

ESI NEWS

*Monthly
Newsletter*

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DEVELOPING A GOOD SEAT

A summary of Erica Poseley's teachings, by Manuela McLean



In May, we were lucky enough to have Erica Poseley visit us all the way from California and stay with ESI. Erica is a rider biomechanics expert, who is passionate about improving rider's seat and posture.

Erica is also a certified Mary Wanless, **'Ride With Your Mind Coach'** and proudly the first person in the United States to complete **ESI's Diploma of Equitation Science.**

Above: Erica & Manu

For those booked in for lessons with Erica, we thought it would be a good idea to get a short bio from each rider to find out what they would like to achieve and improve on. What impressed me most was how keen riders were to improve their posture to enable them to be kinder riders for their horses. Many riders commented that their aim was to not get in the way of their horse's movement but rather to try and enhance it without being excessively strong with their aids.

An improved posture can help develop still hands, a balanced seat, straightness and many other important rider skills that enable the clear and consistent delivery of aids.

Erica systematically and progressively shaped the rider's position so that they felt more balance and a better 'feel' of the horse's movement. At the end of the clinic they felt they had better control and feel, and were more effective in achieving better balanced horses.

Here is a breakdown of the development of a good and stable posture. It is good to start from the beginning, and once the feel of a good seat/posture is achieved then it becomes less necessary to go through every step each time.

FINDING THE SIT BONES

Firstly, Erica had many riders sit in the saddle with their legs over the front of the saddle in the aim of finding the riders sit bones (or an upright pelvis). This is the beginning of a rider achieving a neutral spine. (see right)

A rider that tips the top of the hips forward (sitting on their crutch) or backward (sitting on their pockets) will not be able to achieve a neutral spine and will also make the horse uncomfortable due to the increased pressure. Some horses will run if uncomfortable and others will slow down.



With the legs over the front of the saddle, you will notice that the seam on the side of your jodphurs should be vertical at this point.

It is the rider's hips that move with the horse's body and back, the rest of the rider's body stays quite still. The rider's hips need to be flexible to be able to do this.

INNER THIGH ROTATION

Inner thigh rotation is the key to creating thigh and lower leg alignment. The thigh should bear the weight of the rider's body and allow the rider to sit lightly. Many riders incorrectly bear nearly all weight in their stirrups. The heel should be positioned under the hip. The whole or varying parts of the rider's leg can be used in different ways as aids to achieve different responses. The inner thigh is the major part of the rider's body that is connected to the horse's sides and can enable the horse to lift its back as well as bend its ribcage.

As explained by Erica, a great way to find this position, is to begin by sitting with the legs over the front of the saddle.



1. Lift the thigh up



2. Rotate the thigh away and back



3. Turn the thigh in from the top of the hip bone (trochanter)



4. Position the thigh forward into the knee roll.

This is a circular pattern and can be done while the leg is against the saddle by following the same pattern or the rider can pull the back of the thigh out to achieve inner thigh rotation.

There should be even contact from the hip, thigh and lower leg against the saddle and sides of the horse. From the hip to the knee, there should be approximately a 45-degree angle and the rider should not be gripping but rather feel like the thigh is draped around the horse's ribcage.

This allows the rider to feel the inner thigh muscles (adductor magnus) and stabilize the lower leg position. Erica then aligned the rider's lower leg in the following way.

- 1. Bend the knee so that the lower leg is positioned at approximately 40-45 degree angle from the thigh.**
- 2. The rider's heel is positioned in line with the back of their hip joint (the ankle joint is directly below the hip joint).**
- 3. Lift the toe to begin to position the foot in the stirrup, the stirrup leather should hang vertically.**
- 4. Ensure the stirrup sits under the ball of the foot evenly.**

Erica stressed that the ball of the riders foot did not push down hard on the stirrup to push the heel down but rather that the rider lifted the toe to make the foot flat.

