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"Safety in the saddle"

Safety in the Saddle

No one plans to fall off their horse. "Coming Off" can cause pain, injury, embarrassment and fear. Here are some steps to help you stay securely in your saddle. The key to safety in the saddle is developing a balanced seat and good posture. The ability to stay on your horse is directly related to the balance and security of your seat. Most falls occur when the rider is out of position and lose their balance.

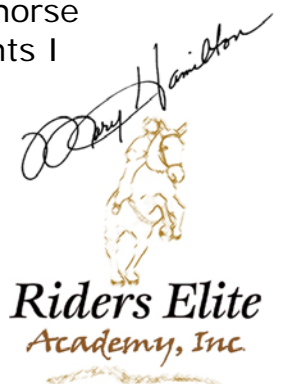
Balanced Seat

Riding with shoulders, hips and heels in straight alignment balances the rider. Your ankle should be in a relaxed position with the ball of your foot resting on the stirrup. Your heel flexed slightly lower than the toe. Allow your foot to gently rest on the stirrup. Don't brace or push off your stirrup iron.

Two common problems I see in students are gripping with their knees and bracing with their feet. Gripping and bracing lock your joints. This creates tension and bouncing. Instead, relax your joints and move your body in rhythm with your horse.

Matching Horse and Rider

Matching the right horse with the right rider is essential for safety while riding. Honestly assess your abilities and avoid horses likely to take advantage of your limitations. Pairing a nervous horse with a nervous rider is a disaster in the making. At the very least both horse and rider will be frustrated with one other. When assigning mounts I let the horse choose the rider. It's easy to see by the horse's





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expression if they are happy and relaxed with their rider or worried and unsure.

Increase your Knowledge

I'm keen on learning. It's amazing, the more you learn the better your horse will perform. Take a riding lesson, read a book or watch a video. Lunge lessons are a great tool to developing a balanced seat. You can focus on your body position and not worry about steering the horse. Video taping your riding is a good means to review and assess your riding skills.

Before you Ride

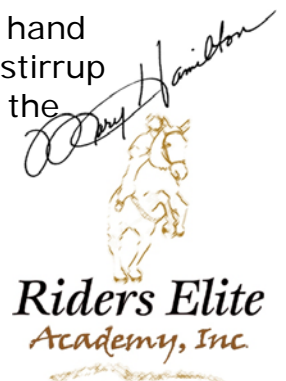
Before you ride evaluate your horse. Visually inspect your horse for injuries and lameness. Assess his attitude or inner horse. Is he attentive and ready to work? Or is he full of energy and unfocused? Release this excess energy on a lunge line or in a round pen to enjoy a more relaxed and focused partner.

Mounting and Dismounting – Vulnerable Moments

Select an area free of debris and objects to mount up. Check your girth or cinch prior to mounting and then again after walking your horse in a warm-up. This will reduce the chance of injury to you or your horse.

I advocate using a sturdy mounting block to mount smoothly and efficiently. I have seen too many people heave and pull themselves into the saddle from the ground. This one sided pulling of the saddle against your horse's back and spine can cause injury. Speaking of safety, it leaves you in a vulnerable position should your horse step away to keep his balance.

To mount stand at your horse's shoulder facing the rear. The left hand holds the reins and a bit of mane. With your right hand turn the stirrup toward you. Place your left foot securely in the stirrup. Step into the





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left stirrup grasping the cantle of the saddle with your right hand. Swing your right leg high over your horse's croup. Insist your horse stand quietly until you are securely seated in the saddle.

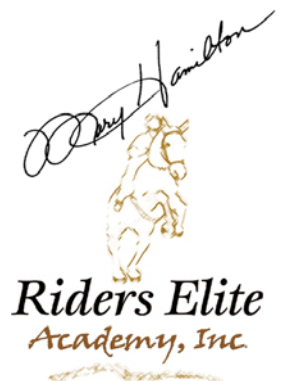
Be careful if you wear spurs or have a cantle bag. Banging your horse with a spur or getting a foot hung up on the cantle bag could cause problems. Slamming the horse in the back as you plop down in the saddle always creates tension and gets the ride off to a bad start. Use a smooth motion to mount and sit lightly on the saddle. This procedure gives you maximum control while maintaining your balance.

Stepping down (dismounting) from the saddle with the left foot in the stirrup as the right foot touches the ground is extremely dangerous. A foot could very easily become hung up in the stirrup in this awkward position. Instead, swing your right foot over your horse's back while standing with your left leg in the stirrup. Use your arms to support your body as you remove your left foot from the stirrup. Push yourself away from your horse and land with slightly bent knees to absorb the shock of your landing.

Police Story

Crowd control duty is not a glamorous job. It presents many challenges for the mounted police officer. Even a "bomb proof" horse can have problems. Major and I worked a block party in downtown Minneapolis on a hot July evening. Imagine 80,000 people crammed into the streets to listen to live music. They were drinking, dancing and having fun.

We had inebriates jostling us on the streets. Party goers were on the rooftops throwing beer bottles at us. These bottles would smash on the sidewalk spraying glass and beer everywhere. Having a deep, balanced seat was a necessity here if you wanted to stay on your horse.





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I was assigned to monitor the crowd near a loud rock band. The noise was deafening. My horse Major was cool, calm and collected until the bass speaker suddenly blew out. This created a horrific noise ten feet from us. Surrounded by the crowd there was no where to release his flight response. He began to sit back, almost touching his hocks to the ground then leapt forward. He bucked so hard the speaker microphone for my police radio flew off my lapel.

This microphone was attached to my radio with a long coiled cord. As he bucked the cord dangled, bounced and wrapped around his rear leg. Barnum would have loved to buy this horse for his rodeo bucking stock had he seen the performance. Eventually Major tired and relaxed. I slowly unwound my microphone from his hind leg. All that saved us that day was a deep balanced seat and a little bit of luck.

