Horsemanship How-to: Find the Right Length for Your English Stirrups

Here’s how to make sure you have your English stirrups correctly adjusted.

Cindy Hale
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A stirrup that’s too long usually results in a loose, swinging lower leg. If the stirrup is too short the rider’s leg appears cramped and hiked up beneath their upper body. The correct length will put you in a comfortable, balanced position.

If you ride English then you already know the importance of correct stirrup length. A stirrup that’s too long usually results in a loose, swinging lower leg. Plus it undermines the rider’s position. Instead of a classic huntseat look, with a slightly forward angle to the rider’s upper body, a too-long stirrup can force the rider into what’s often called the "chairseat." In the chair seat the rider sits too far back in the saddle (toward the cantle) with the toe of their boot near the horse’s elbow. It truly does appear as if the rider is sitting in a chair rather than on the back of an athletic horse. The chair seat rider is perpetually behind the motion of their horse and unable to stay with their horse as it sails over a jump.

At the opposite extreme is the stirrup that’s too short, a rarer occurrence. If the English stirrup is too short the rider’s leg appears cramped and hiked up beneath their upper body. Besides making the lower leg less effective as an aid, the too-short stirrup also corrupts the rider’s position. Similar to a jockey, they ride above the action of their horse, perched precariously out of the saddle.

To find the correct stirrup length, sit in the saddle with your feet out of the irons. Relax your leg and allow the stirrups to bump against your feet. The bar (bottom) of the stirrup should hit your ankle bone. If you’d like to have the correct length before mounting, stand next to your horse. Place your fingertips on the stirrup safety bar beneath the flap of your saddle. Now, with your other hand, pull the stirrup leather taut alongside your outstretched arm. If it’s the correct length it should end with the stirrup bar rubbing your armpit.

Keep in mind that you may occasionally need to adjust your stirrups a hole or two. For example, new leathers stretch over time, so the original length you settled on may become too long. Also, if you switch from a wide-bodied horse to a slender one, or vice versa, then you’ll have to alter your stirrup length. A broad horse takes up more of your leg than a narrower one. Finally, many riders use a slightly longer stirrup for flatwork and then shorten them a hole for jumping. Ultimately, the correct length is one that allows you to sit in the proper position and also remain a safe and effective rider.

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