"I have said to many of my riders "heels down is a fallacy, it is actually 'toe up'", Pushing the heel down causes the rider's lower leg to move forward resulting in the rider landing at the back of the saddle. So remember 'toe up' not 'heels down'.

STABILITY OF THE LOWER LEG

Once the lower leg was in the correct position, Erica would ask the rider to resist her push.

(see photo right)



There were 3 major pushing points that need to be resisted: -



1. The heel: rider pushed heel back against Erica's hand.



2. The side of the ankle: rider pushed the ankle away from the horse's side.



3. The top of the toe: rider pushed the toe up

This enabled riders to help find the muscles in their legs responsible for stabilising their lower leg position.

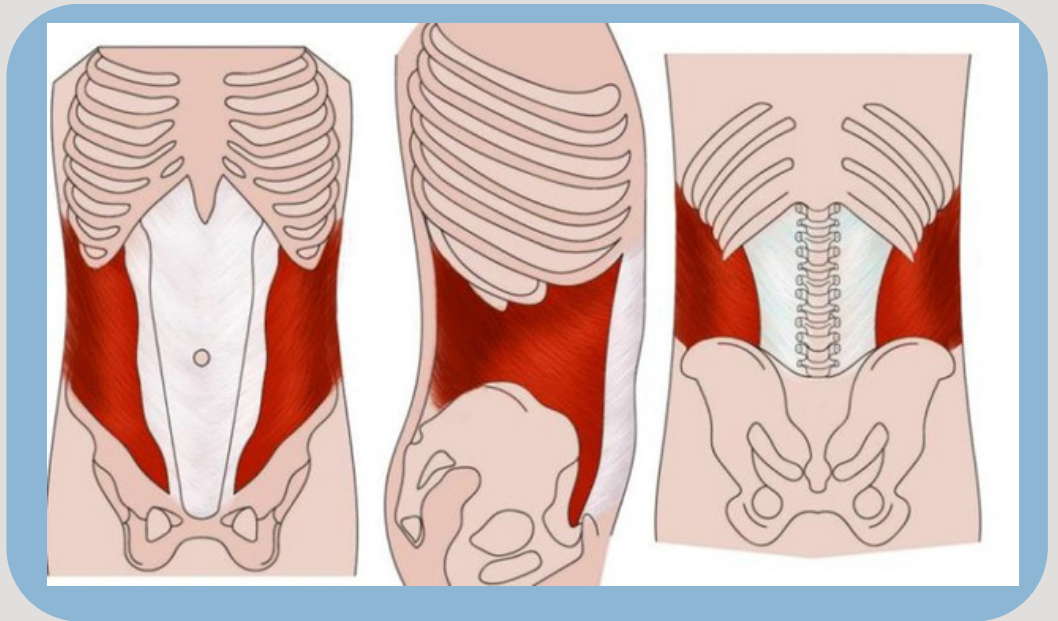
In this new position, many riders initially felt their lower leg was sitting too far back & tending to tip them forward. However, once also balanced in their upper body position, riders recognised their lower leg was in an optimal spot allowing them to activate their gluteal and hamstring muscles, which directly helped improve the rising trot mechanism, as well as length of stride and tempo.

Once the lower part of the rider's seat was organised, Erica moved her focus to the middle section of the rider's posture.

USING THE TRANSVERSE ABDOMINUS MUSCLES

Erica called this section the “bowl”, or that little bit below the belly button that in many women can pop out and pull the pelvis forward. Erica used a great analogy and would say ‘lift the bowl up to stop things falling out the front’. The muscles used for this action are the transverse abdominus and they need to tighten inwards to engage that part of the core and to flatten the lower or lumbar part of the rider’s back. It makes the pelvis more upright. This is a major part of the rider’s shock absorber and allows a following motion of the horses back movement.

The Transverse Abdominus is the deepest muscle layer of the abdominal muscles. Its main roles are to stabilise the trunk and maintain internal abdominal pressure



To find this part of the lower back and improve neutral spine, position one hand below your belly button and the other on your lower back. Now draw from below your belly button back, to fill up the lower back. Riders with a hollow back will find this more difficult but it is still achievable.

