

# PRACTICAL HORSEMAN EXTRA

**STRENGTHEN  
YOUR BASE  
FOR BETTER  
BALANCE**

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# ALL ABOUT THAT BASE!

Improve your performance by strengthening your base of support.



The stronger your base of support is, the straighter you'll be able to carry your upper body and the softer and steadier you can be in your hands. Here, West Point Cadet Matilda Brady's good lower-leg position is supporting her quiet upper body and hands—even without stirrups. The proof is in 26-year-old Thoroughbred/warmblood-cross Aberdeen's relaxed, content expression.

**By Sherry Cashman ■ Photos by Amy K. Dragoo**

**G**reat equitation requires a great base of support. By that I mean your lower body position is solid and strong from your feet to your waist. The ball of your foot is balanced nicely on your stirrup iron and your weight is down in your heel. We equitation trainers feel like broken records constantly reminding students to put their "Heels down!" But there's a good reason: It all starts with your heels. If they're far enough down, your feet will stay steady on the stirrups and you'll be able to keep your balance.

Working up from the heels, we want to see your lower legs steady against your horse's sides just behind the girth, never slipping forward or backward. Your knees should operate as a pivot point so that their angles open and close, for example, when posting to the trot. They should stay in light contact with the saddle without gripping. Your thighs provide the strength necessary to either hold your seat in the saddle—for example, at the sitting trot—or support your upper body when it's out of the saddle in two-point or jumping position. At the same time, your core abdominal and seat (buttock) muscles constantly work to correct your balance and hold you in the middle of the saddle.

Why do you need this strong base of support? For starters, it'll save you from "eating dirt"—it's the safety net that keeps you from falling off when the going gets tough. But that's just the worst-case scenario. Whether you're in the show ring or not, every aspect of your riding performance goes hand in hand with a good base of support. Here's how:

Your heels, legs, seat and core muscles act like an anchor for your upper body, helping you to sit up straight—without being too tight or frozen in the saddle—while staying soft and steady in your arms and hands. They also absorb all the bouncing of your horse's movements so it doesn't channel up through your arms into your

hands and his mouth. This makes your rides more comfortable and enjoyable for both you and your horse. It also creates a more pleasant picture for the judge.

Most importantly, a good base of support helps you stay centered and balanced in the saddle so you're never tempted to use your reins for balance. This enables you to develop a kind, effective connection with your horse, so you can influence his balance and ride him in a nice frame. This, in turn, will help you regulate his pace and rhythm and find better distances to your fences.

Sound too good to be true? I promise you, it's not. Many of my students over the years have used the exercises I'll share with you in this article to develop a strong, secure base of support.

## Evaluate Your Base

Start by checking your stirrup length, which can play a major role in the stability of your support base. Every rider's conformation is slightly different, but my general rule of thumb for riding on the flat is that the irons hit your ankle bones when you sit in the saddle with your feet out of the stirrups and your legs stretched long against your horse's sides. If you're on a narrow horse who doesn't have much curve in his barrel to take up your leg, you might need to shorten your stirrups a hole or two. If you're on a wide-barreled horse, you will probably need a slightly longer stirrup in order to stretch your legs down and around his belly.

Either way, you'll know if you have the right length when you feel most balanced, secure and effective in the saddle. If you feel your body tipping forward like a jockey's, your stirrups may be too short. If you're reaching for your stirrups, balancing on your toes and having trouble keeping your heels down, your stirrups are likely too long. Keep adjusting them until they feel just right.

In general, I recommend shortening your flatting stirrup length by a hole or two for jumping. This will vary depending on the spacing between holes on your leathers (some are much closer than others).

