

DRESSAGE, EVENTING, HUNTERS, JUMPERS

VOL. 42

# PRACTICAL HORSEMAN EXTRA



## DEVELOP A STRONG GALLOPING POSITION

## Diagnosing Arthritis

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**COSEQUIN®**  
Joint Health Supplement

Colleen Rutledge  
and Covert Rights

Amy K. Dragoo

WHEN PERFORMANCE MATTERS, CHOOSE

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The job of eventing riders is to maintain proper balance and a secure, efficient galloping position to give their horses confidence and make their jobs easier on cross country. Here, the red line shows how my center of gravity is aligned directly over my base of support, giving me a solid, balanced position while I gallop the Hanoverian gelding Escot 6.



# DEVELOP A STRONG GALLOPING POSITION

A five-star rider explains her key to success—riding in balance.

**By Colleen Rutledge with Sandra Cooke**  
**Photos by Amy K. Dragoo**

**W**hen someone comes to me as a new student, I usually say, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re not going to jump for a while.” Before we work over fences I want my riders to work on position—and their galloping position in particular. Otherwise, we’ll have to come back later and fix the position flaws that become a bigger issue as a rider progresses. This happens because our horses go the way we ride them: Horses want to feel secure, which includes knowing that their riders feel secure. If we’re riding out of balance, our horses go out of balance. At the beginning of every year, even I review my position and determine where improvements can be made.

Some eventing riders take the attitude that if their horses can jump and they can stay on, who cares? But what I teach is not about looking good, it’s about being functionally efficient and correct. The easier you are to carry, the happier your horse is. A happy horse does his job much better. My goal as a rider is to make myself the easiest possible package for my horse to carry, and that’s also my goal for my students.

## When Balance Is Lacking

First let’s talk about the position errors I commonly see and how they affect your riding. To secure your leg, riding books and many instructors typically tell you to close your knee. But

they don’t specify that you should not close the **FRONT** of your knee, and that is the part with which most people grip. When you pinch with the front of your knee, you close your inner thigh. Then your lower leg usually swings back and at this point you become a physics problem: If your lower leg goes back, your upper body wants to tip forward. To your horse, this scenario feels as you would trying to give a piggyback ride to a small child who is all over the place—leaning here, leaning there. You lose your focus because you have to rebal-

ance and think about where you’re putting yourself. In the same way, the more motion your horse has on his back, the less he can concentrate on his job.

Over fences, if your grip is wrong, causing your lower leg to swing back and your upper body to tip forward, you either throw your horse off balance or you overcorrect—falling backward and holding on to his face to keep your balance. The result of either situation is that your horse may slow down off the ground or run at the jump.

Even if your lower leg is stable but you’re in the habit of jumping for your horse by leaning forward, you make his job more difficult. Instead, allow his jump to move you. It’s hard at first to allow that to happen. We are all control freaks. We so much want it to go correctly that we make it our job to jump for the horse.

## Finding Balance

OK, enough about doing it wrong. Now I’ll explain the position that enables you to stay in balance with your horse and makes you an effective rider in all three phases of eventing. The key is keeping your center of gravity above your base.

Your center of gravity, or center mass, is

### TIP

The easier you are to carry, the happier your horse is. A happy horse does his job much better.



Colleen during the 2016 Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event

## Five-Star Success

In 2011, Colleen Rutledge rode Shiraz to her first five-stars (Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event—where she placed 12th—and Burghley). She completed a total of five five-stars with Shiraz before his retirement at age 18, and was named to the U.S. Equestrian Federation World Class High Performance Training List with CR in June 2015. By then she had already competed CR, then a 9-year-old, at Rolex, where they came in 11th. The recognition helped her get to Burghley with CR that fall, where they finished 22nd.

More recently, Colleen and Covert Rights placed 15th at the 2022 Land Rover Kentucky Three-Day Event. She and CR won 2019 Plantation Field CCI4-S and 2019 Morven Park CCI4-S. They placed second in the CCI4-S at Great Meadow International that summer. Also in 2019, she and Global Absolute were seventh in the Young Event Horse Championship for 5-year-olds.

