

# THE ART OF CLASSICAL DRESSAGE RIDING

## THE CANTER (PART 3)

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THE CANTER IS GENERALLY EASIER TO LEARN THAN THE SITTING TROT. HOWEVER IT REQUIRES A SUPPLE SEAT THAT IS CORRECTLY BALANCED.



The canter may be ridden in three ways: sitting, half-seat, and two-point. In a half-seat and/or two-point position, as described below, the rider's seat is raised out of the saddle to some extent, the upper body leaning forward slightly, enough to balance over the horse's center of gravity, and more weight is carried in the stirrups. This position provides more freedom for the horse, especially over rough terrain or when jumping. When a rider sits the canter, the seat remains firmly in the saddle at all times, allowing a more secure position and greater control over the horse.

### Sitting

The hips should be relaxed and the rider should lean forwards slightly with the movement of the horse. In cross country, the rider tends to stay out of the saddle and be standing up with their knees bent and the upper body leaning over the horse's withers. The heel of the rider should be in line with their shoulders and then the back of their riding hat in dressage to make the canter look neat.

### Seat

The rider's seat bones remain in contact with the saddle at all times. The rider "rolls" with the canter, allowing free movement in the hips and relaxation in the thighs. The hips move from a backward position, to an upright position aligned with the body, to a slightly forward position, in relation to the gait. So when the 1-2-3 of the footfalls occurs, the seat is moving forward. During the suspension phase, it moves back. The rider should focus on making a sweeping motion with the hips. A good visualization technique is for a rider to imagine sweeping the saddle with one's seat, or to visualize sitting in a swing, using the seat muscles to gently move it going back and forth.

### Upper body

The upper body remains still while sitting, allowing the hips to move underneath the upper body. The shoulders should not "pump", or go forward and back. If the upper body moves, it is usually a sign that the rider is tense. The forward incline of the rider's upper body may vary, from very upright (used in a collected canter), to slightly forward (used in the lengthened canter if the rider is using the forward seat). However, the shoulders should still remain back and still.

### Lower leg

The lower leg should remain still when sitting the canter. If it moves, the rider is tense, or gripping with the thigh. The heel will sink down slightly and the knee angle may open with the footfalls, absorbing the shock of the gait.

### Hands and elbows

The hands should keep steady contact with the horse's mouth. Visually the rider keeps a straight line between the elbow and the mouth of the horse, which requires a relaxed arm that can follow the motion of the horse's neck. The rider must account for that movement by allowing the elbow angle to open and close: opening during the footfalls, and closing during the suspension

phase after the footfalls. To do this, the rider needs a steady, elastic contact, rather than mechanically pushing the hands forward or back.

### Half-seat

In a half-seat position, the rider's seat bones are lifted out of the saddle, and only the pelvis has contact. It is used for jumping when some seat aid may be necessary, especially for sharp turns, when riding downhill, on the approach to potentially spooky fences, or when the rider wishes to collect the stride. This seat is a compromise, allowing the jumping rider to have greater control than in two-point, but still keeping the majority of the rider's weight off the horse's back.

Half-seat is often seen in hunt seat, show jumping, fox hunting, eventing (jumping phases), and at times in dressage for training purposes, to help lighten the horse's back.

The rider in half-seat should have almost the same body position as one who sits the canter, except the shoulders are inclined slightly forward and the pelvis is rotated forward, keeping the seat bones free of the saddle. The rider should still keep the hip angle nicely open, and the lower back soft.

There is disagreement about the use of the term "three point" position. Some scholars use this term to describe the half-seat, others use it to describe a rider sitting all the way down in the saddle. Conversely, some instructors use the term "half seat" to describe a full two-point jumping seat.

### Two-point

Two-point position is ridden similar to half-seat, except the rider's seat bones are off the saddle. This position is used for jumping and galloping, as it is easy to stay out of the horse's way and gives the horse the most freedom to use its body. However, the position also provides the least amount of control, and so is only used when the horse's behavior and body is focused properly. This position requires a rider to have good base of leg strength to perform well for long periods, and it can be quite tiring. Two-point is seen when galloping uphill or in straight lines on flat ground, doing large, wide turns at moderate speed, and when approaching a jump that the horse should jump easily, without needing any assistance from the rider.

### Standing

In polo and polocrosse, two-point position is called "standing" and the rider in fact stands upright in the stirrups. This helps to isolate the rider's upper body from the motion of the horse, and to allow the rider's hips to rotate as the rider turns sideways in order to swing the playing stick (polo mallet, polocrosse racquet) on the side the horse opposite the stick hand. Some polo instructors recommend standing in the saddle for all strokes.

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