## Evaluate Your Base

**1. To evaluate your base of support, start by checking that your stirrups are the correct length. Take your feet out of them and allow your legs to hang down by your horse's sides. In general, the bottoms of the stirrup irons should be about level with your ankles for flatwork.**

**2. Next, ask a friend on the ground to analyze your leg position when your feet are in the stirrups. As German exchange student Cadet Merle Kreye is demonstrating here, your stirrup should be on the ball of your foot and your ankle flexed so your heel is deep. Your legs should be positioned so that your heels are directly underneath your hips. Merle is showing a good stirrup length for flatting here. She would typically shorten her stirrups a hole for jumping.**

**3. Ask your helper to check your leg from all angles to be sure your thighs, knees and calves are evenly closed around the horse as Merle's are here. This allows you to use your entire leg for stability and support.**



## Unmounted Exercise 1: Stair Stretch

If you have trouble keeping your heels down, this exercise can make a big difference. Although Cadet Charlotte Hereford is demonstrating it here on a mounting block, it's ideally done on stairs with a banister. Stand on the edge of a step with your heels hanging over the edge. Lightly rest one hand on the wall or railing if necessary to maintain your balance. Then, keeping your back straight, flex your ankles to allow your heels to drop below the level of the step. You should feel your calf muscles stretching. Hold this position for about 10 seconds, then step off the stairs and rest for a moment. Repeat this 10 times.



## Unmounted Exercise 2: Ball Squeeze

Find a ball that's 1 to 3 feet in diameter (a soccer ball, basketball, etc.). Standing on flat ground, place it between your knees and/or thighs. Bend your hips and knees slightly so you're in a squatting position as if you were in the saddle in two-point position. Squeeze the ball with both legs for 10 seconds, then relax. Repeat 10 times.

calves and your horse's sides? That is a sign that you are pinching with your knees.

After analyzing your position, try to compare it to successful upper-level riders—in your own

barn or at competitions. Watch how their base of support stays the same throughout an entire ride. Then try to mimic their riding styles during your own practice.

Meanwhile, work to strengthen and stabilize your base with the mounted and unmounted exercises I describe in this article. Build up slowly. If you do these exercises to the point of exhaustion, your body won't be able to maintain the correct position we're trying to teach it. You also might make your muscles so sore that you won't be able to ride properly in your next session. So if you feel yourself getting tired, call it a day. Over time, as the exercise becomes easier, gradually increase the duration and number of reps.

Check out the boxes above for two unmounted exercises I teach my students.

## Longe Lessons

One of my favorite training methods for riders of all levels is the longe lesson. This is a great way for riders to work on their positions without pulling on their horses' mouths accidentally. You need to have an instructor or ground helper who is skilled at longeing and a quiet horse who is experienced, forgiving and comfortable on the longe line. Not all horses tolerate riders bouncing on their backs or stirrups bumping against their sides. If you plan to do any riding without stirrups, test your horse ahead of time without a rider. Longe him with the stirrups down, starting at the walk, then build up to the trot and canter.

When you begin your mounted longe session, knot your reins and loop them over your horse's neck so they don't fall down around his legs. Throughout the session, either put your hands on your hips or hold your arms straight out to the sides, level with your shoulders.

Start with a slow posting trot, focusing on keeping your back straight and your body centered over the middle of the horse. When that's going well, try to sit the trot. Have your longe person slow down your horse as much as necessary

Next, ask a friend to video you or take a series of photos while you ride. Review these images carefully to analyze your position from the bottom up. Where is the stirrup positioned on your foot? If it's under your toe instead of the ball of your foot, you can't achieve maximum lower-leg stability. Are your heels truly down? Do they stay down all the time or do they come up now and then depending on what you're doing? If your case is the latter, your balance is probably equally unreliable.

Does your lower leg stay in position or does it swing backward or forward? If your leg swings, notice how predictably your upper body tips in the opposite direction. When your leg swings backward, your upper body tips forward and vice versa. Can you see daylight between your

## Sitting Trot with One Hand on the Pommel

To learn how to sit the trot with a secure, yet following seat, put both reins in your outside hand and hold the pommel with your inside hand. Now you can pull your seat deeper into the saddle. Note how Matilda is maintaining a nice leg position, with weight in her heel, while keeping her back straight and tall.



for you to sit the gait comfortably. Wrap your legs around your horse's sides to draw your seat down into the saddle. If you're a beginner or intermediate rider, there might be some bouncing involved. That's OK! Everybody has to get through this phase.