Colleen is a popular clinician and trains out of her family’s Turnabout Farm in Howard County, Maryland. Her daughters Cassie and Ciana both compete in eventing.

## When Balance Is Lacking



A common error I see is when riders pinch with their knees and their lower legs swing back, causing their upper bodies to tip forward. As shown by the expression of Roulette, a 9-year-old Oldenburg gelding owned by Leslie Schulz, this scenario can be distracting to a horse because you're constantly in motion, rebalancing yourself. The red line shows clearly that my base is not under my center of gravity.



Many riders who grip with their knees try to overcorrect the problem as they head to a fence and end up falling back and grabbing the horse in the mouth to hold their balance. Here on Covert Rights, my 11-year-old Thoroughbred/Clydesdale gelding, I'm demonstrating this: My center of gravity has shifted backward, causing my lower leg to slip in front of me. Because my base of support is unstable and not aligned directly under me, I am using my reins to keep my balance. This bad habit can cause horses to slow down or run at the jump.

located just behind your belly button and in front of your spine, centered vertically in your body. And your base is where you grip to keep balance, ideally your lower leg. To keep your center of gravity above this base, you need to achieve what I call the basic balance position: You close your leg by turning your toe out slightly and contacting the saddle with the *back* of your knee. To find it, locate the hollow at the top inside of the calf muscle—just below where your femur joins the tibia to create the hinge of the knee joint. Contacting the saddle in this way allows you to let go

with your inner thigh. I sometimes tell students to imagine there is a tennis ball between the front of their knee and the saddle. This leg position makes it impossible to pinch with your knee and grab with your thigh.

This position lets you use your lower leg and your pelvic girdle—the muscles around your hips and waist—to truly follow your horse's motion with your hips. Allowing this motion enables you to create

energy. But you need to work through this concept because it's natural to want to grip with your knee and inner thigh. When first learning to canter, most riders try to hold themselves on their horses by gripping incorrectly. For galloping and jumping, you need to use the muscles on the outside of your leg, between your hip and your knee and between your knee and your ankle, to close your legs around your horse like a hinge. My coach and mentor Jim Wofford sometimes tells students to imagine "closing your knees into your horse's shoulder muscles" when galloping.

In addition to a correct leg position, your core—your abdominals plus the muscles that lie along your spine—is critical to keeping your center mass balanced over your feet. I tell my students that to engage their core they need to consciously push their middle together, imagining that they are creating a more cylindrical feeling in that area. Another technique I teach is "push your stomach muscles and back muscles together as if someone is about to smack you in the stomach and you want to counteract that punch."

### Testing the Balance

Your leathers are the recommended length for galloping and jumping when you take your feet out of the stirrups, letting them hang down, and the tread of the stirrup iron touches your

#### TIP

To help keep your center of gravity above your base, close your leg by turning your toe out slightly and contact the saddle with the *back* of your knee.

## Finding the Balance



To have a balanced position, you must align your center of gravity vertically above your base of support, as shown by the red line. Your center of gravity is located between your belly button and your spine, and your base is in your lower leg.



Make sure your stirrups are the correct length for galloping and jumping. When you take your foot out of the stirrup and let your leg hang, the tread of the stirrup iron should hit at or slightly above your ankle.



To set the leg position that enables you to stay in balance with your horse, close your leg by turning your toe out slightly and contacting the saddle with the back of your knee. This allows you to let go with your inner thigh. This position lets you use your lower leg and your pelvic girdle—the muscles around your hips and waist—to follow your horse's motion with your hips.

### TIP

To practice this new leg position, shorten your stirrup leathers two or three holes above your regular galloping and jumping length. Then practice riding in a two-point position.

leg at or slightly above your ankle. To introduce students to the new balanced position I described earlier, I have them shorten their stirrup leathers two or three holes above their regular galloping and jumping length. Then I tell them to rise into their two-point galloping and jumping position. As they bend their hip angle, I remind them to “focus on opening your knee and thigh, step down into your lower leg, really engage your core and push

your hips back a little,” to keep their center mass over their base.

