

STAY CALM & SIT ON

MASTERING THE SITTING TROT

By Natalie DeFee Mendik | Photos By John Borys Photography

Sitting trot: does this term conjure images of floating along gracefully with your horse or jarring in the saddle until it's blessedly over? Beyond being part and parcel of riding, sitting the trot well allows you to be a more effective rider who not only rides in harmony with the horse, but positively influences the horse as well.

To be sure, some horses' trots are easier to sit than others, but employing a few tricks can help ease your way. Grand Prix dressage rider and USDF Gold Medalist Patti Becker shares her insider tips, and as coach of two-time USEF Dressage Seat Medal Finals winner, Alexander Dawson, Becker is the obvious choice for advice on plugging those seat bones into the saddle!

WARM YOURSELF UP

Especially in cold weather, get your blood flowing before you tack up. "Make sure you've walked around a bit and your body is warm before you get on," recommends Becker. "A good body temperature is important—otherwise your muscles get hard, and no matter how much you relax or breathe, your muscle tissue won't let go."

Before getting started, bend over and touch your toes. "Make sure your lower back is relaxed and released so you don't hold tension there," Becker says. "The lower back, hamstrings, and gluteal muscles are often where we have the most tension, which gets



Fifteen-year-old Alexander Dawson demonstrates aboard Uno how sitting well allows for both harmonious and effective riding. Under the guidance of coach Patricia Becker, Dawson has claimed two USEF Dressage Seat Medals Finals titles—in the 13 & Under division and again in the 14-18 division.

in our way of sitting the trot."

Once you've mounted, if you have a reliable horse, let your feet hang out of the stirrups while you walk on a long rein. Spend a few minutes finding your seat bones in the saddle. Your leg should have a soft bend in the knee, with your heel lining up beneath your hip.

Letting your hand drop by your side, bring your lower leg up to touch your heel to your hand. "You want to be stretched and loose so that you're not pulling your leg up in front of you," says Becker. "Keep your leg long and underneath your body. Relax and make sure you're following the horse. This doesn't sound like much, but in reality is a big deal. If you focus on that in the beginning, you'd be surprised at how great an impact it makes when you actually sit the trot."

WARM YOUR HORSE UP

In the trot, the horse's legs move in alternating diagonal pairs with a suspension phase between footfalls.

Practice Makes Perfect

Run through this mental checklist while schooling to make sure your position is on target:

- Am I sitting with both seat bones even and balanced in the saddle?
- Are my core muscles, which allow me to follow and absorb the motion of the horse's stride, engaged?
- Is the small of my back in a supple, neutral position—not roached back or arched forward?
- Is my body in the classic ear, shoulder, elbow, point of hip, heel alignment?
- Is my leg draping under me? If I can see the tip of my boot, I know I need to bring my leg back under me more.
- Are my heels slightly down (even without stirrups)?
- Is my upper body stretching up from the waist and lower body stretching down from the waist?

In your warm-up on the horse, touch your heel to your hand to loosen and lengthen your leg.



An elastic, rhythmic trot is achieved by the horse engaging the hind quarters and carrying that energy over a supple back to a soft contact in the bridle. This is also important as far as the sitting trot goes for the rider, since a horse's tight back is very hard to sit.

"I sometimes have people come to me and say, 'I can't sit the trot very well.' I look at the horse and think, 'I couldn't sit that trot, either—and I ride 10 to 12 horses a day,'" remarks Becker, who stresses allowing the horse time for a solid warm up. "If you try to sit while the horse's back is tight, no matter how much you work at it, you're not going to be successful. Spend enough time in rising trot, working on getting the horse to stretch the neck down, reach out to the bit, swing the hind legs, and work over a relaxed back."

Along with relaxation, warm up with an eye on rhythm. "The other thing that is important to focus on with the horse is the rhythm," notes Becker. "Rhythm comes from the rider. Have a rhythm in your head and have the horse stay with you in that rhythm. It's very hard for your body to follow an

uneven rhythm. Establishing rhythm helps the horse's back to relax and makes sitting much easier."

STAY CENTERED

So how do your muscles work together to make all this possible? "Everyone talks about the core being important, and yes of course it is, but we need to remember that it's not just your lower and upper abdominal muscles, but also your lower back, upper back, and hip flexors," notes Becker. "When you are sitting the trot, focus on the fact that the movement in your body comes from below your breastbone. As your hips swing back and forth with the motion of the horse, your hip flexors open and release, so your hips can swing without your body from the breastbone up moving. We don't want our shoulders and head swinging back and forth, which often happens when the core, the abdominal muscles, and lower back are not strong enough."