To get a better idea of what a good sitting trot should feel like, grasp the pommel of the saddle with your inside hand and pull your seat down deeper into the saddle. If you feel your back rounding, tighten your

## Serpentine Notes

While you ride the serpentine exercise below, periodically check that your leg is still in the correct position. The steadier it is and the more centered your body is, the more balanced your horse will be and the easier it will be to steer him through the exercise.

Over time, challenge yourself by adding more poles and bringing them slightly closer together so the serpentine has more loops and the turns are tighter. Never bring them so close together, though, that you lose the balance and flow of the exercise. If you're more advanced, challenge yourself by riding the serpentine without stirrups at the posting and sitting trot.

## Serpentine with Poles

Put a line of four or five ground poles down the center of your arena, placed end to end and spaced about 30 to 40 feet apart. Then ride a serpentine at the posting trot, making four or five wide, smooth loops, almost touching the rail each time you approach the sides of the arena.

1. In between each loop, trot straight across the arena and over the center of one of the ground poles as Cadet Alex Vinson is doing here on Ellie, a 15-year-old warmblood. She's straightened Ellie well and is keeping her balanced and steady, but I'd like to see her hip angle slightly more open, her heel a little deeper and her fingers more closed around the reins.

2. Although Alex's well-ridden straight line brings her to the center of the pole, her base of support is slipping a little. Her heel has come up and her leg has slid in front of her body, which makes her shoulders tip forward. She'll have time to correct this as she

continues heading straight toward the other side of the ring and prepares to make the next loop in the serpentine.

3. As she approaches the rail, she drops her weight deeper into her heels, which helps to keep her body upright as she rides a nice smooth loop to the left. Notice how she's resisted the temptation to lean to the inside. I'd still like to see her heel a little deeper, her weight lower in the tack and her hands holding the reins with her thumbs on top, but that will come with practice. She's doing a good job of turning her head to aim for the center of the next pole as she completes the turn.

4. As a result, she and Ellie arrive at the pole in a much better rhythm and balance than they had over the previous pole. Alex's lower leg is back in the correct position and she's maintaining a better rein contact. She's already looking ahead, planning to ride a straight line to the rail where she'll initiate the next smooth loop.





**Sherry Cashman** started her equestrian education at the Thomas School of Horsemanship on Long Island. She studied equine science at Delhi University before attending the Kentucky Equine Educational Program at

the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington. She became a harness-racing trainer and driver and met her husband, Peter, a fellow driver (pictured with Sherry). Together they switched career paths 30 years ago by accepting jobs at the U.S. Military Academy. Since then, they have coached West Point cadets in intercollegiate competitions in hunt seat equitation as well as Western riding. They also manage and train the academy's traditional mule team. For over a decade, Sherry also coached the James I. O'Neill High School Equestrian Team.

Each of their children, Shane, Randi and Shelby, showed horses growing up. After competing on Centenary College's equestrian team, Randi and Shelby followed in their parents' footsteps, becoming trainers at Saddle River Equestrian, near New York City.

abdominal muscles. Try to stay with your horse's motion as much as possible. This will take a certain amount of strength in your legs and core muscles. Be careful not to tighten your muscles so much that you become stiff in the saddle, essentially working against your horse's motion. Your body still needs to stay somewhat soft and flowing to work effectively in the saddle. Finding that happy medium is just a matter of practice—and lots of it.

If you're feeling comfortable sitting the trot without reins, try dropping your stirrups as well. Slip your feet out of the stirrups and let the irons hang loose. Maintain the exact same leg position you had with stirrups: just behind the girth with your heel lower than your toe and your lower legs closed against your horse's sides. It can be tempting to dangle your toes down toward the ground and let your legs flop around, but this won't improve your equitation skills. This is also good practice for both you and your horse in case you lose a stirrup temporarily in the show ring. While you're recovering your stirrup, you want to be able to carry on without distracting your horse or disrupting your performance.

