

Perfecting the Posting Trot

Fine-tune your position at the rising trot, and fix six major flaws for both hunt-seat and dressage riders.

By Sharon Biggs

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About the Author

Award-winning writer Sharon Biggs is a frequent contributor to Horse Illustrated and has written for many other equestrian and women's magazines in the United States and the United Kingdom. She is the author of "In One Arena: Top Dressage Experts Share Their Knowledge Through the Levels" (Half Halt Press). Sharon ran her own dressage training stable in California for 14 years, specializing in longeing to develop seat and position. In 2001 she moved to England and became the dressage instructor for the Civil Service Club at the Royal Mews in Buckingham Palace. She is awaiting the publication of her first children's book called "Willamina, Lost in Buckingham Palace."

For many riders the days of learning to post the trot are relics of the past. The hours spent listening to our instructors shouting "up down, up down" (as if that made it any easier) are over. Our time is now spent in better pursuits, such as learning to jump trickier courses or trying our hand at more challenging lateral work. But the posting trot still deserves our attention. It's an important skill to perfect, particularly since we use it so much of the time. As you fine-tune your position, you'll be surprised at how much better your horse responds. An improved posting trot will give you steadier hands, better control of your leg aids and a softer seat.

Stylistic Differences

There is a difference between a hunter rider's posting trot and a dressage rider's. Yet dressage riders often post like hunter riders and hunter riders often post like dressage riders. Pay attention to which style you've adopted, as it does have an effect on your horse.

Hunter Style:

A hunter rider should lean forward and post forward and backward. "The angle of the shoulders in the posting trot should be about 30 degrees in front of the vertical," says Scott Hofstetter, top hunter rider, coach and judge from Ocala, Fla. "In this way, you can move with the motion of the horse, which will allow your

Hot Tip! For the Hunter Rider

"When warming your horse up, the first 10 minutes should be spent posting very lightly in the saddle," says Scott. "You should be posting in a position that is between sitting and the two-point, what I call the 'crotch seat,' which means you'll land a bit more in your crotch and less in your seat." horse to trot out better." Hunter riders also use the posting trot as a tool to get off a horse's back and allow him to stretch his neck out and forward. If a hunter rider posts up and down over the vertical, such as from a chair type of seat, the rider can land quite hard on the horse's back, making him reluctant to take a bigger stride. "We want our horses to be in front of the vertical and leading with their noses out, as opposed to a dressage horse that is more flexed," adds Scott.

Dressage Style:

Dressage riders, on the other hand, should sit over the vertical with shoulders and hips in one line. Their thighs should hang as straight as possible with the knees slightly bent. The angle of the shoulders should never come forward but remain

Hot Tip! For the Dressage Rider

Posting trot is a very useful tool and shouldn't be abandoned just because you've advanced to higher levels. You can do all lateral work in rising trot, which is particularly beneficial if your horse is learning the movements. Rising trot is best employed during the warm-up and to refresh the trot, and it's essential in the forward-downward stretch. straight. The hips should rise out of the saddle and forward over the pommel and land back in the saddle in the same place. In this position, the rider is able to keep the lower leg quietly against the horse's barrel throughout the posting trot so that he or she can use the lower leg when needed. This position also helps the horse arch his frame and encourage his haunches under.

Top Six Posting Faux Pas

1. Problem: A Heavy Seat

Culprits: Hunter Riders and Dressage Riders

"I often see riders posting straight up and down in a chair seat rather than forward and back, and that causes them to land heavy on the horse's back," says Scott. This position also makes it difficult to balance, which causes hands to bounce and jar the horse's mouth.

Cure: Stiffness is often the problem. For the hunter rider, pick up the posting trot, and with one hand grab your horse's mane about halfway up the neck (make sure to keep your shoulders square). This will pull your shoulders forward to the correct 30 degrees and help you feel how to land in the saddle softly. Maintain this position for 15 to 20 strides and then let go of the mane. Repeat if you fall out of position.

For the dressage rider, a stiff, closed hip angle is usually the problem. Think of the posting trot originating from a kneeling position instead of a sitting position. Your knees should point to the ground, and your hip angle should open as you rise and close as you sit. Think about someone pulling your belt buckle forward as you rise and then pushing it back as you sit. Don't let your knees shift around. Keep them pointing toward the ground as best as you can.