The reaction is usually immediate—and dismayed. The shortened stirrups make it impossible to pinch with the knee because there's nothing to pinch against and they enable the riders to perceive exactly which muscles they need to use to maintain a balanced position. These usually are muscles they haven't used much before. New students often complain that their backs and their knees are really feeling the new challenge.

Sometimes I put a neck strap about halfway up the horse's neck and tell the students they can hook *just a finger* in the strap for a little help while they learn where their balance is and how to use the proper leg muscles and core muscles to maintain it—without trying to balance on the reins. The strap is also a reminder to shift their weight back a little bit to get their center mass over their feet. If students say their back hurts in the new position, I explain that it's because they're using their back instead of their core to hold themselves up. The remedy is for them to pull their stomach in to support their back.

### Building New Muscle Memory

Our ultimate goal in this work (and it is work!) is to *replace* the muscle memory of an ineffective galloping and jumping position and motion with the one that works. This is an important concept because you can't learn to simply *stop* doing whatever it is

### TIP

A new, correct riding position can feel unnatural. Have a friend take a photo or video as you ride so you can see that the new position is correct even if it feels wrong.

## Center of Gravity In Dressage

In dressage, you ask your horse to bring his hindquarters under his body, lift his back and withers and take a contact. But when you grip with your knee, causing your leg to swing back and your upper body to tip forward, you block the energy you're developing from behind. So it's like driving with the parking brake on. With your *lower leg*, you're telling him that you want him to go forward, while your *thigh is restricting the energy* when it grips to support your upper body's forward lean. At some point, he stops listening to your subtle cues.

In addition, many riders grip with their legs incorrectly just to try to hold themselves still on their horses for flatwork. A truly "still" rider cannot maintain the proper



**Keeping your center of gravity balanced over your base of support is also important in dressage. As I perform a dressage test with Covert Rights, my leg is properly positioned and I'm following his motion with my hips to keep him supple and energetic. If I were to grip only with my knee, my lower leg would tell him to go forward but my tight thigh (which is supporting my forward upper body) would restrict his energy and send him conflicting signals.**

motion with the horse. Motion you can see is motion against the horse's motion.

As I discuss in "Finding Balance," on pages 4 and 6, for the galloping position, in dressage you want to use your properly positioned lower leg and your pelvic girdle—the muscles around your hips and waist—to follow your horse's motion with your hips. A dressage balanced position is a much more vertical position than the galloping position. The more core you can develop, the better control you'll gain over your position. This is what you need to do to sit the trot effectively and as efficiently as possible.

## Testing the Balance



**To try out your new balanced position, shorten your stirrups two or three holes above your normal galloping and jumping length. As you rise to your two-point position, focus on opening your knee and thigh, stepping down into your lower leg and engaging your core. This will help you keep your center mass over your base. You may hook one finger under a neck strap for a little help as you adjust to this new balance.**

that doesn't work—unless you are replacing it with a different action. So once my students have gotten used to the feeling of the new position at the standstill and walk, I tell them to trot. (I tend to do most of my clinic teaching at the trot because there are two beats, or motions, within each stride, which requires riders to work twice as hard as at the canter.) Now when they pick up a trot they need to isolate their position from both the up-and-down and the side-to-side motion of the gait. Another advantage is that the trot is not as fast as the canter, so riders feel more in control as they're trying to make all these changes.

I often have students alternate five or 10 steps in the two-point position with a few strides of posting, building it up until they can hold the two-point for 20 or 30 trot strides. When they can hold the balance position down the long side of the arena at a trot, I put down some ground poles. First we do regular trot poles set at standard striding. Then I put down what I call "pick-up sticks"—some poles are set on a short stride, some on a long stride, some are even set at angles. As horses start to trot through these, riders have to adjust their position to maintain their center mass over their base for the variations. This helps them learn to control their horses while maintaining the new position.