Many riders find it easier to sit the trot without stirrups than with stirrups because it forces them to balance on their seats rather than the stirrup irons. It's still great strength training, though, for your legs, seat and core. In the beginning, you might be able to do just a few minutes at a time, but you can build up to riding an

## Drop Your Stirrups Over Trot Poles

Next, take the ground poles you used in the previous exercise and turn them parallel to one another to create trot poles on the centerline. Space them 4 to 5 feet apart, depending on your horse's natural trot stride (farther apart if he has a big stride; closer together if he's shorter-strided). Ask a ground person to stand by to adjust the poles however necessary so your horse can comfortably trot through them without having to lengthen or shorten his stride.

1. Matilda begins the exercise by riding down the long side of the arena in a posting trot. She then turns Aberdeen down the centerline, aiming for the middle of the poles. They arrive in a nice balance, but Matilda's leg has slipped too far back. I'd also like to see her heel a little deeper and her hands slightly lower.

She continues posting over the poles and then trots straight to the end of the arena before making a smooth turn back onto the rail in the direction opposite her original approach. This way she

can alternate turning right and left onto the centerline each time she repeats the exercise.

2. After doing this several times, she drops her stirrups before reaching the first trot pole. She continues posting over the poles just as she did before, trying to keep her legs in the same correct position. Her hip angle could be slightly more closed here—and we've caught her looking down—but otherwise she's maintaining an excellent steady position.

After the last pole, she'll sit the trot and find her stirrups again before going back to posting. She'll also check to be sure she's on the correct diagonal for the upcoming turn.

This exercise is great for strengthening your base of support and also good practice for quickly recovering your stirrups—a skill that comes in handy if you lose one in the show ring and don't want to attract the judge's attention to your rooting around to find it. If you are an advanced rider, try this at the sitting trot, too.



entire session without stirrups.

Posting without stirrups is another excellent exercise. To challenge yourself even more, try sitting for one beat and standing for two beats. Do this with stirrups at first and then, if you feel strong enough, try it without stirrups. Concentrate on using your legs to push your seat out of the saddle rather than pull your body up by your shoulders. Since you are constantly changing your posting, do

not worry about your diagonal during this exercise.

### More Mounted Exercises

All of the longeing exercises described can be done during your regular rides, as well. For these, be very careful never to use your reins for balance. Periodically go through a mental checklist of the components of your base, always starting with your heels and working your way up to your abs.

More exercises to sharpen up your core include serpentines over ground poles, dropping your stirrups over trot poles and jumping without stirrups. Turn to the photos on pages 6–8 for tips and step-by-step instructions on how to ride them effectively.

Whatever your riding goals may be, continue practicing these exercises. The stronger your base of support is, the stronger your riding performances will be. 🐾

## Jumping Without Stirrups

Safety always comes first in our barn so our riders jump without stirrups only if they're experienced over fences and mounted on quiet, trustworthy horses. The key is to start very small and work your way up slowly. Begin with a single ground pole on either long side of the arena. First ride over the poles at the posting trot with your stirrups, then do it without.

1. You can also practice trotting over poles on a circle as Alex is doing here with Ellie. (To see a video describing this particular exercise in more detail, go to [www.PracticalHorsemanMag.com](http://www.PracticalHorsemanMag.com).) She's leaning slightly to the inside here, so she'll practice this a few more times before dropping her stirrups.

When doing this at the trot feels good, progress to canter, first with your stirrups, then without.

Most horses will simply step over the poles rather than jump them, so there's no need to give a big rein release. Just stay soft in your arms, always following your horse's mouth with your hands no matter what he does. Also remain "in the tack," following his motion with your seat just as if you were riding a regular smooth, flowing canter without poles.

