

RIDING IN *Harmony*

Improve your seat with tips from chief riders of the Spanish Riding School and Cadre Noir.

*By Andreas Hausberger and Col. Christian Carde
with Silke Rottermann*

It is a typical picture which unfortunately can be seen in riding schools all over the world: absolute beginners on the longe line, riding a patient horse. They are trying to position their heels, back and hands all at the same time in textbook style, but this is an impossible task for someone on a horse for the first time. The result is often a cramped rider going against the movements of the horse underneath. Quite often, this is the beginning of a future for a rider who will not learn to feel the horse and go with his movements, which is the precondition for allowing her to develop her full potential and be in unison with her horse.

It is amazing how children in countries with no typical riding school tradition learn to ride bareback only by feeling the movements and trying to adapt to them. However, dressage riding requires a lot more: moving with the horse in the correct position to be able to produce the dressage movements in a seemingly invisible way.

The problem is that there are riders who might go with the movement but lack a correct seat, while others have the opposite problem. In both cases, the result is a horse that does not move correctly. For a rider who strives for perfection—and this feeling should be instilled in every dressage rider—it is of utmost importance for her to become aware of certain weaknesses in her seat and position and how they badly influence the horse's way of going. Regrettably, this still does not happen often enough. Even worse, some riders do not seem to mind as long as they can produce spectacular movements and get the dressage scores they have hoped for.



A rider demonstrates how an incorrect position can negatively affect a horse's straightness.



Col. Christian Carde, former chief rider at the Cadre Noir in Saumur, France, warms up at a show without stirrups.



Every rider has to learn “the feeling for the required impulsion and the moderation regarding it,” says Col. Christian Carde.



Without feeling, “the horse will become stiff and will not swing through his whole body, and so not allowing the rider to sit comfortably,” says Carde.

Photos by Silke Rottermann

However, the biggest goal in dressage should not entirely be to be competitive, but to find total harmony and understanding with your equine partner.

Riders following this aim are often confronted with the challenge to recognize and improve weaknesses in their seat and position. Andreas Hausberger, chief rider of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria, and Col. Christian Carde, former chief rider of the Cadre Noir in Saumur, France, both discuss aspects of this problem and how to solve it.

Andreas Hausberger: Parallelism of the Shoulders and Hips

In the art of classical equitation there is the rule that the rider’s shoulders and hips should be parallel with those of her horse. As simple as it may sound, this is a rule that many riders find quite difficult to fulfill and even at international shows one can observe riders struggling with it.

The problem: A lack of shoulder and

hip symmetry with the horse is mostly seen on curved lines, such as circles and voltes, and any lateral work.

Most likely the rider’s outer shoulder trails back and she pulls at the inside rein. As a direct consequence, her inside shoulder is pulled forward.

When this happens in lateral work she now needs more push with her out-

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side leg to compensate for her pulling outside rein. As a result, she gets tense. Often there is a yielding of the rider’s inside or outside hip to compensate. The negative result can best be seen in half passes, where the rider’s crookedness hinders her horse’s forehand to slightly lead in this movement.

The effects of parallel shoulders and hips: If the rider’s seat is in unison

with the horse’s direction of movement then she helps him to go where she has asked. This is particularly important for advanced movements like half passes and pirouettes.

When the rider’s shoulders and hips are parallel to those of her horse, she is simply supporting his balance. The more balanced the horse moves, the more

light-footed and elegant he appears. Then it becomes possible for the rider to give much finer aids. As a result, her horse can become more elevated and be in lighter contact with her hands.

How to correct the problem: Often underestimated, rider’s asymmetry is often due to a lack of physical fitness. It seems only logical that if the rider lacks it, she cannot support the horse or



A seat exercise practiced on the longe: The rider takes her outer hand over the topline of the horse and places it about 4 inches in front of the saddle.



After repeating this exercise in both directions, the rider keeps this feeling of looseness as she returns to her correct riding position.

Photos by Silke Rottermann

expect him to move smoothly and balanced. So I strongly advise every rider to regularly work on her personal fitness in whichever way. Additionally, stretching exercises can help to loosen muscles, allowing the rider to sit better.

Even though it might present a problem to riders who don’t have a suitable horse for it, I have to say that longe lessons are the most effective way to correct the problem of asymmetrical shoulders and hips. Whether we are talking about relative beginners or Grand Prix riders, if this problem occurs, it is best to find a horse and trainer for longe lessons so the rider can focus on this problem.

Here is one effective exercise that we practice at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna to help improve this mistake:

1. On the longe, begin without reins or stirrups in all three basic gaits.
2. Take your outer hand (the left, if you are going right) over the topline of the horse.
3. Place that hand approximately 10

centimeters (about 4 inches) in front of your saddle.

