

Mounting and Control in the Saddle

Our topics for this week are proper:

- Mounting
- Position in the saddle
- Means of control from the saddle
- Dismounting

Safety Checks Before Mounting

Safety checks should be performed before mounting beginning with grooming the horse to ensure that no dirt, plant material, or other debris might be rubbed into the horse's skin with the tack. The cinch area on the lower chest is most likely to be dirty and must be carefully brushed clean. The rider's hands should be run over the entire horse to search for problems that may not be visually apparent. The rider should pick out all hoofs to remove rocks and caked mud or snow. Caked mud or snow in the hoof can cause the horse's feet to have no traction and cause falls.

Tack needs to be adjusted to fit the horse. Poorly adjusted tack can be ineffective or uncomfortable to the horse which can adversely affect the horse's attention to the environment and to the rider.

The rider should be certain that the horse will willingly flex its neck laterally by gently pulling on a rein on the right side and then the left to ensure a one-rein stop can be accomplished. The one rein stop, gradually circling the horse in smaller circles, is a rider's emergency brake.

The rider should *longe* ("lunge" in the UK) the horse with a halter or neck rope with a cavesson and a longe line at least 15 ft long to assess the horse's attitude before getting on. This can be done with the bridle on as long as the reins are security wrapped or tied to the saddle. The rider should longe the horse both directions and pay particular attention to how calmly the horse makes the change in direction. When the horse can make the change in direction without excitement or resentment, it can be considered to be in a proper frame of mind to consider riding. Longeing should not be done in an arena where other people are riding.

Mounting

Before the rider mounts, the horse should be moved away from nearby objects that the rider or it may be injured by. The saddle should be gripped and rocked from side to side to spread horse's feet slightly and become better balanced for mounting. It is best to have the horse's feet positioned so that the left front foot is slightly forward. This will facilitate mounting and reduce the horse's desire to move as the rider is mounting. The horse's mane is grasped along with the reins with the left hand. Holding the mane and reins while mounting enables the rider immediate control of the horse if needed. The left rein should be held shorter than the right to be able to make the horse's hindquarters' move away if the horse tries to move. The horse should be required to stand still when mounting and stay still for about 30 seconds after being mounted. If it moves while the rider tries to mount, the rider should step down and back the horse at least 20 feet and then try again. This should be repeated as needed until the horse stands still to be mounted.

Moving during mounting is disrespectful and dangerous.

While standing on the left side of the horse and facing its right hip, the rider's right hand holds the left stirrup and angles it to more easily place the rider's left foot in it. On a western saddle, the horn can be grasped with the rider's right hand rather than the cantle to mount, but if the horse moves its rump away as the rider attempts to mount, mounting will be difficult to impossible. If the rider grasps the cantle with his right hand to mount, he has 3 points of contact (mane, stirrup, and cantle) that allows the rider to move with the horse no matter how it moves. Mounting is accomplished by the rider hopping on his right foot two to three times moving to the right and closer to the horse on each hop so toe of the left boot will not bump into the horse's side and then a strong final hop to mount. Mounting should not be attempted by pulling up into the saddle with both hands, rather than using a strong final hop to propel the rider upward and into the saddle. The saddle could be pulled off center and control of the horse lost, if the mount is improperly performed.

The needed stirrup length can be approximated by the length of the rider's arm. The rider can stand facing the same direction as the horse on the left side. The rider places his right hand at the middle of the saddle and lifts the stirrup to the chest with the left hand. An approximate proper length is for the bottom of the stirrup to be at the middle of the rider's chest. After mounting, the rider should make sure he can stand in the stirrups with a couple of inches clearance from the saddle, or if he dangles his feet, the bottom of the stirrups should be just below his ankle bones. Shorter length stirrups are needed for jumping horses. Changing the length of stirrup leathers can be done while mounted in an English saddle. Western saddles must be adjusted by the rider or someone else on the ground.

Position in the Saddle

Horses can change direction quickly and the change cannot always be anticipated. Therefore, the safest position in the saddle is to sit in the middle of the saddle (called "centered riding") without leaning. Foot pressure on the stirrups should be on the ball of the foot with the heels down and in a perpendicular line with the rider's shoulders. A few exceptions exist. If riding a colt that might stop and turn very quickly, the rider's heels can be slightly in front of his shoulders. When riding at speed and asking for a quick stop, it is best to lean back with the rider's heels slightly ahead of his shoulders.

During the Ride

Attention must be paid to the horse's attitude and focus of attention while riding. Their attitude should have been checked before mounting, and their predominant focus of attention should be on their feet (where they are stepping) and the rider. The rider should ride with his attention ahead, looking for objects or situations that might frighten or endanger the horse.

Maintaining the horse's attention on rider can be achieved by directing it in a zig-zag pattern, circling, and doing vertical flexion of its face by rhythmic gentle pulling and release of the reins when needed. The goal is to have the horse go where it should, not necessarily where it wants.

A ride should always begin at a walk or trot. The rider should circle the horse anytime it wants to go faster than the rider wants. It is important to keep the horse's feet moving. Attempts to keep an energized or frightened horse's feet still will cause them to feel claustrophobic and add to their anxiety and the rider's difficulty in handling the horse. After the horse is warmed up and maintaining a calm attitude, it can be loped (cantered) or galloped. If needed, the rider

should ride the horse at a walk, trot, and lope in a small round pen and move to larger pens as the rider's confidence increases.