Next, try a line of two poles, placed several strides apart. Ask a helper on the ground to adjust the poles to suit your horse's natural stride length.

2. Eventually, build up to jumping small cavalletti and crossrails without stirrups. Ride over each jump in the same steady manner you would use if you had your stirrups—the same pace and line in your approach, the same release in the air. Cadet Rachael Schloo is demonstrating how to do this on Aberdeen. As she comes out of the turn to a small crossrail, she drops her stirrups. She's doing a good job of keeping her heels down, but her lower leg could be a hair farther back and her shoulders could be more open.

3. In the air over the crossrail, Rachael is pinching with her knee instead of using her calf. This allows her leg to swing backward and causes her hips to move too far forward. To compensate, she's



tipping her head backward. Her shoulders still need to be more open and I'd like to see more release through her hands. All of these things will improve as she continues to strengthen her base of support.

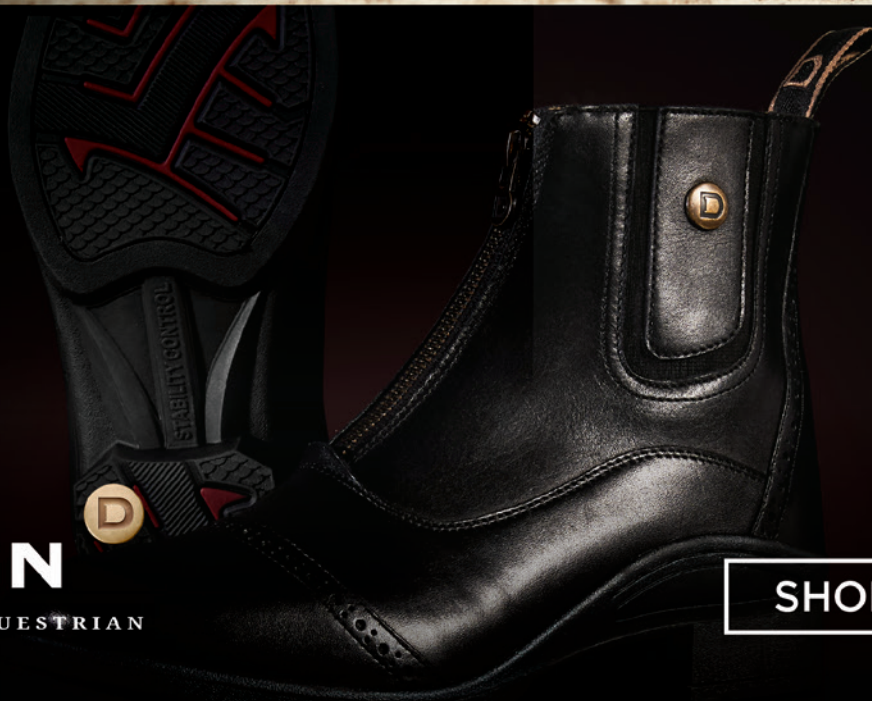
4. If you feel comfortable over cavalletti and crossrails, try jumping small fences (at heights several inches lower than your usual show height). Over each jump, concentrate on keeping your butt underneath you and your legs wrapped around your horse's barrel. Many riders find that their lower legs slip backward when they jump without stirrups. This, in turn, causes their upper bodies to tip forward. So try to hold your lower leg steady and in position.

This is harder than it looks! Merle is doing a good job here staying with Ellie's motion, but you can see that her lower leg has come loose and her knee angle has straightened. This has pushed her body too far out of the tack and made her lose some of the rein contact. (Having said that, I'd rather see a rider let her reins get loopy in the air over a fence than catch her horse in the mouth.) Next time, she'll work on tightening her calf on her horse's side and bending her knee so she can keep her body closer to the saddle. That will give her the stability necessary to maintain a more even rein contact. I'll also remind her to keep her eyes open!



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# How do I prepare my barn for the winter?

