Common rider problems, your position and balance and the elusive ‘independent seat’.

The subject of rider biomechanics deals with the rider in detail. A rider usually expects their horse to be ‘straight’, ‘supple’, ‘balanced’ etc. but a horse cannot be these things if their rider is hindering rather than helping them due to their own position and balance problems. A rider needs to fully examine themselves if they want to ride to the best of their ability and get the best out of their horse.

In my experience, most riders come up against the same or similar problems. Many of these problems are interrelated but can be roughly grouped as follows.

Problems with the body

Asymmetries of the body – everyone has a certain amount of ‘crookedness’, many have pain due to previous injuries, some people are naturally supple and others naturally stiff. Tiredness/lack of strength/fitness are other issues that a rider may have to deal with. An additional issue is that most riding instruction assumes that a rider has a perfect body shape for riding whereas the reverse is often true. The Horse Rider’s Mechanic System teaches you how to ride well despite any ‘irregularities’ you may have.
Problems with incorrect information

There are many myths about riding and these can hinder the rider, for example, you may have been told to ‘wrap your legs around the horse’, ‘grip with your knees’, ‘push your heels right down’, ‘point your toes forward’, etc. There is no end to the often unhelpful instructions that a rider is currently receiving, or that are stored in their head from years ago when they were first learning to ride. The Horse Rider’s Mechanic System explains what is the correct information and expels the myths.

Problems with your attitude

Your thought process as a rider is vitally important. Mature riders tend to ‘try too hard’ compared to children who tend to ‘go with the flow’. Mature also riders tend to overthink/overcomplicate the subject. Sometimes it seems that the harder a rider tries, the harder it gets and additional frustration may occur because a rider may remember how easy it used to be if they rode as a child. The Horse Rider’s Mechanic System helps you to focus on what is important rather than what isn’t.

Confidence problems

Issues with your confidence unravel your riding ability and cause you to ride a level less than your best. Confidence issues can result in your body not functioning as it should - it is common for a rider to ‘stiffen up’ as they become increasingly tense – this all creates a downward spiral of events. The Horse Rider’s Mechanic System rapidly improves your position and your balance – this means that you start to feel more confident right away. An upward spiral of events starts to occur!

Problems of insecurity – i.e. lack of an ‘independent seat’

For many riders, development of the seat was not a priority when being taught to ride and consequently they have developed rider problems that do not go away without some special attention. For example, no amount of being simply told to ‘keep your legs still’ or ‘keep your hands still’ will help a rider to do this. The root of the problem must be found, and then worked through, before a rider can improve.
It is important to clarify what a rider is (or should be) aiming for. The term ‘independent seat’ is difficult to describe exactly in words. The term is often used to indicate how a skilled rider rides a horse. Watching a skilful rider should give the illusion that they are not moving at all, when in fact they will be moving, but it will be with, rather than against, the movement of their horse. This apparent stillness is because the rider has an independent seat.

Having an ‘independent seat’ means that:

- Each of the limbs can be controlled independently of each other, therefore enabling the rider to give the aids (signals/cues) clearly and concisely.
- The rider can stay in balance with their horse through different speeds and gradients.
- The rider does not have to resort to gripping with the legs or pulling on the reins to help them to balance.

All of this of course means the rider is far easier to carry and has better communication with their horse.

At the other end of the scale entirely, think about when you were a complete beginner, or if you cannot remember that think about a beginner rider that you have seen. When they used their legs, their hands would have moved at the same time, in fact sometimes a beginner’s hands shoot up in the air when they move their legs!

The opposite happens when a beginner rider tries to use their hands to stop their horse, in this case their upper body may tip forwards and their legs may swing backwards. These extreme movements usually disappear quite quickly (hopefully!) but this example illustrates what the body tends to do, albeit to a much lesser extent, until the rider learns to have full control of their various body parts. Even experienced riders can still have a certain amount of this behaviour going on when they ride – particularly if their confidence starts to affect how they ride.

Even though the term independent ‘seat’ sounds as if it is all about keeping your seat on your horse it involves much more than that. Yes, it is about how you ‘sit’ on a horse but in actual fact it involves your whole body.
Symptoms that a rider does not have in ‘independent seat’ include: losing stirrups, hands that won’t stay still, gripping knees, wobbly (disengaged) legs and bouncing etc. These tend to result in a loss of confidence and create a vicious circle of events.

So, you can see, if you are having problems, and if it’s any consolation, most people are, it may be that there are several things that you can do to improve the situation.

**Your position, balance and how they affect your seat**

The subjects of rider position and balance are inextricably linked and it is not until a rider has good position and balance that they can develop an ‘independent seat’.

**Your position**

In terms of position this is what we are aiming for (rider diagram). Not just because it looks pretty but because:

- it is balanced.
- It is more secure.
- you are easier to carry.
- you can then apply the aids correctly.

Improving your position is the first step to improving your riding. Many common horse riding problems, including pain and discomfort when riding, can be attributed to poor rider position. In addition, many ‘resistances’ in a horse, stem from poor rider position.

Often riders are not even aware of what is happening to the various parts of their body. This is partly because a rider cannot see much of what their body is doing when riding (unless they have mirrors available to them) and partly because riders are not commonly taught what they are meant to feel. Learning to become a better rider is about developing an awareness of what is happening to your body when you ride.

A rider should be aware of what they can feel, right from the soles of their feet upwards. Starting with the feet, the stirrups should be in just the right position on the feet so that the rider can properly ‘engage’ the lower leg, with the heel positioned just slightly lower than the toe. In
this position, the heel can then dip further when necessary in order to absorb the movement that is generated by, and is travelling upwards from, the horse.

The correct positioning of the rider’s legs is crucial for good balance. If they are positioned too far forward, the rider sits too far back, putting too much weight in the weakest part of the horse’s back. If the rider’s legs are positioned too far back, the rider’s upper body tips forward, this unbalances the rider and makes them very insecure indeed. In addition, if the legs are incorrectly positioned, they will not be in the correct place to apply the aids.

The upper body should be upright with the head positioned directly over the body, not in front or behind. This is particularly important because the human head is very heavy. If it is not balanced on top of the body then this unbalances the rider and uses up unnecessary energy.

There should be an imaginary straight line from the rider’s ear, through the hip, to the ankle.

The arms should hang at the waist or slightly forward of the waist and there should be an imaginary straight line from the rider’s elbow to the horse’s mouth.

When in the correct position, a rider should be sitting/standing across a horse in such a way that if the horse were to disappear in a puff of smoke, the rider would land on the ground with their knees slightly bent, but still in perfect balance.

**Your Balance**

After improving your position, improving your balance will lead to you becoming a more secure and therefore confident rider. Improving your balance is the key to further improving your riding. Most riders need help with this area of their riding life, yet it is not a commonly taught subject.

Good balance comes easier to some than others, and generally speaking, the older you are the more you have to work to have good balance. Children tend to balance easily and naturally whereas older riders often have problems with their balance. This is because, whereas children tend to carry out activities that use balance daily, modern adults tend not to do so. This can be very frustrating if you rode as a child and can remember what it used to feel like!
Sometimes it seems that the harder you try, the more unobtainable those quiet legs, still upper body and good hands become.

You can greatly improve your balance, and riding *correctly* is a great exercise to improve your balance in general. But you need to make sure you are practicing the ‘right’ behaviour – and maintaining or improving your balance, rather than practicing the ‘wrong’ behaviour and just getting better at doing it wrong!

Improving your balance involves utilising certain mounted exercises. These and much more are detailed in The Horse Rider’s Mechanic System.