The next step is to set up some simple low (as small as 18 inches) jumping gymnastics. This helps students zero in on where they might have particular challenges over fences. Often when I

## Building New Muscle Memory



Once you've gotten acclimated to your new two-point position and can hold the balance position down the long side of the arena at the trot, you're ready for an exercise. I like to put down ground poles at random intervals. Some are set on long strides while others are set on short strides, and I'll even include angles. As Roulette trots over the poles, I focus on adjusting my position and maintaining my center mass over my base. This exercise helps you learn to control your horse while maintaining this new position.

ask riders, "Can you feel how you fell forward right there?" the answer will be "no." For their next pass through, I have my cell phone out to video them so I can show them exactly where and how they need to reinforce their position.

As with any change in something riders have been doing a certain way—even if it's the wrong way—for a long time, riding in the basic balance position feels odd to many new students. As they're struggling they say, "This feels so unnatural!" So I give them instant feedback: I snap a picture with my phone and when I show them how they look in the new position they say, "That is NOT what it feels like!" The truth is that our bodies lie to us. For instance, if—like many of us—you get used to riding a little crooked in the saddle, it feels as if you're sitting straight. Then, when you fix it so that you're sitting evenly, your body tells you you're tipping. That's why I encourage students who are working on their position to buddy up. Ride with a friend so you can critique each other or enlist a friend who can stand on the ground and video you with her phone. If you can't get feedback this way, try riding in an arena with a mirror.

### Use Cross-Training—and Music

Some athletic activities other than riding can contribute to a better position. One is skiing because to do it well you have to engage your core, turn your hips, use your pelvic girdle—sound

## A Different Body Type



Great Britain's William Fox-Pitt is a good example of a rider whose body type is quite different than mine. Even though he's very tall, he's learned how to package his body and keep his center of gravity over his base, ensuring an effective, balanced galloping position.

familiar? Another type of exercise that relates directly to riding is almost any type of dance training because the muscle control you learn for dancing is similar to what you need for riding. Yoga, which also entails muscle control and balance, helps as well.

Once you've learned to maintain the new position for a couple of minutes at a time, a helpful technique is riding to music. I suggest my students get some music they really love on their personal listening device and begin by trying to hold the new position for the duration of one song, then two songs and so on. I use music myself when doing my gallop sets. It helps me override the voices in my head that are telling me I've done enough for the day, I'm as fit as I need to be.

I'm not saying that the basic balance position is the only improvement in your riding that will bring you success. But I do know that most riders recognize, even subconsciously, when they are out of balance. That makes them feel insecure—and insecurity hinders your progress. Fixing your position brings you one big step closer to maximizing you and your horse's potential as a team and reaching your goals. 🎵

### TIP

Listen to music you love as you ride. Try holding the new riding position for the duration of one song, then two songs and so on.

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# Diagnosing Arthritis

*Evaluating your horse for arthritis—and determining the extent of his condition*