# Q

I recently bought a small horse property in New England and am preparing for my first winter on it. Do you have any tips for winterizing the barn?

**SARAH GEIKIE**

# A

One of the first things I recommend doing is checking your hay and bedding supplies. The availability of both can decline dramatically mid-winter. Ideally, store enough hay mid-fall to last until next year's first cutting. If that's not possible, find a reliable supplier willing to bring you hay at any time throughout the winter, even on short notice. Similarly, stockpile enough bedding to get you through the winter or arrange for a supplier to make regular deliveries.

Also in the fall, inspect the entire exterior of your barn. Look closely for any type of damage or deterioration—loose boards, broken windows, missing shingles, etc. Be sure to complete any necessary repairs before winter starts. Winter weather can quickly turn a minor issue into a major structural problem. In an especially cold climate, air leaks or loss of insulation can lead to drafts. If you have an older barn, opening barn doors judiciously to improve air circulation—which is essential to equine respiratory health—is still preferable to uncontrollable drafts. Well-built newer barns incorporate ventilation into the roof structure to provide adequate air circulation even when the barns are closed up tightly.

Next, ask a plumber to check that all of your plumbing system (indoor/outdoor spigots, automatic waterers, frost-free pumps, etc.) is in working order and properly insulated. If you don't already have them, consider installing water heaters in your pasture water troughs and heated waterers or buckets in your stalls. Both can be a godsend in extremely cold climates. Also plan to detach, drain and store all of your hoses, both to protect them from damage and to prevent them from freezing solid onto the faucets.

Ask an electrician to inspect your barn's entire electrical system to make sure it is absolutely safe and capable of addressing your current electrical needs. If you have an older barn, it may be necessary to upgrade the electrical system. An inadequate system is a fire hazard, so this is well worth the expense!

We recently had a tragic barn fire in our region that was traced to a space heater. I strongly

urge you to ban space heaters from your barn. If you do decide to use one—for example, in a tack room—enact a policy that it never be left on unattended.

Be sure that you have a secondary power source, such as a generator. Most barns require electricity to run their water pumps, so no power means no water. This can be very dangerous if a snow or wind storm takes out your power for a prolonged period of time.

Check that all horse clothing has been returned from the cleaners and, if necessary, repaired. Re-waterproof all turnout blankets. Also have one extra turnout sheet on hand for every size of horse in your barn in case a turnout blanket gets wet and needs to be replaced temporarily with a warm blanket covered by a turnout sheet.

Finally, create a comprehensive snow-removal plan to guarantee access not just for vehicles to the driveway and main road but also for humans and horses on the pathways to and from the barn and pastures. Be sure this plan includes keeping at least one trailer plowed out at all times, so that you are always ready to transport a horse in case of emergency. Also plan to clear snow away from all gates and barn doors routinely, so there's no risk of them becoming blocked. Have a designated place to put all the removed snow—somewhere large enough to accommodate multiple storms occurring close together.

If you plan to remove snow yourself, find a convenient location for your plow, snow-blower, shovels, etc., so they're in place and ready to go before the first snow flies. I also recommend stashing several bags of ice melt strategically around the barn, where ice is most likely to accumulate. Icy footing is extremely dangerous for horses.

If you don't plan to remove the snow yourself, line up a dependable contractor for the entire winter season. Make it absolutely clear that, no matter how brutal a storm is, humans must always be able to get to the horses to care for them. 🐾

*Sarah Geikie is an FEI four-star dressage judge and current co-chair of the USDF's Instructor/Trainer Committee. She is also a member of the USDF Judges and Freestyle committees. Based at Meadowbrook Farm in Marlborough, Connecticut, Sarah is a very popular clinician with a busy schedule conducting clinics across the country.*



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**Cut down on winter stress by taking the time in the fall to carefully inspect your barn, fix any damage or potential problems and make a plan for snow removal. You'll feel more at ease with the coming season if you don't leave repairs until the last minute.**

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