

Riding Bareback to Improve the Seat and Coordination of the Aids from a Balanced Seat

The seat is the focal point of every rider and his horse. Elementary requirements of the rider's seat are to follow the horse's motion, stay in balance with the torso while the limbs used to signal the horse. Acquiring a good seat can take years, however, one way to accelerate your seat's development is to ride bareback.

One purpose of riding bareback is to teach the rider to comfortably stay in balance with an independent seat *without* support from the reins or gripping with the legs. Imagine this bareback technique to develop your seat, as the back yard approach to balanced riding. As we learn to home school ourselves, as well as our horses, often we are not privy to an instructor who can lunge us to develop a seat. Improvising to develop the seat and aid coordination by riding bareback on a broad backed horse or large pony is the next best way.

However, before you proceed, be cautious that no one rides bareback who is not ready. Otherwise, if not ready riding bareback may develop negative habits such as learning to hang onto the reins to maintain balance and/or gripping with the thighs. A rider that is ready to ride bareback is one that can maintain her balance in the saddle independent of the reins.

The Bareback Horse

Your designated bareback horse should be comfortable to ride, round and/ or broad in the back, easily accept being on the bit and, not get upset if a rider begins to bounce, grip, or slide off to one side. The horse's stride should be comfortable, not too bouncy or choppy. It is best if the horse can keep a slow rhythm at the trot with out too much coaxing because the rider will already have his hands full attempting to remain balanced and relaxed without the need to apply driving aids and half halts to keep the horse steady! A good canter is not necessary because all of *this* bareback work is done at a sitting trot.

A horse that is adept and capable to do lateral work such as quarter turns, shoulder-in, haunches-in, leg yielding and, the entry to all lateral work, ten meter circles will especially challenge the bareback rider. It is when the rider performs lateral movements bareback, that the seat's development and the rider's coordination with the aids will be emphasized.

For many equestrians, riding bareback at a walk can be challenging. Therefore, before a rider could effectively perform lateral movements, he must be able to sit the trot comfortably bareback and minimally ride transitions, straight lines away from the wall, serpentines and large circles. Of course, being able to do all this bareback with the horse on the bit is a feat in itself. So, first achieve these above basics before asking for lateral work, otherwise the horse will become confused from mixed signals. Obviously, it is recommended that you work with your trainer to learn lateral work if you don't already know the movements.

Leaning, Gripping and Hanging

A rider's position weaknesses surface immediately when she rides bareback. Three major riding weaknesses that appear are leaning, gripping and hanging onto the reins. Unfortunately, many of these rider faults are easier to maintain in a saddle, but not when riding bareback. Hence, the rationale to ride bareback! With conscious effort, these weaknesses can be overcome and a balanced and independent seat developed.

Let's take each of these riding challenges one by one. If a rider *leans* while riding bareback she will slip off to the side she is gripping on and lose her balanced seat. **(photo)** If the rider *grips* with both legs, her seat will not envelop the horse's back, like an upside down letter U, but will be pushed forward off the horse's back and lose its balance. If the rider *clutches* the reins for support, the shoulders will tighten resulting in the rider leaning forward, coming off the seat and she will lose her seat's balance because of tension. All three of these weaknesses will result in the horse being uncomfortable and its performance burdened, not to mention the rider's compromised position.

Many riders lean into a circle when turning with an inside rein, it is one of the most common rider faults whether under saddle or bareback. To keep the horse in balance, the rider must stay perpendicular to the horse keeping her nose positioned in between the horse's ears and the spine in line with the horse's mane. **(photo)** Even when turning to look in on a hunter course for the next fence, a rider's head should still be in the center of her torso and not off to the side. So, if you need to break a habit of leaning while you turn, ride bareback for a week concentrating only on keeping centered in the middle of the horse's back during turns and circles. Once you have succeeded with simple circles and changes of direction, challenge yourself by doing lots of serpentines and other more advanced school figures. In the process, discover how quickly you stop leaning and begin to ride with balance.