"Your chest should be up, with the front of your body stretched, without an arched lower back," she explains. "You want to feel as though somebody can take the back of your head and pull

your whole spine straight up without pulling you out of the saddle. This will give you a nice straight spine without hyper-extending your lower back and allowing you to activate lower abdominals, as well as lower back to follow the horse."

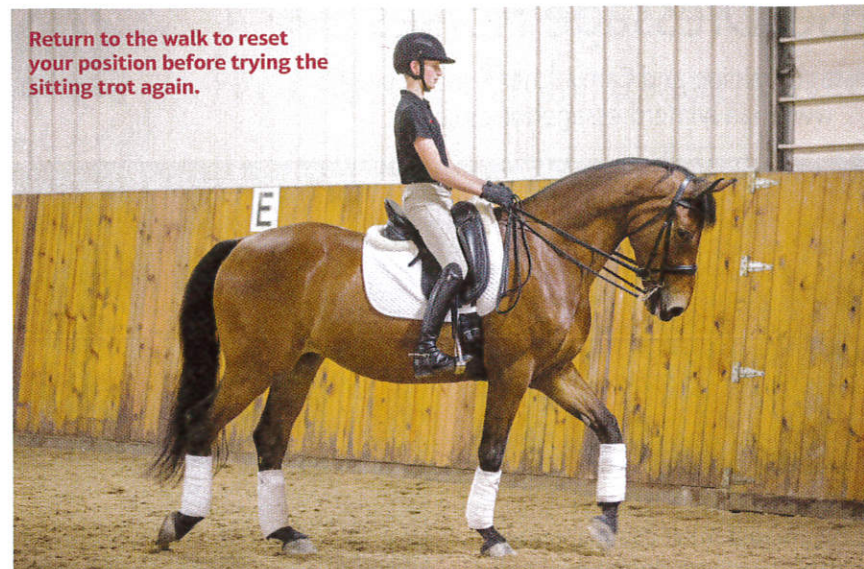
KEEP IT SIMPLE

One of the best ways to work on the sitting trot is to take it step by step; you can do this by sitting just short periods of time. "It's very difficult to go from rising trot to sitting trot, so in the beginning, I recommend two different things," says Becker. First, start with walk-trot transitions, sitting the first five to 10 strides after transitioning from walk to trot. Establish your seat and then go to posting. Eventually return to walk, reset your position, and try sitting again.

"You don't want to lose your focus. Make sure the actual time you sit is quality; don't get tired, tense, bounce, or lose the rhythm," she explains. "It's very difficult to then find that again without going back to walk."

The other approach starts in rising trot, sitting a few strides, going back to

Return to the walk to reset your position before trying the sitting trot again.



Alternate between sitting trot and posting trot, gradually making your sitting trot sets longer as you develop a better ability to sit.



posting trot, and repeating the cycle. For example, post three strides, sit three, post three, sit three, adding strides as you improve. "Build on it instead of forcing yourself to sit with the hopes it will get better as you go—it usually doesn't, because your body tenses up and protects itself—you end up bouncing and using your stirrups more than you like," comments Becker.

BRAIN GAMES


Sometimes being in your head can be a good thing—like when imagery helps your body control. Becker tells her students to imagine a thin rod running through the middle of the head downward, encouraging the idea of the body working around its own axis, not at the back of the body, but at the center. "We often think of the spine," she says, "but focusing on your center allows you to stay more grounded in the saddle." In addition, imagine if your leg could reach the ground, your foot would center right beneath your body.

GEAR UP

Obviously your saddle has to fit both you and your horse. As far as position goes, if your saddle isn't balanced front-to-back, or is the wrong size for you, you'll have a hard time sitting properly. If your cantle sits too low, your leg will angle forward, putting you in a chair seat; conversely if the pommel is too low, you'll end up perched in the saddle. "Find the best saddle for you within your budget," says Becker, who recommends enlisting a professional saddle fitter.

Stirrup length also plays a role in sitting the trot. One rule of thumb for getting the right fit is when you drop your stirrups, the stirrup should hit at about your ankle bone. "If your leg is too short, it will actually push you out of the tack, which makes it hard for you to sit. But you also don't want to be reaching for your stirrups," says Becker. "You should lift your toe to get your foot into the stirrup."

JUST DO IT!

Put the time in to learn correct position and develop muscle memory. Don't let the sitting trot be your nemesis—master it instead! The end result will bring you more comfortable and effective riding. 

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