The yellow line and arrow show the general shape of the spine, and direction that the seatbones point. The orange arrows show a tilting back of her ribcage, which drives her shoulders back. You can see the reduced bend in the elbow which results. The red circles highlight areas where tension easily builds up in her ride as the muscles in those areas becomes tight from trying to create stability that is not present in her core/trunk area.

The postural issues and compensating patterns are not as visibly affecting her ride when she is jumping, as when she is doing flatwork.

There are exercises this rider can do to allow and encourage more straightness in her spine, which would result in better use of her core, and better seat position. The value of exercises is to train the body to carry and conduct itself correctly, without the rider having to consciously think about it. Regular stretching and strengthening exercises designed to straighten her spine vertically will help. She can get immediate results though, just by being aware of the slouch, and engaging muscles properly to better align her spine and pelvis.

In the second figure, the yellow line and arrow show significantly straighter spine and seatbone alignment. The green arrows point to a nice engagement of the lumbar muscles supporting her lower back (notice there is no more hollow), and a much nicer bend in her elbow. Notice that with better spine alignment she is able to put her feet more under her seat (as much as is possible on a fitness ball), and has lost the clear chair seat from the first picture.

In addition to sitting more mindful of her posture in the saddle, exercises are recommended to help give her postural muscles the stamina needed for riding, and to reduce the tension that has build up over time in her back and shoulders.

