

POSITION IS KEY

Cover
feature

What happens when the outside looks great but the inside isn't? **Lindsay Wilcox-Reid** pinpoints the real challenge

Rider performance has a huge impact on the partnership between horse and rider and can either deepen the connection between the two, or greatly hinder it.

I'm sure you've all read many articles on rider alignment, how to find your seatbones and what your position should ideally look like. However, how you appear to be sitting on your horse is only half the story! In the next few issues, I'm going to be helping you work more deeply on your position and how this influences your riding, through Equipilates™ techniques and exercises.

DEVELOPING CORE CONNECTION

How your body looks (your form) and how your body actually works inside biomechanically (your function) determines how you sit on your horse (centrally or off to one side, twisted or tilted), how well your body can absorb the shock of your horse's movement without strain and how well you can stay balanced whilst resisting any unwanted movement forces being exerted, like a spook or buck. It also determines how well you can apply aids to your horse and cease them when they aren't needed anymore.

If there is restriction present in your body it is very difficult to keep your weight in a correct, centred and balanced, neutral position or to use weight aids with any precision, as there will always be one side of you that is easier

Imposing an outer layer of 'looking nice' on top of an inner layer which is struggling can be damaging

to load than the other. Your body will probably already be loading in one direction without you even knowing it. This is linked to your intrinsic biomechanics and later we'll explore why you find it easier to perform certain movements and not others.

FORM VERSUS FUNCTION

Your form is how you look to your trainer or other observers and how your weight appears to be distributed in the saddle; where your legs hang, whether your spine is neutral, the angles of your joints, how your shoulders are positioned, and so on. This is called extrinsic biomechanics, which also refers to the study or analysis of performing movements or tasks in the most mechanically efficient way. Movement analysis, including visually assessing your position and riding, is working with your extrinsic biomechanics. In this age of complex technological advances there are pressure sensors and a variety of scientifically useful devices and software available that can capture measurements of joint angles, and there are experts specialising in interpreting and making sense of the data readings.

Your function refers to how your body is actually working, or not, on the inside; the behaviour of your muscles, nerves and joints. Your horse can feel which areas within your body are working properly to absorb his movement, and those which aren't and result in blocking. These inside



workings are known as intrinsic biomechanics.

Two people could present with extremely similar postural patterns or forms, and yet the areas in their bodies which are actually restricted, their intrinsic biomechanics, could be totally different. Having good form is an important half of the mechanical requirements of riding. This is what we are taught to develop almost from the moment we start riding; the ear, shoulder, hip, heel line which is the classic neutral spine. However, although it is an important half, it is just that, half the story. The function bit is really the missing link in so much of what is taught today to improve rider posture and position.

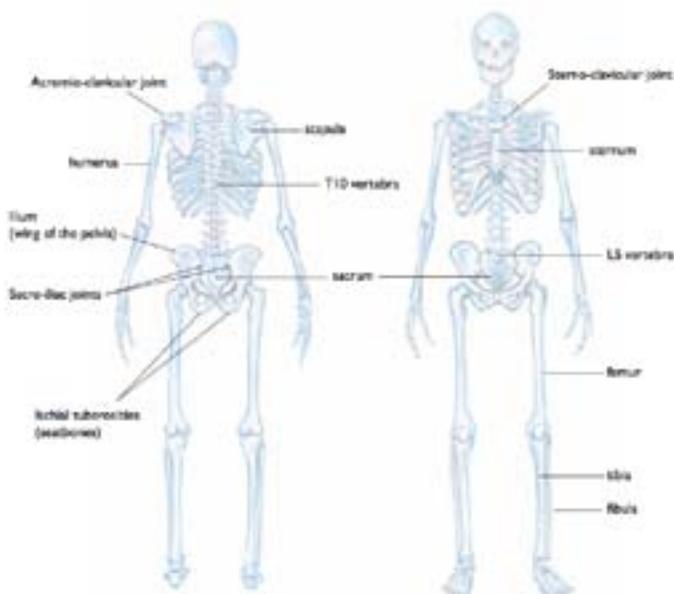
When a rider's position is corrected, often it has a really positive effect straight away. This is great, because the horse will always provide feedback, even if it is subtle, when there has been an improvement made in how the rider is using their body. This doesn't just mean how they are aligned or how their weight is distributed, but how they actually use their body to give aids or signals to the horse. Improving form will make a positive impact in terms of packaging up the rider's body into a more organised load for the horse to carry; it will look better, and in improving how the boxes are stacked, will probably allow aids to be applied and transmitted more clearly.



Good form on a horse helps him to perform better; but this does not necessarily mean that the inside workings are doing their job properly!

Sometimes though, you can be trying to achieve something different; a different leg position for example, or turning more a certain way, and it just seems a real struggle. Or your trainer says, "Yes, that's it! Now hold it"

and you feel contorted, while the horse doesn't feel any different at all! It can be frustrating for rider, trainer and horse when, despite persistent reminders and consistent effort, rider corrections remain stubbornly beyond reach.



It is very common for riders to have low grade muscle spasm in the muscles surrounding the sacro-iliac and hip joints. This affects symmetry and shock absorption in the saddle (and out of it!)

Do any of the following seem familiar?

"I try hard with my position. My trainer tells me all the time to make this or that correction, but:

1. "It's fine while I'm thinking about it and my horse definitely feels better, but a couple of minutes later I've forgotten and I've gone wrong again." (We'll discuss later how conscious corrections sometimes get lost in the mix of all the other things you have to think about whilst riding.)

2. "It feels really awkward, sometimes even hurts, when I get into the position my trainer wants me to adopt."

3. "I make the correction, but my horse stiffens against me."

This is where it is likely that your body is not functioning intrinsically biomechanically as well as it could be, and your ability to absorb the horse's movement equally through both sides of your body is diminished. This affects your core, and your balance, and increases the risk of stress, strain and injury. If there are restrictions in how your body is working on the inside, making your position look better on the outside by following all the usual cues, poor ones like "Sit up straight, heels down!" or better ones like "Lengthen your spine", or even my own phrase "Headlights!" can often be ineffectual. In the worst case, superimposing an outer layer of looking nice on top of an inner layer which is struggling can be damaging as yet another compensatory mechanism is brought into play.

The solution? Take care of both form and function, or preferably, function and form in that order!



Lindsay Wilcox-Reid is a dressage trainer, founder of Equipilates™, author of books and a DVD on improving rider performance. www.equipilates.com