SADDLESEAT EQUITATION

ACCORDING TO ENID NORTON

Saddle Seat equitation is undoubtedly one of the most controversial topics within our beautiful industry. It is a discipline filled by variable norms and forms while being judged on imaginary shapes and lines. It is fuelled by an inexplicable desire to achieve the almost impossible while virtually relying on the idea that your interpretation of sound horsemanship practices, a functional seat and the execution of precision and perfection are enough and correct.

In my opinion, it all boils down to: two people, three opinions (yours, mine and the correct one).

The information shared in this article is based solely on my interpretation and understanding of the Saddle Seat Equitation discipline and is by no means part of the 'rules of engagement' for the game, but rather to be seen as a guideline on route to uniformity in our sport.

Trusting that my definition of equitation; riding your horse in the most balanced, effective form while practising the art of invisible aids during the execution of precise manoeuvres in absolute unison with your horse, will bring riders, trainers and judges into closer proximity.

SADDLE SEAT NORMS

Saddle Seat is the art of combining horse and rider in harmony, while exhibiting precise body poise.

The style has been uniquely adapted to suit both vertical and horizontal movement from the horse. The horizontal movement presents similar in style to most equine disciplines with a similar cadence to an extended trot, while the vertical movement becomes very pronounced and extravagant in saddle seat styled riding. The horses have strong engagement from behind, prominently affecting the rider's timing on the rise and their saddle depth in the canter, slow-gait and rack. It requires an upright, poised position from the rider to maintain balance at the centre of the horse's movement, as well as allowing space for the horse's high head carriage.

A flat cut-back saddle has been specifically designed to fit the saddle horse's unique conformation, freeing the shoulder and allowing the rider to place themselves in their horse's centre. It is vital that the rider maintains balance to fully synchronise with the horse's high animated forward impulsion.

The equitation rider is required to perform on the rail and execute various levels of tests individually. The optimum rider would engage the horse in a balanced frame at the correct impulsion while skilfully maintaining a neat, elegant yet versatile seat. Confidence, presence, poise and consistency are key elements. Horsemanship combined with showmanship separate the winner from passengers. The equitation seat should always be natural and in no way exaggerated.

BASIC SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

If riding is important to you, becoming a successful athlete is a priority. To become successful, optimize your athletic performance and increase your chances of achievement, you need to understand the psychology behind what drives you as well as the factors that contribute to your success. Some factors that will aid your mind set:

- Maintain a positive attitude
- Nurture a high level of self-motivation
- Set a compelling vision with high achievable short-term and long-term goals
- Commit
- Deal effectively with people especially with difficult opponents & conflict
- Use positive self talk and regulate thoughts
- Use positive mental imagery
- Manage anxiety
- Manage emotions
- Maintain concentration
- Pursue excellence
- Persist through difficult tasks/times

'WHEN TWO HEARTS BEAT AS ONE'

TRAINING AND RIDING ACCORDING TO THE HORSE COGNITION (BRAIN FUNCTION) AND ETHOLOGY (STUDIED BEHAVIOUR).

Equitation is not just about a pretty seat, it's about total understanding of your horse, its bio-mechanics, natural response behaviour and its brain interpretation of your cues.

Equitation should be trained and ridden calmly and quietly. It is an almost silent language between horse and rider based on the use of minimally invasive pressures to cue your horse to respond to different instruction. Relentless pressure will dull a non-sensitive horse, while it will tense a sensitive horse. Always ensure that you aid in a manner that your horse does not revert to a flight response.

Cue, motivate cue and release (touch, clack, give or set him up and turn him loose)!!

It is key to maintain and execute consistent habits, let your cue be the same every time for each specific request. Horses are contextual learners (context specific) which is why our actions are often anticipated. There is only one correct response per signal which is of the utmost importance for a rider to understand that inconsistent cues become difficult for the horse to interpret and lead to major confusion. Do not ask for lots of things at the same time give each cue separately and independently, adding a cue onto the first should the manoeuvre require a combination of cues. To prevent total confusion, a discernible gap should be held between each independent cue (1-2-3).