POSITIONING THE RIBS AND SHOULDERS ABOVE THE HIPS

To achieve a stable and strong core, a rider’s ribs/shoulders need to sit directly above the hips. A rider that tends to lean back may have a hollow lower back and ribs that sit behind the hips. A rider that leans forward can also be hollow in the back, and ribs/shoulders sitting in front of their hips.

The rider's chest or ribs should be above their pubic bone. A chest that points forward and outward or can also make a rider's back hollow. A classic Erica saying is "boobs on low beam" to correct the ribs pointing too far forward.

The position of the ribs/shoulders helps give rider core stability not only at the front and back of their spine but also the sides, preventing collapsing in at the waist by using oblique muscles (waist muscles). Imagining the torso is a square box is a nice analogy, the front and back of the box are the same length as are each of the sides. A rider with a long torso may have a more rectangular box but will still need to be even front and back and sides.

THE CORE

Erica had riders resist her push again, but this time to teach them how to engage their core. Riders were challenged to do this without losing inner thigh and lower leg alignment and stability, the "bowl" or below the belly button and neutral seat bones (upright pelvis).

Erica gently pushed riders: -

1. *From the front of the body*
2. *From the upper back*
3. *From the left side and right sides*



Each time Erica stressed that they needed to resist through their core muscles to make a stable torso, keeping the ribs above the hip and the lower tummy muscles or 'bowl' engaged.

Many horses displace our position, not with intention but more than likely because it is rewarding for them through the freedom from effort. Having a stable core, thigh position, and neutral spine is important to prevent being displaced forwards, backwards, sideways and any other ways. And importantly, it will go a long way to help keep us in the saddle!!

It sounds like a lot to do but most of us have one or two weak points and focusing on those helps everything else come into place.

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SHOULDER & ARM CONNECTION

The position of the rider's shoulder should be above the rider's hips to create the neutral spine and a strong upper body. Opening the collarbones helps riders engage their pectoral muscles.

Once the shoulders were in position, Erica asked the rider to: -

1. Lift their arm up
2. Lower the top of the shoulder
3. Roll the arm backwards keeping it straight
4. Position the elbow slightly forward
5. Bend the elbow to position the hands forward in front of the wither



We are all different in the length of our torso and the length of our upper arm. If you are lucky enough to have a short torso and long upper arms you will find putting your elbows and hands in the right position relatively easy. But a long body paired with short arms seems to be more difficult. At least I find it difficult!! My elbows are miles away from my hips and so my hands feel higher than I feel they should be.



Once again Erica asked the rider to resist but this time resist her pull. Erica would take the rider's fingers and ask them to resist her pull, the aim being that they would engage their shoulders by stabilizing between the shoulder blades making the back square. And engaging the back muscles in particular the **latissimus dorsi** and the underarm muscle (**serratus anterior**) and not get pulled out of the saddle or allow their hand to be pulled forward but also without pulling back with the elbow.

And of course, during this resistance Erica expected us to keep our seat position, thigh position, leg position etc.

The elbow pulling back will tend make the rider lean back and is likely to shorten the horse's neck and prevent the rider from releasing the rein pressure when a response occurs from the rein aids.

HAND POSITION

Holding the reins correctly is critical in developing a steady rein contact and when using the reins for transitions and turns.

Although a rider should form a fist around the reins, the reins should only actually be held firm between the thumb and first joint of the forefinger. The other fingers (middle finger and ring finger) are held as if holding a bird in the palm of your hand. Do not squash that bird!

The aim should be a light touch of the reins from a closing of the thumb and forefinger upwards, but never backwards. Closing the ring finger strongly can pull the reins backward and put too much tension on the horse's tongue causing a shortening or raising of the horses neck. Using good posture can help to improve downward transitions but using light touches of the rein aids is equally important. If you pull, you train your horse to pull.

