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All of us who love horses have aspirations of being able to continue to ride, drive, and work with our horses into later life. We can do that, if luck is with us, and if we use our bodies wisely as we age.

So often well meaning riding instructors or show judges know a great deal about horses and how the horse's body works, but they often know little about the mechanics of the rider's body.

Often riders are taught by what looks right or looks good without consideration of how does a particular position feel or function. Or how about the old adage “no pain no gain”? We think that if it doesn't hurt the rider isn't doing it well or isn't trying hard enough. We need to listen to our bodies and learn to use our bodies wisely to preserve the soundness of our muscular skeletal system as well as our overall health.

Riding and driving are dynamic sports that deal with motion, balance, and receiving impact from below. As the horse moves and strikes the ground the rider receives impact from below, or as a cart or carriage rolls across the ground it moves and bounces, no matter how good the springs may be. It is important that we carry ourselves in a way that is balanced and puts the least stress on our delicate backs for back pain or injury often puts an end to one's horse career.

We need to be aware of having a neutral pelvis at all times. Pelvis is a Latin word for bowl or vessel and our pelvis is just that, our pelvis is a bowl that holds our upper body and our organs. Many of us sit or ride on the front of our pelvis, especially young girls. Sitting perched on the front of the pelvis causes us to hollow our backs and stiffen. When the horse or carriage moves the motion is received up into the locked hollow back and back strain, injury or pain can eventually develop. The other extreme is sitting with the pelvis rocked back. You've heard the well meaning instructor say “ride on your pockets”! This is often an attempt to get the rider to stop perching forward on the front of the pelvis but then they may go back to the opposite extreme, riding on their pockets or riding in a “chair seat”. Chair seat is not a bad way to ride, it's fairly secure and can be comfortable for a little while, but habitual chair seat, like a perched seat, will result in back strain. In chair seat our legs are out in front of us, like sitting on a chair, when we sit like this the legs cannot support any of our body weight and cannot do their part to absorb the impact of the horse's motion. Neutral or balanced pelvis however places our back in a position where it is best able to absorb impact from below and in a position that helps our skeleton to find natural balances alignment without muscular strain or tension.

Our legs in riding should serve as our springs. Our strong leg bones and strong leg joints are engineered to carry our weight and to absorb shock as we move. We should ride, not like we are sitting on a chair, but rather in a position where we are straddling the horse like one might straddle a kitchen stool. You may have heard someone say “ride as if you are standing on the horse – if that horse was suddenly pulled out from under you you should end up standing on the ground not falling back into the dirt”. Our legs should extend out down and around our horse's barrel and our feet should be comfortably supported in stirrups that are the correct length.

Stirrup length is important when we ride. I like to suggest to riders that they have a “range” for their stirrup length. For instance, a big round barreled horse with a short legged rider may

require that rider to have a little bit shorter stirrup length to allow their short leg to go out and around that big horse. The same rider on a narrow slab sided horse will ride with a straighter leg and may want their stirrup a hole or two longer. Fast work or cross country may want a little shorter stirrup while ring work or a trail ride may invite a longer leg. The key to stirrup length is comfort and a length that “loads the rider’s leg springs – the hip, the knee, and the ankle”. Too short a stirrup may lock up the springs and force the rider into a rigid position in their seat while too long a stirrup may force the rider to always be reaching down for a stirrup which in turn creates another type of tension.

Another common injury that riders face is injury to the knee joint. The thigh and knee joint and the angle of the foot, while in the stirrup, must be the same. Knees over toes is a common rule in athletics. But riders are often told to ride with their toes pointed straight ahead or even told to ride as if you were pigeon toed. Riders who force their foot into a position that looks right to a judge or a trainer may pay for this faked position later in life with damaged knees or joints. The rounder the horse and the shorter legged the rider the more the leg must come out, down and around the horse and the toe must point out enough to match the thigh and knee angle in the upper leg. On a narrow horse the same rider may ride with their toes naturally pointing straight ahead with no effort at all. If the rider experiences feet that “fall asleep” during the ride, particularly on the little toe side of the foot, they need to really pay attention to this toe and knee alignment. Western saddle fenders can also force the foot and leg into an unnatural position. Fenders should be bent and trained to fall properly and there are devices now on the market that will hang a western stirrup at the correct angle to prevent knee strain.

One of the biggest culprits of upper back pain in drivers and in riders is the position of our head. The human head weighs around 12 pounds (the same as a man’s bowling ball) and our heavy head is balanced on top of a rather thin column of neck vertebrae. If we carry our heads tipped sideways or looking down we place strain on the muscles that lie in the back of our necks and upper back, not to mention the strain riders place on our horse when we drop that twelve pound head out of balance and expect the horse to carry it. We need to be aware of this balance of the head and continually correct ourselves when we find ourselves looking down or carrying our head forward like a buzzard. Head balance is one of the biggest contributors to balanced riding and driving and to good overall posture and health.

Many components of good riding and use of the body can be practiced all the time, not just when we are working with our horses. If you would like more information on good riding and body use you might be interested in the following books and DVD’s.

Swift, Sally Centered Riding 2 – Further Explorations

Brown, Peggy and Harris, Susan Anatomy In Motion™ The Visible Rider, DVD
Bentley, Joni Riding Success Without Stress
von Dietze, Susanne Balance In Movement – The Seat of the Rider, book or video