All cues, whether rein or seat must be unique and distinct. Ensure that both you and your horse can clearly distinguish between aids such as go faster or stride extension, turn or flex, collection or rein-back. Most human aids are not as clear as we, as riders, think. Our aids often become blurred by unconscious pressures such as when rein contact is used for balance in novice riders, compromising safety and desired performance.

Implement the shaping scale while teaching and riding equitation. Perfection comes with the improvement of closely spaced, identical repetitions of simple responses that are graded on the Equitation Science grading scale. Each level of the scale needs to be in place before progressing to the next level. Horses do not generalise, what we may feel is familiar or similar to, it is a totally different challenge for the horse to put into perspective. Persevere to retrain target behaviour in different settings to achieve a proof level of performance from rider and horse.

SHAPING SCALE AS FOLLOWS:

- Basic attempt (horse offers an attempt at the correct response)
- Obedience (horse offers immediate response to light aid)
- Rhythm (horse maintains rhythm and tempo)
- Straightness (horse maintains directional straightness)
- Contact (horse maintains connection)
- Harmony (horse is under stimuli control in any environment)

RIDER FORM IN SUMMARY

Feet
The foot is the foundation of the seat, supporting the rider's body. The foot should run a natural base wide angle along the horses rib spring. This natural slope outwards should not be exaggerated, but rather be determined by the horse's barrel substance. The rider's weight distribution centred on the ball of your foot. The toe should be directly behind vertical and pointed forward. Heels should always be lower than the toe. In the perfect world, the riders heel should rest directly below the seat bone.

Legs
Your body weight should fall into your knee while the knee is pointed downwards and rests on the stirrup leather. The slope of your thigh should exit your hip at approximately 45 degrees with a slight inward rotation. The thigh and knee to be flat and snug against the saddle, while the calf is slightly angled outwards from the horses sides. All the joints in the leg should be supple and functional, presenting a controlled spring on the post and act as enhanced shock absorbers for the animated motion.

Hip
The hips should be placed squarely in the centre of the saddle, preferably with a 2 inch clearance from the cantle. Your spine is best centred directly above the horse's spine while you are openly seated on the seat bones.

Back/shoulders
The upper back best presented as an extension straight out from the hip. Shoulder slightly rolled back and out from your belt, presented square and heavy in frame. The upper body should always maintain flexibility and appear graceful and never be braced.

Head
The rider's head determines body balance. The head should always face the direction you are moving in. The head weighing nearly 8kg will easily displace your balance if it is displaced.

Hand position
At the halted position, the hands to be held above the horse's withers at approximately the same level as the snaffle, holding the reins parallel to the ground proves to be the most efficient line of communication. Elbows should point down presenting a right-angle between the upper and forearms. The hands should be spaced that the horse's neck fit between them allowing reins to have contact on either side of the neck. Hand position should be versatile and dynamic with elastic/fluid and respectful mouth contact. Hand position is secondary to good communication with your horse.

At a heightened cadence, line the point of the horse's mouth to the point of your shoulder. Your hands are to be placed in the centre of that line. There cannot be a hard and fast rule as the hand position varies depending on the shape and length of the horse's neck and its carriage during movement and halts. The placement of the horse's neck determines the correct elevation of the rider's hands.

Side view
There should be a straight line running perpendicular to the ground, from your ear, through your shoulder and hip/seat bone to your heel. This formation would encourage the balancing of your centre of gravity. The longer your saddle, the more difficult it becomes to achieve the side view line (in taller riders).

GENERAL POSITION AT REQUIRED GAITS

The equestrian is required to maintain natural poise throughout all specified gaits. Riders are to be aware that the horse's centre of gravity changes on different gaits. The good seat unites horse and rider. The best seat is shown by a rider that is seated in the depression of the saddle's seat, cradled by the cantle.

Trot

The rise in the trot should be quiet, low, controlled, flowing and crisp. The rise should be clear with a single seat between the alternating two-beat cadence. Posting should represent the diagonal required for the direction of movement, always set by the horses outside shoulder or inside hind. A trot exhibits a forward impulsion, your post should follow with a rise into a forward motion through the hip and a quiet landing in the seat, thus ensuring that you will stay synchronised with your horse's forward impulsion and preventing you from losing timing or falling behind your horses centre. The rider's shoulder and hip alignment should stay straight and remain synchronized. The rider's hands must always be independent from body movements while the post remains non-mechanical.