4. Remain in this position for a certain period of time, depending on your balance and personal fitness.

5. This exercise should be done repeatedly on both leads for no more than 30 minutes.

It is important for the rider to stop before there is fatigue or tension. After each change of lead it is useful to do some loosening work in the saddle (for example, making arm circles) before returning to the exercise.

It is not enough just to do seat exercises because the problem might easily reoccur when riding unsupervised or off the longe. Never try to correct this problem on your own, as you will most certainly end up with even more mistakes. Instead work to recall the feeling you have on the longe when riding off of it. Have your trainer tell you exactly when your outside shoulder is turned enough. When you have internalized the correct feeling during such lessons

you will be able to recall it when riding on your own.

Col. Christian Carde: The Right Feeling for the Movement

Again and again, and even at the highest levels in our sport, we can observe the situation that a rider is not moving with her horse because she, unaware or consciously, does not put the right impulsion into her position.

This mainly happens in two situations. The first is when a rider wants to lengthen her horse’s stride and creates too much impulsion with her seat by pushing with her buttocks and thereby leaning back. As a result, her horse loses cadence in the extensions.

The second situation mainly happens in movements of high collection, such as piaffe and passage, when the rider gets the feeling she has to create energy and puts too much energy in. The movements then lack slowness and grace.

The problem: In both cases, the rider lacks feeling for the optimal balance

that she needs to give the horse and keep it throughout the movement. It is something every rider has to try to learn: the feeling for the required impulsion and the moderation regarding it.

If a rider is not able to get the correct feeling through practice or even ignores it to push the horse to move more spectacularly, the result will always be the same. No matter at which level or in which dressage movement, the horse will become stiff and will not swing through his whole body. As a result, the rider cannot sit comfortably, which creates a picture that is far from the harmony one should aim to achieve.

How to correct the problem: Of course, the following depends on the character and training level of the horse, but a well-trained and happily working one requires only light aids from the rider. Still, many riders think

equestrian discipline, although a sport of its own, is excellent to supplement the education of young riders, but may not be ideal for all dressage riders.

In my opinion, another great way to get a feel for the horse's movement is to ride without stirrups. This kind of practice is suitable for everybody. Additionally, unlike with longeing lessons, no second person is necessary to practice it. Just cross the stirrups in front of your saddle for a certain period of time at the beginning of a training session, for example, to get a feel for your horse. You will automatically make your legs longer and sit deeper in the saddle.

If you are united with your horse's movement, it feels like his motion just pulls you into the saddle and takes you with him. This will not come overnight, but done regularly, the effect will not only improve your position, but also the

The famous Dr. Reiner Klimke often warmed up without stirrups at international dressage shows.

that they have to apply a more or less high level of impulsion through their seats and end up with lots of body tension transmitted to the horse. Instead of being united with the horse in a supple and harmonious way, the rider experiences tension on both sides.

The first thing to practice is to relax. This doesn't mean to lack positive body tension, but to (re)learn to feel the horse's movements. When we try to follow them with our legs, hips, back, shoulders and arms, then these parts of our body automatically will relax.

There are a few ways to get a feel for the horse's movements and the amount of impulsion or energy every individual horse needs from his rider (ideally, as little as possible). Vaulting is a good way to practice balance and get a feeling for the movements of a horse and how to follow them smoothly. This kind of

way you give aids.

It is even possible to work without stirrups or the longe as a warm-up at shows. There is no reason to be intimidated because this work is not reserved for beginners.

The famous Dr. Reiner Klimke often warmed up without stirrups at international dressage shows. Christine Stückelberger warmed up on the longe line with her Olympic Games gold-medal partner, Granat, and her trainer during the world championships in 1978. They became world champions the same day.

The rider knows that she is truly with her horse when she feels that his back is supple and swinging. This is only possible if the rider herself does not have any stiffness or tension in her back or chest and thereby does not disturb the horse's way of going.

When a horse has a supple back, he

Col. Christian Carde

was born into a horse-loving family in Bordeaux, France. He



started competing as a teenager in jumping and three-day eventing before taking a close interest in dressage after joining the prestigious Cadre Noir formation in the 1960s. In the '70s, Carde, who lives near Saumur, France, was a member of the French dressage team at international championships with his Budjonny gelding, Solitaire. He became the French national coach from 1985 to 1989. From 1991 to 1999 he was the chief rider at the Cadre Noir. Carde is also an FEI judge and conducts regular clinics in Europe and North America.

Andreas Hausberger

comes from a family of horse breeders in Austria. He joined the prestigious Spanish



Riding School in Vienna, Austria, in 1984 and was named its chief rider in 2007. Hausberger's long-line displays, especially with the Lipizzan stallion Conversano Dagmar became world famous within the equestrian community. His particular talent is to be found in the in-hand work of horses, but he trains international Grand Prix riders and conducts clinics all over the world.

allows his rider to follow the movement smoothly. This allows the rider to sensitively follow the horse's mouth, which results in what we are all looking for: harmony when riding. 🐾