

[SPIRAL SEAT, A MISTAKEN IDEA](#)

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The concept and terminology of the ‘Spiral Seat’ is confusing. The most popular version is RUBBISH.

One of my students – a professional and Grand Prix trainer – asked me why I eschew ‘the Spiral Seat’ concept, when the expression is so bandied about in books. I asked her to show me some references. She brought me a dressage book written by scientific types. It referred to the Spiral Seat– by saying something to the effect that it had been discussed by somebody 50 years earlier. That was it. It was accepted because it had been out there for decades, and much quoted. That, apparently is all it takes to turn something into a fact, or dogma, without any thought, analysis, or questioning.

If it is referenced without explanation or analysis, it is useless. If it is described, it helps to be able to draw one’s own conclusions about its validity.

Spiral Seat is one of those things that is referenced and accepted because its been out there for so long. Albert Einstein said “The most important thing is to not stop questioning.” That is good advice for horsemen, especially dressage types (who tend to genuflect toward Mecca when confronted by dogma and things labeled as ‘classical’). And so it is with the ‘Spiral Seat.’

In order to be able to analyze what it even means, we need to understand a very basic issue in sports (including riding), and just a basic issue of balance, locomotion and stability. The rider/human has what is called a Frontal Plane. This is a plane that bisects the rider in to a front half and a back half. And there is the Sagittal Plane – which bisects the person in to a left half and a right half. These planes are perpendicular to each other – when one changes or rotates, so does the other.

A plane is like a pane of glass or piece of plywood– the whole thing is on ONE plane. It is not twisted or ‘spiraled.’ The line through both shoulders is parallel to the line through both hips.

A common description of the Spiral Seat is that the rider’s shoulders are parallel to the horse’s shoulders, and the rider’s hips are parallel to the horse’s hips. That means that when the horse is bent (as on a circle), the rider swivels in the middle (waist area). The pelvis points outward, and the chest points inward. This is RUBBISH.

In other sports, and physical therapy, this is simply viewed as loss of core tonicity and integrity, or what I call ‘Rotational Instability.’

It may sound good, and we may be inclined to say “Ahhhhh, yes,” but it is recognized as a bad form by someone who understands even a little about biomechanics.

The Frontal Plane (all of it – as an integral flat unit) can be rotated to some degree, but should not be twisted or spiraled in the middle (which destroys the plane).

The only thing that occurs to me that might explain how this bit of myth got started (and unthinkingly and unquestioningly swallowed hook-line-and-sinker), is about a different concept. The rider CAN try to arrange his sagittal/frontal plane relative to the rider’s line of choice, even if the horse is trying to turn and face somewhere else. The rider should try to ‘aim’ the Sagittal Plane along the line that he wants the horse’s long axis to ‘point,’ even if it is a bit of a struggle to avoid being governed by the horse (who is in charge here?!).

A useful image here is Leg Yield or Half Pass. We want the horse pretty much parallel to the long axis of the arena. But the horse finds it easier to angle itself on a more diagonal line – less work, less engagement or adduction of the hind leg on the outside. If the rider effectively makes his Sagittal Plane parallel to the long axis of the ring, the horse (if reasonably well balanced and in self-carriage) will eventually arrange its long axis under the rider. He does that for his own comfort – not because he understands or cares what you are up to. Another way to think of this is to keep the Frontal Plane perpendicular to the long axis of the ring. It is the same thing, but may be an easier image for some.

Try this off-the-horse exercise to get a better understanding of the concept. Sit in a swivel chair (like a desk chair). Keeping the chair still, rotate your chest and shoulders laterally. You will swivel or spiral in the middle, with no effect on the chair. Rubbish for riding. Now, rotate your pelvis until the chair rotates. The shoulders and pelvis must stay parallel to each other for this to work

To add an extra fillip to this exercise, ask someone to hold your shoulders with a little resistance when you try to rotate your sagittal/frontal plane. This is rather what it is like when you try to control your planes, and the horse is not yet automatic about arranging his long axis under your sagittal plane. It can be a fair grunter at first, but vastly better, long term, than grinding and contorting with the leg.

This is an issue of mechanical effect of the rider upon the horse, rather than a learned response (like kicking him in the ribs). The more sophisticated the riding style, the more the rider uses these mechanical influences, and the less we rely on kicking and pulling.

Initially it takes the horse a while to realize that you are going to outlast him with the unrelenting stability of your position, and that the only way to make himself more comfortable is to arrange his long axis under (lined up with) your Sagittal Plane. This is usually easier with very green horses, who have not yet learned to ignore the rider's seat and position (a couple of weeks under saddle usually does that).

Besides making for better straightness, alignment, and parallelism to the line of reference, this issue cultivates the horse's back as a sensory organ. There are other versions of "the back as a sensory organ," but this is one of the first and most important ones.