Canter

The canter is a three-beat cadence and executes a round circular type motion. A rider's hips should rotate with the stride while maintaining depth in the saddle and a quiet upper body frame. The rider should maintain collection and control on impulsion. The canter should always lead by the inside shoulder of the horse or by the outer hind strike.

Rack

The slow gait and rack, both four-beat with lateral cadence, require depth in the saddle showing an even singular beat through the seat. The horses centre shifts slightly further back. The rider's seat bones should be deep yet relaxed. Riders should refrain from twisting their hips from side to side or excessive bumping/jarring.

'VICTORY IS HAVING DONE YOUR BEST. IF YOU'VE DONE YOUR BEST, YOU'VE WON'

- Bill Bowerman

RIDER PROFICIENCY

RAIL WORK

Longitudinal impulsion is the foundation of a great equitation rider. Riders need to keep their horse ahead of their legs at the walk, trot, canter, slow gait & rack. Consistent and steady rein contact with the horse's mouth will control tempo, maintain regular speed and rhythm at each gait. It is imperative that riders are able to regulate and differentiate the horse's beat and cadence on each gait.

Reins should have steady contact and refrain from bouncing or exhibiting tautness or slackness. The rider's seat and the correct use of seat is of utmost importance to balance the horse allowing optimal performance.

Riders should present a strong performance on the rail with controlled transitions, maintain good spacing and present a level of showmanship that entertains the judges every step of the way.

FULL RAIL WORK

A full rail is ridden as a full class with multiple riders being judged against one another simultaneously.

Riders always enter the arena in an anti-clockwise direction and on the left rein. Horses should move up the rail in perfect balance and consistent rhythm. Immediately prior to the turn, riders should ask their horses for a slight inside bend using the combination of inside rein and inside leg placed on the girth. This, in theory, will prevent the horse from falling into the turn. The outside rein should be used as a supporting rein while the outside leg should shift just behind the girth to maintain the horse's haunches curved and prevent them from stepping out of his bend.

Riders are instructed when to perform their gaits and when to turn around and reverse the routine in a clockwise direction/ right rein.

EFFECTIVE USE OF THE FULL ARENA & SHOWMANSHIP

There are many ways to use the arena to reflect your horsemanship ability and showmanship. It is not advised to continually space or attract unnecessary attention to yourself. If increasing/decreasing pace is not an option, execute a calculated circle spacing at the top or bottom of the arena as to not interrupt the judges view of other riders on the straights or execute the use of the diamond exit out from your turns.

MINI RAIL WORK

A mini rail is ridden individually.

Riders use their discretion on where to perform their gaits and where they choose to turn around and reverse the process, provided each direction ends before the entry/exit gait.

DIAGONALS

Riders are encouraged to rise immediately on the outside/ correct diagonal, without anticipating the movement ahead of the horse. This movement synchronises with the forward impulsion of the horse's outside shoulder or from the forward thrust of the horse's inside hind leg.

CANTER

Before giving your horse the canter aid, make sure you have its attention. Keep the horse square, lightly placing rein pressure on the instruction hand to control the fore quarter, drop the inside hip from the required lead. Slide outside leg slightly back behind the girth and apply light pressure through the calf to engage the hind quarter. Once the horse has taken the correct stance, add inside leg calf pressure to encourage the horse to strike into the canter. While giving the horse the instruction, give it enough time to respond to your aid and shift its body weight without moving off the square position

TRANSITIONS

An up transition is the increase of impulsion from one gait into another, while a down transition is the decrease of impulsion from one gait to another. An up transition requires collection, balanced frame and a strike from behind. The rider is to apply leg pressure while maintaining collection to set the horse off at the correct frame encouraging lightness on the fore quarter. The movement should be controlled with a gradual increase of impulsion. The down transition requires the rider to maintain the horses balance keeping the fore quarter free and behind the vertical. The rider should apply rein pressure and depth in the saddle, slowing the post from an impulsive trot to the collected frame, slowly decreasing pace and lowering post height until the timing is correct to apply deep saddle pressure into the walk. Transiting from the canter to the walk requires rein collection, decreased pace in a controlled frame, shortening the stride into a smaller motion until the horse can stride from the canter directly into the walk. Equestrians need to take into consideration that there will be a push from behind as a result of the forward momentum of the gait. The rider needs to control this momentum before the final down transition otherwise the horse will transcend with its weight on the fore quarter