Gripping with the legs when riding bareback, whether the calf, knee, or thigh, destabilizes the rider's seat by causing it to move off to one side of the horse's back. Gripping also locks the rider's leg joints that are supposed to work as hinges in order to absorb and *go with* the horse's motion. Riding bareback will reveal any gripping or tightening in any joint area that the rider may mask in a saddle. Nevertheless, if the rider grips while riding bareback and the horse is in any way sensitive, it may be difficult for the horse to maintain a regular rhythm. This is because the horse will interpret the gripping as a driving aid. No good, especially when riding bareback! Less you want to take a fast track lesson on learning how to apply a half halt, or pulley rein!

When you ride bareback, to correct yourself from gripping the rider must continually remind himself to unlock the legs, and get them as long as possible by pushing the knee down and back lengthening the thigh toward the horse's hocks. **(photos)** For the rider who grips attempting to allow the legs to hang down will feel totally unstable at first, since gripping usually causes the rider to shorten the leg by drawing it up. A rider must learn to balance on the seat, and allow the legs to fall and drape out of the hips. Do not try and hold a position with the leg or ankle. Only when a rider can relax on a balanced seat can he be receptive to the horse so that the signals from horse to rider and rider to horse are more easily interpreted. A tense ride will never

be able to understand the horse since all of riding is a 'silent dialog' of muscles communicating to one another via rider to horse and horse to rider !

A rider that breaks the habit of holding and gripping with the legs and develops the ability to release the tension allowing herself to balance on the seat will greatly improve the ability to communicate with the horse. The rider's seat will also improve as the gripping muscles diminish because a rider that releases gripping discovers that real security on the horse comes from a truly balanced seat, not a gripping, tightening and shortening leg.

Similar theories apply for the rider who hangs on the reins for support. If a rider is dependent on the reins, this rider should temporarily be put on the lunge line and ride bareback at a walk so there is some semblance of control. To be safe, put a strap around the horse's neck in case the rider needs to grab onto something to quickly regain balance. A rider who leans on the reins for balance, obviously lacks an independent seat otherwise there would be no need to clutch the reins for support. To stop a rider from hanging on the reins, the rider must simply drop the contact. This will break the habit "right quick!"

Riding with no contact is frightening for the rider who wants to clutch at the reins, however, once the rider learns to trust her balanced seat and relaxes, the temptation to clasp the reins will diminish. Once confidence is gained at the walk slowly move to a slow trot or jog without allowing the rider contact, obviously the horse controlled by the lunge. By going from a walk to the trot and then back to the walk helps the rider to mentally relax. Keep riding these transitions from walk to trot until the rider can maintain a trot on a balanced seat and does not need the reins for support. When the rider can balance on the seat without grasping for the reins then restore a slight contact with the reins, only this time, with the correct amount of contact. Eventually allow the rider to go on her own off the lunge line.

The value of Riding Patterns and Lateral work

When the bareback rider is comfortable at the walk and trot, start riding simple arena patterns with walk - trot transitions. It is when transitions and patterns are ridden that the bareback rider becomes challenged. Suggested patterns are twenty meter circles, spiraling in and out on the circle, three and four loop serpentines, ten and fifteen meter half circles, figure eights, straight lines away from the railing and across the diagonal. Riding along the railing is easiest for horse and rider, so to challenge the use of the balanced seat the rider must ride school figures and transitions and get away from the walls.

When the bareback rider can stay with the horse comfortably at the sitting trot, during transitions and for basic schooling patterns, then it is time to progress to lateral work. Performing lateral movements bareback intensifies the rider's interaction with the horse and teaches the seat to stay in balance with equal weight on both seat bones as each of the rider's aids performs their basic functions. For example - seat in balance, inside leg at the girth, outside leg back, inside rein suppling and outside rein supporting.... A rider has to learn how to coordinate all four limbs simultaneously while the seat and/or torso stays aligned and balanced yet moves with the rhythmic pulsation of the horse's gait.

Maintaining a balanced seat when using your other aids to signal the horse

Even if the rider becomes accomplished at riding the basic patterns bareback, the same rider faults of leaning, gripping and clutching the reins will surface when drilling lateral work only with more exaggeration because the use of the aids are more intricate for lateral work than doing twenty meter circles, serpentines, spirals, and straight lines.