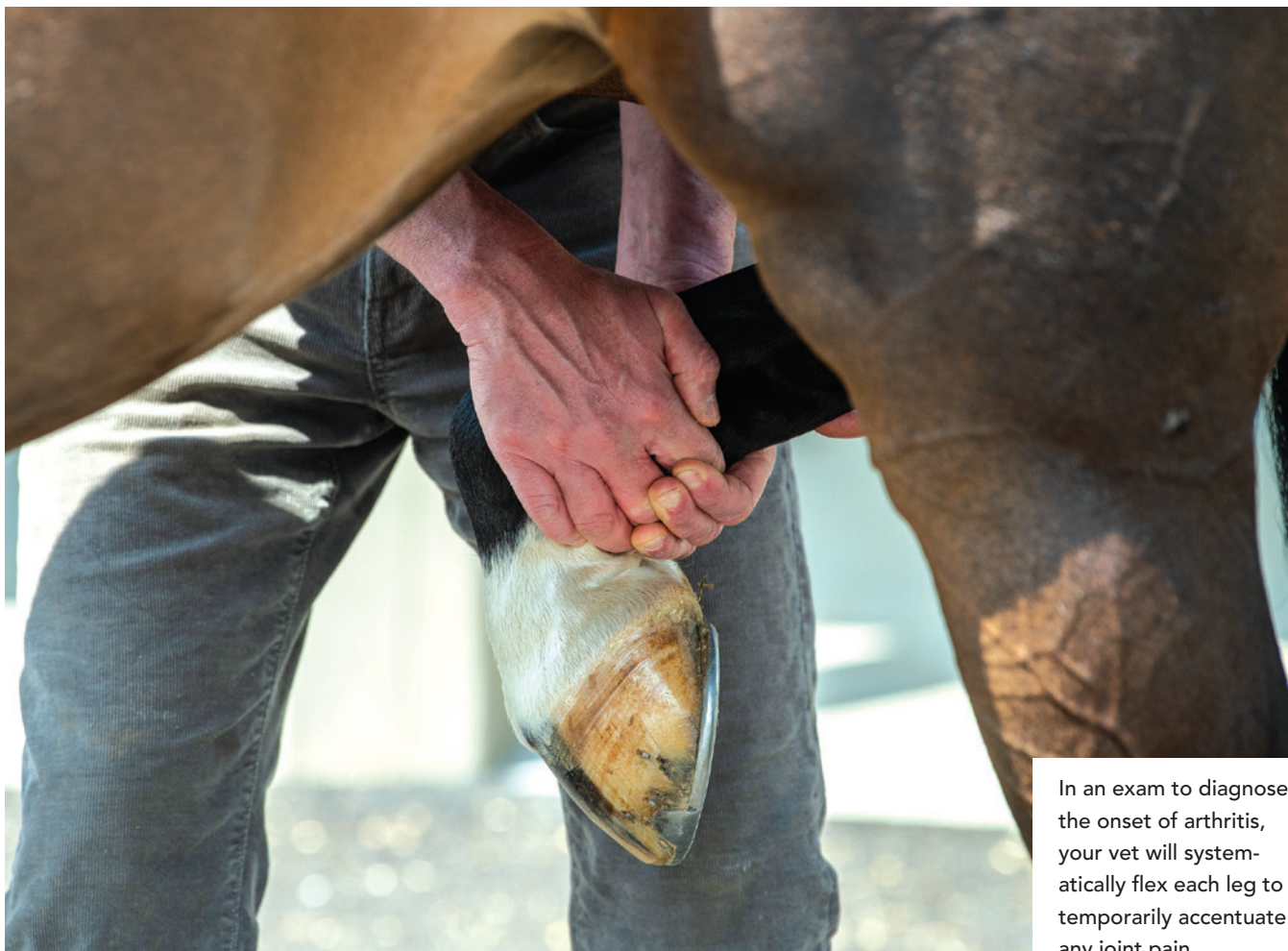
**Q** My 12-year-old warmblood gelding has started to feel a bit stiff when he comes out of his stall. After a warm-up, he seems more his old self. I'm concerned that he may have developed arthritis, and I've scheduled the vet for a barn call. What will an examination likely include for a definitive diagnosis of the condition?

**A** Your veterinarian will perform several tests to determine whether your horse has arthritis, which, simply put, is inflammation in a joint. She'll begin with a review of your gelding's history. It will include questions about his age, use, activity level, previous injuries and particulars related to the onset of the stiffness you've recently noticed. Then she'll use one or more of several techniques

to evaluate the condition of the bones, cartilage, fluid and other structures that make up each joint.

**Observation:** Watching your gelding move will help your veterinarian identify lameness and begin to zero in on the affected limb. Be prepared for her to ask to see your gelding being led, ridden or longed. Working on a hard surface, at the trot and through turns, often reveals the most about irregularities in a horse's way of going. He may bob his head or favor a leg that is painful.