HORSE'S FRAME

The rider is to keep the horse in a compacted frame of collection at all times. All forward impulsion is initiated from a strike in the hind quarter. If your horse is above or below the vertical or evading the bit, any strike will be lacking in collection resulting in your horse falling into its gait or allowing the hind quarter to trail

RIDER PROFICIENCY

CIRCLES

The rider is required to bend the horse's body laterally along a curvature line ensuring that the horse tracks his hind feet in exact accordance to the front feet. Executing a circle correctly, the horse carries its weight on the inside hind leg. The rider needs to transfer their weight onto the inside seat bone following the direction of movement and have the outside shoulder moved slightly forward and into the circle. The horse is guided by your steering rein, dropping your inside leg on the girth followed through by supporting your horses flexion to the inside on the indirect rein and supporting his outside hind quarter with the outside leg being just behind the horses centre. The rider needs to keep the horse bent on the curvature line through its entire frame and maintain the horses balance preventing a closed or open shoulder from the horse in the circle. The circle should present equal depth through all four of its quarters.

On changing rein, the rider needs to shorten the new inside rein, transfer weight and leg aids. Before changing direction, the horse must be straightened for three strides before executing the changing of rein. It is of utmost importance that your circles remain equal in circumference, stride length and pace.

SERPENTINES

Executing the serpentine starts on a centre line and ends on the same centre line, using this line as your marker when changing rein. The execution from the rider is the same as the description for circle work. The serpentine requires consistent bending and flexion over equal distances over the arena while maintain rhythm and balance. The loops are counted from centre line to centre line. Like the circle, it is of utmost importance that your half circles remain equal in circumference, stride length and pace.

PIVOTS

These are executed either on the forehand or hind quarter. Your decision to execute a specific pivot is based on your pivoting point. The fore quarter pivot should be when the inside fore foot is closest to the pivoting point while on the hind quarter pivot, the pivoting point should be closest to your inside hind foot.

The forehand turn needs the rider to apply slight inside rein pressure and a transfer of weight onto the inside seat bone. The inside leg applies pressure slightly behind the girth pushing the horses hind quarters step by step around the forehand. The rider's outside leg supports the horse behind the girth, applying pressure after each step to encourage a light pause. The horse's inside hind leg should cross over the front of the outside hind leg.

The hind quarter turn creates collection, the horses weight is distributed on his hind quarter allowing the forehand to pivot. The rider guides the horse with the inside hand, rider weight in the inside seat bone while the inside leg is positioned closed to the girth, encouraging a 'forward movement.' The inside leg together with the correct use of the outside leg encourage the horse in a four-beat rhythm to move its hind quarter forward towards its centre. The horse's pivoting point is at the side of the inside hind leg.

STRAIGHT LINES

To be performed from point A to point B in absolute straightness and free of curves. The horse needs to maintain a straight line through its spine and remain balanced. The rider should keep the horse between their hands and legs. The rider should look up and straight at the end point riding directly towards it to maintain straightness. The rider needs to cover ground and maintain pace throughout the segment.

DIAGONAL LINES

Diagonal lines start with a change of rein requiring the rider to balance the horse while travelling with sufficient impulsion through the turn followed by a straight line to a specified point. The rider needs to ensure that the horse is immediately straightened and continues straight without deviation. Maintaining correctness of the straight line is vital.

HALT

A square halt is defined by pausing, the horse is to stand square with all four hooves on the ground, the horse's weight equally distributed on each foot, maintaining a collected quiet frame. Ride your horse into the halt with a maintained frame while the horse's weight is securely centred. The rider is to maintain poise and apply depth in the saddle.