2. Problem: Incorrect Leg Position

Culprits: Hunter riders

"If your lower leg is too far back, your upper body will fall too far forward. If you ride with your leg in front of the girth, then your upper body will be too far behind the vertical," says Scott. "If your leg is at the girth (essentially the middle of the horse), then your shoulders will be in the right position."

Cure: Stand in your stirrups and begin trotting. You can stand either straight up or in two-point. If you feel balanced, your legs are in the correct position.

3. Problem: Eyes Down

Culprits: Hunter and Dressage Riders

"Riders tend to get absorbed at the posting trot and end up staring down to the inside of the ring or at their horses' necks. It's an easy habit to get into and a hard habit to break," says Scott. Also, eyes down will lead your upper body forward, and before you know it you'll be slumping.

Cure: Practice looking ahead by gazing at a focal point ahead of you, such as the tops of the trees or the roof of a building. This will bring your eye level up and will keep you from falling forward or slumping.

4. Problem: Incorrect Arm and Hand Position

Drop 'Em! Look Ma, No Stirrups

Hunters and dressage riders often don't see eye to eye, but surprisingly in this case we do. Rising trot without stirrups is a fine thing—if and only if, a rider has mastered basic position. This is because riding without stirrups is meant to increase the rider's balance. Scott points out that in the Medal and Maclay classes, riders are asked to jump a course without stirrups to show that they have good balance. So for someone who lacks good balance, working without stirrups is exhausting and difficult. Unbalanced riders will compensate and balance on the horse's mouth and/or grip tightly with their legs. Therefore, make sure you can check off the following before you cross your stirrups over:

Do you have good hands?

Can you balance without using your hands?

Do you have a steady, well-balanced seat?

When you do ride without stirrups, make sure that you stretch your leg down as much as possible. "I try to get a student to make their legs look like a dressage rider's—long, relaxed and wrapped around the horse's barrel," says Scott. Riding with scrunched-up legs will actually cause you to grip and hold on with your leg, rather than rely upon your seat for balance.

Culprits: Dressage Riders and Hunter Riders

Your hands and arms shouldn't move with your seat in the rising trot. They should remain stable and separate from your body. If you take your hands and arms with you as you sit, you'll have a very unstable contact—loose then tight. This will cause your aiding system to be haphazard at best.

Cure: Concentrate on keeping your arms and hands in the same position as you rise and sit. It helps to think about moving your hips between your elbows as you rise.

5. Problem: Involuntary Leg Movements

Culprits: Dressage Riders

Have you ever heard your trainer drone on and on about your constant kicking or "nagging" with your leg, but you know for sure that you haven't been? If your upper leg is tight and gripping, your lower leg will pop away from the horse's barrel as you rise and strike against it as you sit. Sounds a bit like kicking doesn't it? Well, it looks like it, and your horse won't know the difference between a honest-to-goodness leg aid and a mistaken thump. It's very difficult to give a clear aid if your leg is always involuntarily bebopping against your horse's side. To the horse it feels much like communication through static.

Cure: This is a case of too much tension in your upper leg and not enough in your lower. Keep thighs and knees soft and lower leg on. Focus on holding your calves lightly against your horse's barrel, and don't let them come off as you rise. Have a friend point out when your legs are moving and make a mental note of how this feels.

6. Problem: Can't Get the Right Angle

Culprits: Hunter Riders

If you were told there would be no math involved, and you're slightly stumped as to what a 30-degree angle is, you may get stuck riding too far forward or not enough.

Cure: "An exercise that I find beneficial is to practice changing the angle of your upper body in the posting trot," says Scott. "This will help you feel when you are in the right 30-degree position, where the vertical is and what it feels like to be behind the vertical. Pick up the rising trot and come forward to what you think 30 degrees is." When you're in the correct position, you'll feel your horse relax and move forward and feel your seat get lighter. Now come back on the vertical, which will help you understand where the middle point is. Then lean back behind the vertical. Repeat the exercise. You'll soon get a feeling of what angle you are in.

You've come a long way from the first ups and downs of learning diagonals, but there's always room for improvement. Check yourself for these six faux pas; the results should show in better equitation, and most of all, in your horse's response.

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