Two main benefits are derived from riding bareback while performing lateral movements. First, it teaches the rider how to balance on the seat and use the limbs without tightening or gripping, because you cannot be tight and gripping and accomplish any decent lateral work. And, second, it teaches the rider how to use the aids without leaning, because you cannot do this either and be successful. As a result, the rider learns to maintain a balanced seat while harmoniously coordinating the aids to become a more effective rider.

Note that your bareback horse does not have to perform 'classical' lateral work, but just the movements and, as mentioned, preferably be on the bit or submissive to the contact. The purpose, at this point is in the training of the rider, not the quality of the horse's training. But for the the rider to learn to develop security and confidence in his seat while coordinating the aids from a balanced, relaxed and following seat and to eliminate legs or hands that grip, a torso that collapses or leans, and a pelvis that perches, slides or tilts.

Lateral Work Bareback

When the rider is comfortably sitting the trot bareback and the horse is hopefully on the bit, start riding the patterns. Again, begin with trot - walk transitions to secure the seat, and the rider's balance so she does not fall forward with the inertia of the downward transition or backwards when the horse goes forward into trot. Move into serpentines then half circles and ten meter circles without the rider leaning, gripping, or tilting. Once these patterns are accomplished with relative ease and stability, begin the lateral work. Begin with quarter turns, leg yielding to the wall, and advance to shoulder in and haunches - in. (It is assumed that the riders and horses already know how to do these movements as this article is not intended to go into those details.)

Inevitably when learning leg yielding, most riders either lean or collapse to the inside when the inside leg is used to move the horse sideways. Or, the rider will turn the torso toward the wall instead of keeping it positioned straight with the shoulders of the horse. Both leaning and collapsing is caused because the rider tightens the leg when it is applied and, as a result, shortens that side of his body. If balance is lost while riding bareback, the rider will lose stability. Therefore, the rider will have difficulty leg yielding bareback unless the leg aid is applied without collapsing or stiffening the body. Consequently, leg yielding bareback teaches the rider to use the leg with an independent or balanced seat while the torso remains in balance.

Another example is with haunches-in. When a rider positions the horse for a haunches-in and puts the outside leg back to displace the haunches while keeping the inside leg forward at the girth for the horse to bend around and keep active, she will usually twist and lean to the outside, tilt and drop the outside hip, or grip with tension as she attempts to move the leg. **(photo)** If any of the above is done when riding

bareback, again, the rider will begin to slide off and lose his seat and balance. These same problems occur when riding in a saddle, but the saddle keeps the rider secure. Thus the value of maneuvering lateral work bareback is there is no saddle for security, just the rider learning to maintain a balanced seat!

The value in riding bareback to develop an independent seat, and learning how to be “quadraxtrus” with the independent use of the aids (or limbs) on the horse is the mission. Riding bareback and doing lateral work really challenges a rider’s independent seat. This is because doing lateral work requires the rider’s three natural aids (seat, legs, and hands) to work in unison without any gripping with the legs, leaning with the torso, or clutching with the reins. The seat and spine must remain the focal point of stability that secures the rider’s torso with balance so that the other aids can work in efficient coordination and harmony in rhythm with the horse.

When doing lateral work bareback the rider must learn how to apply all three aids without tensing otherwise, the rider’s seat will slide to one side, tilt forward or simply lose its balance. The seat and torso must learn to function independently from the use of the limbs (arms & legs) while staying in balance. This is the beauty of riding bareback and why it is such an effective method for developing an independent seat while coordinating the aids.

So whether you are a rider learning how to coordinate the aids from an independent seat, or an “accomplished rider” showing First Level dressage, go ahead and try doing some bareback riding. There is no doubt you will discover how good or not good your desired independent seat really is!

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Pictures

- sitting in balance
- strap around horse’s neck
- rotate thighs in
- leaning when turning
- turning with opening rein
- gripping with one leg as use it (draws up)
- sitting on seat bones
- sitting on coccyx
- keeping horse round while bareback
- straight lines bareback
- shoulder in or leg yielding