REIN BACK

The back is a two-beat, diagonal movement. The horse is required to move straight backwards with the forelegs following the hind legs. To perform the rein-back, the rider applies guiding leg pressure through both legs with a slight resisting hand pressure preventing forward impulsion. The upper body remains upright. A slight body weight transfer is applied, easing off your weight from the seat bones and transferring the weight into your thighs. This allows the horse to softly round its back and free the hind quarter allowing engagement. The rider is to keep the horse between their legs and hands allowing the horse to execute the instruction on a straight line. When the rider requires the horse to stop moving backwards, the rider should re-transfer weight into the seat bone and apply a deep seat, the rider needs to add leg pressure and loosen rein contact. The horse should maintain its frame while the rider should avoid over-aiding resulting in the horses head moving from side to side or above/below vertical.

NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL RIDER AIDS AND THEIR EFFECT

Aids are a form of communication between rider and horse. They are used on natural pressure points, acting as an extension of the rider's body, communicating in a format that the horse understands.

Aids are to be performed with the least amount of pressure. When the rider applies an aid, the communication should be subtle, a light transfer of information between horse and rider. A rider's hands control the horses neck and head while a rider's legs control the horse's legs and barrel. The combination of leg, hand and use of body weight aids, instruct the horse to increase pace, decrease pace, move forward, move backwards, turn or halt. A voice aid may be added into instruction, providing it is calm, quiet and instructive. It is our responsibility to understand aids and to use them clearly for the horse to understand.

Understanding that the horse does not think in human format and that they are predominantly animals of flight, the use of aids will only be interpreted by the horse if it understands your extended guidance. Aids should be used sparingly to ensure the horse remains responsive to instruction. Over use will eventually result in a desensitized horse and it will not deliver the desired effect. It is of utmost importance to understand that a horse responds to visual and physical stimuli, the stimulation needs to be gentle, consistent and correct in timing.

Aids are divided into two groups, namely, natural and artificial. Natural aids are applied by your voice, body, hands, seat and legs. Artificial aids which are applied by the use of equipment such as spurs and whips.

NATURAL AIDS

Voice Aids:
Your voice is an important tool in training and showing your horse. The tone and length of time held for each word is better understood than actual words. Sounds like clacking encourage forward movement whilst the words "whoa" and "trot" would interpret the intention into an action. It is important to realize that voice instruction is for your horse to hear and understand, it is not necessary to shout the instruction, spoken in the correct low tones, a horse will hear you "whisper."

Leg Aids:
Leg aids are used to guide or drive a horse and are used in conjunction with the rider's seat. A riders legs control the barrel and the horse's leg work. The degree of leg pressure varies from slight pressure to intense, depending on your instruction. The rider's right leg controls the horses hind right quarter while the left leg controls the horses left hind quarter. Driving leg pressure encourages a forward movement while guiding leg pressure insists on maintenance of the horses frame, collection or direction for lateral movement. A leg aid is applied pressure for a specific outcome in pace or direction, it is different to a cue instruction.

There are two lower leg positions for instruction, on the girth and behind the girth. Depending on your instruction, both legs may be used simultaneously or individually.

Hand Aids:
Hand aids are a rein instruction connecting your hand to your horse's mouth. Rein contact should always be encouraged to be light and flexible. Your hands need to be respectful of the horse's mouth, bearing minimal tension through the rein. It is recommended that hand aids work in conjunction with your seat and leg aids. Hand aids are primarily used to instruct a horse to turn, halt, collect and balance themselves. Hand aids control the horse's neck and head.

Rein aids include direct, indirect and neck reining. Your direct rein is when direct pressure is applied to the rein of your specified direction. Your indirect rein is a supporting rein, the opposite rein to the direct rein. It is used with slight inward contact towards the horse's neck, supporting and maintaining the direct instruction. The neck rein is the application of rein pressure on the horse's neck rather than direct bit pressure.

Rider's Seat:
The rider's seat completes the circle of natural aids. It assists in the follow through of an instruction.

ARTIFICIAL AIDS

Whips:
A whip is used to follow up on a command. It can be used on the horse's shoulder or behind the rider's leg. A black whip is generally used, while it is optional to use a white whip with formal attire during evening classes.

Whips are normally presented in the inside hand (hand closest to the judge). It should always be remembered that the whip is an aid and should be held where it be most needed.

