

The Weight & Seat Aids, Your Kinesthetic Sense and Horse Performance, Part 2 of 3

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Photo 1: I am sitting in a comfortable position, with my hands under my seat so I can easily feel the shape and weight of each ishium. From here I can experiment with different movements to discover how the weight and shape of my seat bones change. In this way I can learn more about what my horse feels when I move in the saddle. In the following photos I am going from arching to rounding my back. Both movements, when done easily and slowly, promote a supple spine and improved awareness.





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Part 2: Develop Your Kinesthetic Sense

Last week I talked about the importance of the rider's sense of position and weight in the saddle and how a keen kinesthetic sense, allowing you to use your weight accurately, enhances the horse's performance. If you experimented with your horse's ability to read your shifts of weight and he responded you are on the path to a more responsive, athletic horse.

How can you improve your kinesthetic and proprioceptive senses, or your sense of where you are in space, and the feedback mechanism that tells you where your weight is so you can ride with ease? You do this by paying attention to details of how you move and how your body shifts weight as you move. It is easier to begin off the horse and takes time and many slow, focused repetitions to build self-awareness. It also takes a sense of curiosity, patience, and allowing rather than forcing.

Begin by becoming familiar with the way you move in sitting. First, find a flat-seated hard chair or bench and sit with your thighs parallel to the floor, knees and feet hip width apart. Bring your attention to what you are sitting on, the two bony protuberances at the bottom of your pelvis, which I call your seat bones. Slide your hands, palm side up under your bottom and find your two seat bones—your right and left ischium. With your fingers feel their shape, the weight you put on each, and the direction they point. If you were sitting with each seat bone on a separate bathroom scale would the scales measure the same weight?

Slowly round and arch your low back like you might in the saddle and find out how the shape of your seat bones change as your pelvis moves.

See photo A

Caption: I am sitting in a comfortable position, with my hands under my seat so I can easily feel the shape and weight of each ishium. From here I can experiment with different movements to discover how the weight and shape of my seat bones change. In this way I can learn more about what my horse feels when I move in the saddle. In the following photos I am going from arching to rounding my back. Both movements, when done easily and slowly, promote a supple spine and improved awareness.

Photos 2a and 2b above

In these two photos I am rounding my back. In 2a I am flexing my neck as well, taking my whole spine into global flexion. In 2b I am looking forward while rounding my back, much like a rider does. As a fixed position it is hard on the rider's back, but as one phase of a dynamic riding posture it helps the rider follow the motion of the horse's back.

Photos 3a and 3b above

In these two photos I am arching or extending my back. In 3a I am extending my whole spine and closing my hip joints. In 3b I am retaining a neutral head while arching my back. As a position of movement this allows the rider to follow the horse's motion. As a posture this position is often seen in dressage riders and equitation riders. It is hard on the spine of horse and rider.

Shift weight from one seat bone to the other and turn left and right, discovering what happens in each seat bone. Take your hands out from under your seat bones and discover a newfound sense of yourself. This is a basic exploration in self-awareness, but you are using your hands to discover something vital about yourself. To develop your kinesthetic sense you will learn to sense from inside what your body is doing.

Photos 4a through 4d above

In photo 4a, I want to know what it feels like to sit evenly on both seat bones and how to shift weight from one to the other with the least amount of effort or distortion in my torso. No one is symmetrical but we can learn to sit and turn while knowing what is happening in our seat bones so our horses get clear messages from our seat and weight. Practicing in a chair and then on the horse heightens our awareness. In the following three photos I am weighting my left seat bone. Everyone has different strategies for shifting their weight side to side. For the horse, it is best to be able to shift the weight in the seat bones with the least amount of movement in the upper body and head. In photo 4b, I am leaning to get weight over to the left. In photo 4c I am arching the low back and leaning forward to shift my weight left. In photo 4d I am trying to weight the left seat bone and keep the head in the middle.

Still sitting in the chair, bring your attention to your seat bones, and how they contact the chair. Turn to the right several times, as if you were going to turn your horse on a small circle: your right shoulder will come back and you will turn your head and look to the right. Do this with your eyes closed so you can pay attention to your body and the inner sensations. With a very slow motion, turn right and come back to center 10 to 20 times, bringing your attention to your seat bones, your ribs on each side, your shoulders, your breast bone and your knees and feet. Find out if you can begin to feel how this movement of your upper body affects your seat bone shape and weight, the weight in the bottom of your feet, the way your heels touch the floor or come away. Turn slowly so you can really attend to the way you move and the changes a simple movement causes. Do your ribs change shape under your armpits? Does your waist get short on one side and longer on the other? Can you feel your whole spine turning or do you stop the motion somewhere?

Does one or both legs move when you turn? After you have turned to the right and answered these questions, begin to turn to the left and find out how you turn to this side.

Photos 5a through 5c above

In photo 5a, I turn to the right and maintain length in my ribs on both sides. In photo 5b, I turn to the right but collapse in my right ribcage. This method often goes with looking down and closing the hip joint and lifting the heel as seen in the photo. In the saddle my shoulder would drop and my heel came up when I turned. In photo 5c, I turn to the right but push off of my left foot and let my left knee come in. In the saddle I would grip with my left thigh to turn.

Now do this same exploration on your horse at the halt and then at the walk. Take time and go slowly so you can retain the inner sensation while you are on your moving horse. Ideally you will be able to keep the weight evenly on each seat bone as you turn right and left and you will be able to sense that. At the same time, your thighs may move a little but, if independent of your seat they will neither press into the horse nor come away as you turn. Begin to walk and apply soft, precise aids without losing the sense of your own body and its movement as your horse moves. You will increase your kinesthetic sense and begin to ride with more awareness through practicing slow, repetitive movements while paying attention to your inner sensations. As you learn to ride in better balance it will seem natural and you will not have to pay so much attention to your own movement and weight. As your kinesthetic sense improves, you will be better able to tune into your horse, and your horse will respond with a higher level of performance.