

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

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Being one-sided is a natural human pattern of movement that affects our horse's balance when it causes the rider to sit with more weight on one seat bone or collapse to one side. It makes the horse fall out to the side, stiffen on one side, and more difficult to turn on one direction. If you have read the first 2 parts of this series, you have begun to improve your kinesthetic sense and have a feeling for the weight in each seat bone and how that is affected by the simple act of turning. Now it is time to put that knowledge to use to help your horse. Riders who discover the middle of their horse find out that horses do not fall in or out on circles nearly as much as they believed, nor do they have problems with canter leads. The good news? You can learn to be more symmetrical and sit in the middle of your horse.

As I wrote in the first part of this 3-part article, whether a riding horse or a pack horse, every cooperative horse wants to stay under the mass that is on him. Use this to your advantage and riding and training becomes easy. Using a strong aid to compensate for the rider's unbalanced weight only teaches the horse to ignore the weight aid and makes riding more tiring for horse and rider. Worse, it teaches the horse to be stiff and to develop more strength on one side and can cause lameness or uneven shoulders or saddle fit issues. The rider, when chronically sitting to one side, is defeating all attempts to create a symmetrically balanced horse. This defeats the rider's good intention to teach the horse to turn easily in either direction, smoothly take or change both leads, or travel and stop in a straight line.

The effect of unbalanced riders on horses is often seen and explained away by the horse's unevenness. And older horses do become stronger on one side if the rider is one sided. A young, balanced horse that is not stronger on one side will feel very uneven—falling in and out on corners and circles because he has not developed more strength on one side. He will be confused and unbalanced and even un-cooperative although it is his rider who is unbalancing him.

You can correct this habit until it becomes natural to sit in the middle of the horse by first learning where your weight is and slowly bringing your body mass to the middle until you feel strong and comfortable there. In the seated exploration last week, you may have discovered what side you collapse on more. I think of this as the side that is unsupported.

You can find it by standing on one leg because you will be likely to be wobbly on this side. On the side that has good support you will find you have better balance (see photos A & B). Bring your attention to the line from chin to public bone and find out if the middle of the collar bones, the top and bottom of the breast bone, and belly button all line up. Imagine that you can allow these landmarks to line up rather than trying to force them. When you turn you will keep these points lined up so you turn around your central axis.

Bring your attention to your ribs and, without hiking up your shoulder, allow the ribs on each side from hip bone to underarm, to be the same length whether you are turning or going straight. Imagery and visualization are powerful tools to keep you in the middle of your horse. Imagine you and your horse are like carousel figures with a pole that goes from the top of your head, through your torso and through the horse to the ground. On a dressage horse and many performance horses this pole will stay straight and you will turn around it as you ride. (See photos D & E).

Putting this self-awareness and improved kinesthetic sense to use is difficult at first. It will feel awkward to stay in the middle of the saddle and you may feel unbalanced. Every time you think of something else you will find yourself drifting to your hold habits. Your collapsed side may tire quickly or you may feel either tension or relief in your neck because your whole spine will have to adjust. If you stick with it though, you will soon start to feel normal and strong in this symmetrical balance. Your horse will either feel more balanced, especially in lateral movements, corners, and the canter when you are in balance. Many older horses protest when their rider starts sitting in the middle of the saddle. Horses who have developed a stronger side because of carrying an off-center rider may not want the rider to put weight on the weaker side. Yet you will feel the horse move better in his lateral movements. After he adjusts to your symmetry and gains strength, he should feel more in balance and supple in both directions. When you feel your horse drifting or having a hard time turning in one direction, first examine your own balance before correcting your horse, you may find that is all the correction he needs.