If a horse spooks, the rider should not let it stop and stare at what it is afraid of or run from it. The horse should be made to work harder by trotting in a zig-zagging manner (doing rollbacks) near the object, always turning toward the object. After the horse begins to relax, it can be allowed to slow down and walk away from the object at an angle. Moving directly away from the object will put it in the horse's blind spot and heighten its anxiety again.

The horse should not be allowed to stop and eat while a rider is in the saddle. Allowing it to eat while being ridden will be an escalating problem that results in a rider's loss of control of the horse's attention.

Extreme care must be taken if it is necessary to cross pavement, especially if the horse is shod. Smooth metal shoes are very slick on pavement. Asphalt, oil spots, or light rain which floats oil in the pavement to the surface exacerbate the slickness of pavement. Riding along roads is best avoided. Roadsides are often littered with glass and wire that can injure horse hooves and legs. If it is necessary to ride alongside a road, a rider should ride toward oncoming traffic, if permitted by state law.

The herd instinct of horses should not be underestimated. Another rider should never be left behind on a ride, even for short distances. A horse left behind may panic from being away from the group and race across a road or into other dangers to join up with other horses that it knows. Horses free in a pasture will usually run up to or along a fence line which can frighten horses being ridden on the other side of the fence, especially if the pastured horses and ridden horses are unfamiliar with each other.

Emergency stops and dismounts should be practiced as a precaution against a runaway. Pulling back on both reins of a horse believed to be out-of-control is a common reaction by inexperienced riders but can be very dangerous. Either the horse will not stop because it can easily out pull a rider's arms with its mouth and neck, or it will stop and may then rear up and fall over on the rider. A rider that tries to jump off incorrectly may get caught in the stirrups and be dragged.

To regain control of a horse that wishes to go faster or in a different direction than the rider desires, the ***one rein stop*** is an emergency brake that must be applied slowly. To ensure that a one rein stop can be accomplished when needed, the rider must make sure the horse will flex its neck laterally by direct pull on one rein before he mounts. The one rein stop is performed by getting a shorter grasp on a rein on one side at about the middle of the horse's neck. While giving more slack in the rein on the opposite side, the short rein is pulled gradually to the side at about the height of the rider's knee while pushing its hip on that side away with the rider's heel. One rein should not be suddenly pulled in a sharp back or up direction. Either could make the horse fall on its side.

A properly executed one rein stop will make the horse turn in a circle that gradually spirals into tighter circles. When the horse nears a standstill, the pull rein and heel pressure is gradually released to reward it for paying attention to the rider. The horse is allowed to proceed forward until it disobeys again. Repeated use of the one rein stop may be needed several times before the horse decides to maintain its attention on a rider's cues for speed and direction.

A similar technique to the one rein stop is the ***pulley rein (cavalry) stop***. One rein stops require room to circle which may not be available when riding on some trails. The pulley rein stop is performed by holding one rein in a fixed position, usually a fist that is pressed into the

horses neck just in front of the saddle with direct contact with the mouth (no slack in the rein). The other rein is also held short but gradually pulled back with the rider's upper body while the arm holding the rein remains rigid. The pulley rein stop can stop a horse without the room needed for circling in a one rein stop while reducing the risk of the horse rearing and is the only safe stop method if riding in woods or on slopes.

English style riders are frequently taught an emergency dismount for unruly horses. This requires continuing to hold the reins with both hands while placing the heels of the hands on the horse's withers and kicking both feet free of the stirrups. Using the rhythm of the horse's movement and keeping the rider's legs stretched out, both legs are swung backward and upward in a vault toward either side (usually the left) while pushing the upper body way from the horse's withers and releasing the reins. The rider should bend at the waist while in the air, attempt to land on his feet, and prepare to roll. Some trainers encourage holding onto the mane or reins, but this may increase the risk of being stepped on by the horse or entangled by the reins and dragged.

Dismounting

A routine dismount is similar to mounting a horse, but in reverse. The reins and the horse's neck should be grasped with the rider's left hand while the right hand grasps the horn. The rider's right foot is freed from the stirrup and then the rider's right leg is swung over the horse's rump. It is potentially dangerous for the horse to move during a dismount.

Western-style riders usually continue their right leg swing to the ground and slide their left foot from the stirrup. The swing should also twist slightly. The rider's body will then be facing the horse's right hip which puts the rider back in the safest position to be standing next to the horse.

Horses used for English-style riding are generally taller than horses used for Western-style riding. A short rider or a tall horse can put a dismounting rider in a dangerously awkward position if they try to swing their right leg to the ground while the left foot is still in the stirrup. The left leg may still be in the stirrup while the rider cannot reach the ground with his right foot. Therefore, English-style riders are taught to kick free of the stirrups before dismounting.

To dismount from an English saddle the rider swings his right leg over to the left side, then stands in the left stirrup with both legs together, leans slightly over the saddle, braces his body up with both hands while freeing the left foot from the stirrup. After free, the rider repels his body away from the horse and lands with both feet on the ground while continuing to hold the reins. The English-style dismount is also safer for children and other riders of short stature.

English-style saddles have floppy stirrup leathers and heavy, metal, dangling stirrup irons. After dismounting from an English saddle the irons should be run up the leathers and fixed near the saddle for safety reasons.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- **Prior to mounting, riders should go through a mental checklist of assessing safety concerns.**
- **When mounting a horse, the horse should not move and the rider should not pull the horse toward him/her.**
- **The rider should not lean in the saddle except to rapidly accelerate or stop or to remain perpendicular to the ground when climbing, descending, or**

- **turning.**
- **Both reins should NOT be pulled on to stop an out of control horse.**
- **English-style vault dismounts should be used by short riders or riders of tall horses.**

Abby says it is time to wrap up this episode.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.