

A lesson with Matthew Dowsley is multi-layered, and rider position is one of those layers. References to position are an integral part of a training session with Matthew: just a well timed 'shoulder blades together', as part of the 'half halt now' command helps the rider get the result he is looking for from his horse.

The Horse Magazine asked Matthew to outline the most important points of dressage rider position, the faults, and the faults they cause in way your horse performs, whether he be a dressage horse, showjumper, eventer or show horse.

The Rider's **POSITION**

The Head

Most people ride with their chin stuck down towards the chest, with no neck, looking too low. I don't look up so high, but my head is straight ahead, and I can look down a little with my eyes, sometimes I look asleep, but I aim at having my head straight ahead. You need to concentrate on not looking down, you see a lot of riders riding around looking down, and it means the rider takes the shock of the horse's movement through the neck, instead of the lower back. Looking down also creates a tension through the rider's body.

The Shoulders

Close the shoulder blades, keep them closed. A lot of people ride with the shoulder blades open, then the shoulders come forward, and everything opens up. The elbows comes out, and then the upper body loses the perpendicular line, you lose the seat, the seat goes out the back, and you end up nearly on the crutch, and you've lost your driving aids.

The Elbows

Elbows should be just lightly by

your sides, relaxed. Everyone's arm is not exactly the same length. You would see people, who to ride with the their hands in the correct position, would have their elbows a little forward from the body. Some a touch behind, but not much, you can't say the elbow has to be in one spot, just naturally, softly relaxed by the side.

Hand Position

Riders love to hang on the inside rein and this blocks all the energy from the inside hind leg and any freedom of movement: the horse should be ridden from the inside leg to the outside hand. I always say to riders, 'think how you love to hang on the inside rein', then hold the inside rein lightly, ride the horse away from your inside leg and hold the outside rein, and feel the difference.

I ask riders to think about taking the hands in the direction their going, to the inside. I find it helps stop those people who like to drag on the inside rein to make the horse go to the inside, and all it does is make the horse fall out. If you take both hands

in the direction you're going, to the inside, you're really riding your horse from the outside rein, into the direction you want to go.

I like the hands to be so that there is a line from the elbow, the hand, and to the bit in the horse's mouth. The hands no more than four inches apart, with the thumbs up. If you're riding on the left rein, have your hands a little more to the left of the wither, on the right rein, a little to the right. Occasionally you have to go the opposite way, if you're in a travers for example, you take both hands to the outside for a stride or two, and say 'bend more'. Overall, on a 20 metre circle, I like the hands softly together, a little to the inner side, so you must have the connection with the outside rein firmer than the inside rein, while keeping the horse moving from the inside leg.

The Perpendicular Body Line and the Upper Body

I like a rider to look as if he stood up, standing straight up on the ground, with a bend at the knee, that there's a line from the shoulder, elbow, hip, heel. Now all I try to do is to make the riders think of pushing their weight, their hips, in front of that line: not to lean back, although a lot of people like to ride leaning back, but I like the riders to think, 'push the waist a little bit

forward', and that puts you on the seat bones correctly.

If you tip your weight forward, the horse is always looking for his balance, you're putting your horse on the forehand instantly. Tipping your weight back, I think is a lesser fault, it's not bad, but I don't know how you'd ride around, leaning back all the time. I think you've got to be in balance if you want the horse to be balanced.

Another rider problem is hanging the weight to the outside. On a circle for instance, riders wonder why they can't keep the horse flexed to the inside, or why the horse falls out of the circle. The horse only wants to go where your weight is, so if you throw your weight to the outside the horse falls out; they fall out through the outside shoulder, and then the rider drags on the inside rein, with all his weight on the outside seat bone, and the horse is never straight, and ends up going the wrong way.

The Seat

Riders must learn when they are trying to learn to sit the trot, you don't push down, the rider's seat must follow the horse's back; so your lower back acts as a shock absorber. You must learn to relax, sometimes when I'm teaching someone to sit, I will say, 'look hold the saddle and feel the rhythm'.

The Rider's Position with Matthew Dowsley

If you think down, you end up with your knees up around your ears, and you're bouncing along like you're on a pogo stick. Your hips and your lower back must follow the rhythm of the trot.

The Legs

Years ago people were taught 'hang on with your knees', so the thigh becomes tight, and not stretched and straight enough, the knees come in front of the saddle. The thighs should be loose, with the calf on the horse. You want to stretch right down from your hip to your knee, then relax your knee and put your calf on the horse. You don't try to grip, you feel the horse with the calf. If you sit really well your feet will be parallel with the horse. Your ankles should be supple, and the weight draining down to the heel, but I always tell riders not to be obsessed with the heels being down; just keep the ball of the foot in the stirrup, think of the weight draining down towards the heels.