After the rider worked on their position with Erica, they were asked to ride around Erica and keep their position. Here are some good take home messages and exercises that I saw really improve the rider's delivery of the aids and as a result, improve the balance of the horse:

UPWARD TRANSITIONS

Stay with the horse, keeping core engaged both front and back and watch the "bowl", below your belly button. Use the inner calves and inner thighs to produce the transition, basically squeeze inwards with both to achieve the transition.

Transitions need to occur immediately from this light aid and if not then a touch of the whip may be necessary to improve the response. If a rider needs to motivate a horse with a whip then make sure it is trained to respond immediately from 2 touches of it.

DOWNWARD TRANSITIONS

Stop the hips moving or make them shorter within the gait, use your shoulder and back muscles, latissimus dorsi, making between the shoulder blades strong and use the under-arm muscles (serratus) to resist the pull of the horse. Keep the fingers soft and do not pull the reins back.

If the horse pulls on the reins, use upward vibrations with the rein to improve the downward transition, which should ideally occur in 3 steps.

TURNS

The outer upper thighs are used to assist the turn. Thinking of pushing the heel away will help turn on those muscles. If turning right use left thigh and if turning left use right thigh. An ice skater uses the same muscles to turn. The reins are positioned right or left to produce the turn. The rider should take care to keep the elbow position during the turn. Remember, lower legs are for accelerating or yielding, not turning.

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It is important to keep the weight of the foot in the stirrup consistent. Riders were told to make the heavy foot light to reestablish the inner thigh and position of the lower leg. This had a significant effect on horses that fell in or out.

Horses that fall out tend to make us sit on the inside sit bone too much. The sit bones should be relatively even on a circle. Erica had riders look over their outside shoulder to correct this and to put the weight back on the outside seat bone. This had a significant effect on the rhythm as well as the straightness of the horses and dramatically improved turns from the outside rein.

Positioning the outside hand on the back of the saddle was another strategy to realign seat bones and encourage inner thigh rotation.

RISING TROT

Erica placed enormous emphasis on the rising trot mechanism, stressing that it must be a forward and back movement rather than an up and down movement.

Some horses are not forward enough from the rider's leg so it is also important the horse responds to the longer leg aid to achieve this with minimal effort from the rider.

Make the movement smooth

The forward movement should be the same as the back movement in rising trot. Some riders had a tendency to thrust too quickly during the last part of the forward movement, making riders land at the back of the saddle.

Others had a tendency to make the backward movement too quick. This is controlled through the thighs/hips by imagining a hydraulic pull back of the pelvis to land and stay in the saddle longer.

To help make the rising trot smooth, the rider's muscles between the shoulder blades, back and under arms will need to engage as well as the rein aids to control the horses speed and tempo if it is too quick.

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Keeping the arms forward



Erica had riders position their outside elbow in front of their rib or hip (depending on the length of the upper arm) and then when rising the trot push that arm forward from the elbow with their rise toward the horses mouth.

The hand goes forward with the rise and then becomes still as a result. It is not so much "rise the hips between the elbows" but rather "rise the elbows forward with the hips". This made for a very still hand position!!

SITTING THE TROT

In sitting trot, the rider's hips need to go forward and back with the horse's movement. It is like a hopping action. The hips hop and sit with the action of trot.

To achieve this, loosen the upper thighs and let them go up and down with the movement of the trot. Then when the rider feels the beat, go back to inner thigh rotation.

Another strategy was to ride with the reins in the inside hand and for the rider to tap the outside hand behind the saddle on the saddlecloth every stride. This gives the beat of the trot and engages the outside sit bone with the outside pair of legs. The sit bone sits as the outside hind is on the ground or stance phase and hop with the outside fore while it is in the air or swing phase.



BEND

The rider's inside hip should be slightly forward to create bend. The inside inner thigh is slightly toward the saddle; to move the horse's ribcage away and to ask the horse to bend. As the horse bends, it will also flex at the poll to the inside.