Spurs:
Spurs are fitted to the rider's heel. It gives a firm and precise leg instruction. It is recommended that spurs are only used by experienced riders as spurs used inappropriately can do detrimental damage to a horse's sides. Riders under the age of 12 may not ride with spurs. Spurs may only be blunt and unrolled.

MATCHING HORSE AND RIDER

When mounting a rider, it is important to select a suitable mount. An equitation horse should be able to be competitive in composure in the performance divisions and be of sound, quiet mind. It should appear energetic and be responsive to aids. It should present a smooth cadenced trot and project ground covering ability. The horse should perform a rounded flowing smooth motion in the canter. It is generally preferred to select a well sprung rib which naturally allows the rider to be seated base wide. We place emphasis on the rider's leg slope, from the hip to the knee in the seated position, this angle needs to match the horse's shoulder slope to ensure that the riders length and posting height are a suitable match to the horses stride. The horse's neck length and arch play a vital role under the selection criteria; the riders hand height is preferable at the same height as the horses snaffle while reins run parallel to the ground. The line from the elbow through to the wrist should always be maintained to allow for ideal communication through the horse's mouth. Selection of a suitable mount rests on personal taste, preference and rider ability.

'AT ITS FINEST, HORSES AND RIDERS ARE JOINED NOT BY TACK BUT BY TRUST'

- Anonymous

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW AS AN EQUESTRIAN

- Timing is the basic part of rider control, knowing when to give a signal is as important as knowing how to give the signal. Example, to strike into a canter, the rider needs to alert the horse, align body weight and through timing know when to strike.
- The rider should 'think' like a horse, guiding and planning around potential obstacles ensuring secure execution of manoeuvre.
- The use of peripheral vision and feel are important elements to master
- The bite of the rein should always be of the off side of the horse (your right side when you are seated on him).
- Correctness in diagonal and canter leads are not negotiable.
- Monitor collection and hind quarter drive.
- Showmanship (performance, consistency, style).
- Execution of a pattern should be in comparison to perfect (as specified by the drawing on score sheet).
- If a test specifies, use a diagonal of choice, two things need to be taken into consideration, your direction of movement and your closest rail.
- In the execution of a circle, once the circumference has been determined, divide it into quarters to ensure equal striding/size.
- Should you be asked to execute a figure of 8 or serpentine, the changing of rein is combined with only three straight steps, the rest being in line with the required curvature. It is vital to ensure that the horse's shoulder does not run out/fall into circles and to never move back into previous manoeuvre's parameters.
- Horses have a generalized thought process and reaction to circumstances. In most instances, different horses will all react in the same manner during testing segments due to the nature of their natural mindset. It is important to understand how a horse's thought processing functions and to prepare accordingly.
- Your preparation in striking off correctly ensures the accuracy in intended manoeuvre. If the horse is set up correctly and fully understanding of your instruction; it should execute instruction correctly time after time.
- Expected intensity of rider's calf and rein pressure should be light yet effective, if you think what a horse does when a fly sits on its skin, you will realize how sensitive their reactions are to touch sensation.
- Horses tend to lean into pressure. The contact with a horse's mouth is also affected by pressure, the more you take, the more the horse takes.
- Different finger spreads in picking up reins, will have different effects, ensure that you select either a one or a two-finger rein spread depending on the size of your hands, the quietness of your hands and the level your horse responds to. The further apart the spread, the bigger the reaction.
- Select a saddle with 3 to 4 billet straps to help place rider's leg around the horse's barrel.
- Set your girth on first and third strap, first strap buckled higher than the second to create a 'V' for the rider's knee.
- Select a saddle with a sliding bar or at least two stirrup bars to aid with rider placement in the saddle.

BASED ON A COLLECTION OF OPINIONS, PERSONAL FINDINGS & EXPERIENCES, DRAFTS DRAWN UP FOR MOUNTAIN VIEW STABLES AND RESEARCH DRAWN FROM THE INTERNET, BOOKS AND MANUALS COMPILED BY MARILYN FIELDS, GAYLE LAMPE, LILIAN SHIVELY AND CECILY NORDEN