**Palpation:** Your vet will run her hands over each leg to detect swelling (from fluid buildup), heat (from increased blood flow) and tenderness (from chemicals that stimulate nerve



In an exam to diagnose the onset of arthritis, your vet will systematically flex each leg to temporarily accentuate any joint pain.

endings, making them more sensitive). She'll also compare each leg to its pair to identify any differences that could indicate a problem.

**Flexion tests:** Your vet will continue to gather information by systematically flexing each leg to temporarily accentuate any joint pain. Your horse will stand square, on a firm surface, facing the direction in which he'll trot off. The vet will then pick up a leg and hold it tightly flexed for a minute or so to stretch the joint capsule, increase pressure on bone and compress the surrounding soft tissues. Once the leg is released, your horse may take a few uneven steps or exhibit lameness for several minutes, depending on how painful it is for him to move.

**Nerve blocks:** Once your vet has identified the leg that's affected, she'll use nerve blocks to isolate the area that's causing pain. This means temporarily and systematically numbing the sensory nerves that run down each leg and lie just under the skin. Note that *sensory nerves* are different from *motor nerves*, which send signals to muscles to move. Your vet will inject a numbing agent (usually lidocaine or mepivacaine) near the sensory nerves to selectively anesthetize a part of the leg. She'll begin with the lowest areas in the hoof or leg and progress upward. After each nerve block, she'll ask to see your horse move. The affected area will be revealed when your gelding shows a significant improvement in the lameness.

**Additional evaluations:** Your vet may

recommend other procedures to gain more detailed information about your horse's condition, though they aren't absolutely necessary or financially feasible for diagnosing arthritis in every case.

They include:

- **radiography** (X-rays) to assess the condition of bones. Telling signs of arthritis that can be seen on X-rays include bone chips in a joint, the growth of new bone and a narrowing of the space between bones due to the breakdown of the cartilage that normally covers the bone ends.

*In the average horse, hock and coffin joint arthritis are the most common type, but we can see it in any joint.*

- **ultrasound** (high-frequency sound waves) to evaluate damage to soft tissue in and around the joints, including ligaments and tendons.

- **computed tomography** to produce a detailed picture of the structure, shape and density of the bones in a joint. This is accomplished through multiple X-rays, taken at different angles across a limb, while a horse is anesthetized. A computer is then used to create images that show more detail than a regular X-ray.

- **nuclear scintigraphy** to pinpoint inflammation. Radioactive dye, injected into the horse's bloodstream, diffuses out of blood vessels and concentrates where inflammation is present. The dye gives off energy that is detected

by a device called a gamma camera to produce a detailed image.

- **arthroscopy** (examination with an endoscope inserted into a joint) to detect defects in cartilage.

Your veterinarian will use all of the information she's collected to determine whether your horse has arthritis and, if so, the extent of the condition. "In the average horse, hock and coffin joint arthritis are the most common type, but we can see it in any joint," says Moira Nusbaum, DVM, of PenMar Equine Practice in Myersville, Maryland. She

adds, "Unless the arthritis is caused by a traumatic incident—a fracture in the joint or concussive injury, for example—it's likely that multiple joints may be affected."

Your veterinarian will make recommendations about how to proceed to keep your gelding comfortable and productive. She may prescribe rest, medication to reduce pain and inflammation and treatment to increase the viscosity of the joint fluid. She'll also help you decide what level of activity will do your horse the most good. Many arthritic horses benefit from turnout and light riding as long as they are adequately warmed up before and cooled out after. A balanced diet will help your gelding maintain an appropriate weight, and regular farrier visits will minimize hoof and leg strain. In addition, certain supplements and treatments like massage, acupuncture and chiropractic may be useful for your horse. **PH**



Practical Horseman thanks Moira Nusbaum, DVM, for her technical assistance in the preparation of this article. A graduate of the Virginia–Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine, in Blacksburg, Virginia, Dr. Nusbaum has owned and operated PenMar Equine Practice in Myersville, Maryland since 2011. There, she says, she “enjoys a nice mix of sport and pleasure horse work as well as some reproductive and foal work.”