Thinking of riding the inside hip toward the outside ear will help achieve this. However, if the rider is not sitting level in the seat or doesn't have even weight in both stirrups and an even contact in both reins then the bend will either not happen or may be incorrect.

Once the horse is straight then bend will occur easily by thinking of making the horse's shoulders go out on a slightly bigger circle. The rider's inside thigh, and lower leg (more the front of the calf) may be needed to make the tempo quicker and stimulate the horse's inside hindleg to step under his or her ribcage. This is not a leg yield aid however, the inside seat bone is not back but rather forward with the position of the inside hip for bend.

CANTER

And lastly Erica worked on some of the rider's canter position and canter departs.

Riders were encouraged to look over their outside shoulder to position the inside hip forward for the canter transition. As in all upward transitions, both legs and inner thighs are used, the position of the outside sit bone back (from looking over the outside shoulder) positions the outside leg sufficiently back, for the canter depart.

The seat in the canter has three motions according to the three beats of the canter, a forward hip position when the hindlegs are going forwards is a posterior tilt of the hips, then an upright hip for the moment of suspension and then a backward hip or anterior tilt when the forelegs are going back before beginning the cycle again. It is a little like swinging a swing.

The important part of the movement in the beginning is to control the outside sit bone, looking over the outside shoulder is amazing for this as it gets control of the outside hind leg which remember is the only leg on the ground for a very short beat but has to support the weight of the whole horse during this time. Once this is achieved and the horse maintains canter without running or stalling and breaking rider is then able to focus on the inside hip going forward with inside foreleg. And will then be able to improve bend and collection.

SUCTION OR COLLECTION

The epitome of good posture is when a rider can use it to lift the horses back and collect its movement and produce elevation. Easier said than done and can only be really done if the prerequisites that I have outlined are all in place.

Most important is that the horse is in self-carriage, in rhythm or speed and tempo, straightness or line and including bend. When this is achieved the horse is soft and relaxed in the back and obedient to all leg and rein aids, the rider can let go of the reins or the legs for 1-2 strides and the horse maintains its posture and position and speed.

Suction' involves the rider using the upper third of both inner thighs and glutes, to lift the horses back. This rider must also lift his body (getting narrower in the ribcage) by sitting tall to achieve greater elevation. The aim is that the horse elevates its steps by engaging and lifting the back while maintaining lightness of the forehand. It makes a horse rounder through its whole body but the horse is not forced to be there with a restraining hand and pushing leg. Collection is something the horse should offer when he is ready to do so.

The initial roundness or “on the bit” feeling so many strive for should be a product of the horse being in self-carriage, in rhythm, straightness and bend. The horse should not be forced to do so but become that way through various exercises. Perfect posture certainly helps to achieve this, and varying exercises where a rider controls the horses legs are equally important to train to achieve this outcome.

“Good rider posture allows the rider to deliver the aids more effectively and develop an independent seat. The way the horse responds to the aids is the way he achieves good posture and self-carriage.”

The most important part of good posture and an independent seat is that we make our horses more comfortable but there is always a training component because postural aids are cues that are generally not enforceable and can be ignored or misunderstood by our horses. When a horse is obedient and responsive to the aids (reins and legs) and the cues we give, then it is easier to ride well too.

“Part man/part horse”..... Who is your centaur? I am a welsh pony.... When it feels good I am a part of her.

Manu x

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How is the Diploma of Equitation Science different to Equine Science?

Equitation Science is about horse training, more specifically. Whilst Equine Science is about the horse in general, Equitation Science focusses in on the training and management of the horse.

Our Diploma of Equitation Science is a completely unique qualification based on the practical application of Equitation Science. If the word science makes you nervous, don't worry, it is not lab coats, test tubes and research! It is simply using the science we already have about horse behaviour and how the horse learns, to become an effective and efficient trainer. In doing so, the welfare of the horse is prioritised, and the training is sustainable.

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