



KEN McNABB

HORSEMANSHIP

DISCOVERING THE HORSEMAN WITHIN

Rider Positions: Posture, Posture, Posture

By Ken McNabb with Katherine Lindsey Meehan

This month, we'll cover a fun exercise that will improve your riding and confidence in the saddle. I want to start by saying that safety always needs to be your first concern, and for this exercise you need a broke horse that you trust completely. You also need a friend on the ground that knows you and your horse, and is aware of your riding level. Both your friend and your horse should be familiar with round pen training, and be comfortable in the pen changing directions on cue and changing speed. Use caution and common sense throughout this exercise.

You'll want your horse saddled and in a 60' round pen, with your friend in the middle with a lariat rope, just as you would set up for a round pen training session. Make sure your cinch is tight, and get on your horse. Put your feet in the stirrups, and consider this: if you keep equal weight in each stirrup at all times, you will stay in the center of your saddle. Your saddle goes where your horse goes, and your horse goes where your ground person tells him to. Settle in to your saddle, and put one hand on the horn. Your other hand can hang at your side or be held in front of you as if you are holding reins. Make sure your feet are under you, with your toes out and your heels down. Now put some weight in your stirrups without pushing your feet out in front of you. I like to have more weight in my feet than I do in my seat. You don't want to actually be standing in your stirrups, you are still sitting in the saddle, but think about weighting those stirrups and keeping the weight even between your two feet.

Once you are settled into your saddle and your stirrups, have your ground person start your horse moving around the pen. Start at a walk until you are used to it. Your ground person should do their best to tell you when they are going to ask the horse to change directions or speed. Also, you should watch the horse's ears. He will lead with his ear and tell you where he's going next. When you are comfortable, have your ground person move your horse up to a trot and eventually a lope. Practice relaxing and flowing with your horse. Tension will cause you to bounce. You can try dropping your stirrups and sitting deep in your saddle for a little while if you are comfortable, to lengthen your legs. Feel the difference between sitting on your horse and truly riding him.

Keep your posture correct throughout this exercise. Your shoulders should be balanced over your hips, and your feet should be squarely underneath you, just as if you were standing on the ground with your knees bent. If your feet get in front of you, you are riding behind your horse's movement. If they get behind you, you will be ahead of your horse. And if your legs suck up and you bend your back into a fetal position, you will likely fall off your horse. Your center of gravity should stay as low as possible at

all times. Ride from the waist down, not the waist up. It is easy to try and muscle through things by riding with your upper body, especially if you are strong. You can grab on to that horn and hold yourself in the saddle. Or, you might use your hands and catch your horse in the mouth accidentally if he throws you off balance. But, it is very important to learn to ride correctly, without using your upper body to compensate for an incorrect leg or seat position. A balanced posture is key to riding your horse smoothly and correctly through expected and unexpected changes in speed and direction.

Once you are feeling very comfortable and your horse is doing well, you can have your ground person stop telling you when he is going to have the horse change speed or direction. Just feel your horse and feel your seat, and ride through whatever motion comes. The confidence this exercise will give you comes in handy when your horse spooks out on the trail. Once you've ridden through many unexpected changes of speed and direction in a controlled environment, it doesn't seem like such a big deal when it happens outside.

It is fun to have your friend work you for a while from the ground, and then switch places with each other. You can help by spotting each other's position and letting the rider know when their legs or body get out of alignment.

Enjoy your horses, your friends, and your family, and until next time, may God bless the trails you ride.

For more information on Ken McNabb's programs call us at 307-645-3149 or go to www.kenmcnabb.com.