

Riding a Multi-Faceted Horse

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Riding is inherently a difficult sport, because it is multi-faceted with more than one athletic skill.

The four main skills are:

- Riding the canter
- Riding the trot
- Riding the walk
- Riding the movements, figures, and transitions



Each gait, and the movements performed within each gait, is dealt with differently. The biomechanics of the rider for each gait are separate and unique. Additionally, the biomechanics of the rider for each movement requires different rider functions. The same is true for the transitions between both gaits and paces.

The rider biomechanics is distinct for each gait:

- Walk: Minimum body movement, most movement is in the arms – in order to accommodate the natural and essential oscillations of the horse’s neck
- Trot: The mechanic is almost only vertical
- Canter: The mechanic is almost only horizontal

Most riders are not taught these distinctions. The best riders eventually sort it out naturally and unconsciously. Most instructors are not consciously aware of them – they just say things like “relax” and “go with the movement” and such things. Judges are also mostly unaware of these biomechanical distinctions.

In order to perform, the rider has to begin with a good position – inert and neutral – without worrying about the dynamic of the biomechanics. Many do not get further than this. They are referred to in the older German literature as “monkeys on a stick.”

Then comes the necessity to accommodate the dynamic of each gait – learn to go with it. Many riders get this far; however, often with a lot of unnecessary wiggling and sometimes at the cost of the position and the rider’s stable balance.

Then comes the necessity to regulate, not just accommodate, the dynamics of the three gates. This requires Stability and improving Proprioception

And finally, the better riders learn how to use their body mechanics for steering and positioning of the horse, for the execution of the movements, and for the development of elasticity. The less good riders continue to rely on reins and legs - more and forever.

Each of these four steps requires increasing sophistication in the understanding and development of the motor skills.

In order to address the four skills of our sport, the rider needs to understand the six main components of the rider’s physical effects on the horse, and their relationship to each other:

1. Reins/Hands/Arms
2. Legs
3. Dynamic per gait and per movement
4. Placement of the center of mass (relative to the horse, and to the rider’s Base of Support)
5. Control of the Sagittal/Frontal planes

6. Direction of downbeat

The typical way of addressing the rider's influences is just Reins, Legs and Seat, with Seat broadly encompassing three through six above.

In these days when longe-lessons every day for a year or two, without reins or stirrups, is just not practical, it is all the more important that the rider behave as an athlete and:

- Understand the biomechanics and motor skills involved
- Learn ground exercises that develop awareness and improve motor skills
- Use cross training (perhaps to an already existing skill-set)
- Use imagery and fantasy

Too many riders think that they can learn to ride just by riding. Around and around, doing the same thing over and over. There are many more possibilities for gaining information and motor skills, but they must be actively and ingeniously pursued, just like in other multi-skilled sports.

“The definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Albert Einstein

A quote most of us have heard, but often do not apply to our work in the arena.

If your goal is to become an effective rider, improve horses, and perhaps even to compete, it takes some thought and work (especially off the horse!). If you consider riding a sport, and therefore the rider to be an athlete, the idea of cross training should not seem so foreign and surprising. Cross training with sports that increases overall fitness, develop core muscles and increases body awareness are most beneficial. Some good examples are Pilates, martial arts, vaulting, weight training, etc.

If you just want to commune with nature via your horse (perfectly fine!) get a Paso or Tennessee Walker (preferably old and tired/quiet) and enjoy.

If you want a cuddly pet, get a puppy, Guinea Pig, bunny, or even a duck – it doesn't hurt when they step on your foot.

But, if you want to engage in the sport of riding and develop your athletic skills, it is important to learn how your body influences the horse, and how to use your biomechanics to greater effect.