

**US Eventing**  
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**The Gallop Position**

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The galloping horse senses if the rider is in balance. Even the most beautifully balanced horse is not helped by a rider floundering around in the saddle. An unbalanced rider does not give the horse confidence coming to a jump. The rider's position over the horse is a critical ingredient of the "good" versus "not so good" picture presented by the team. The rider is a kind of "counter-weight" for the horse, capable of bringing the horse into increased balance with their position, or, if in the wrong place, hindering the horse's ability to gallop and jump well. It is the rider's responsibility to be in balance, just as it is the horse's job to jump. How do you make sure that you are able to make it happen? By working on being able to gallop in perfect balance!

Watch jockeys riding in a flat race. To get the most out of their horses they situate themselves over their galloping horse's center of gravity – the wither and shoulder. The good jockeys never seem to move out of sync with their horse – even when reaching back and using the whip. They appear to be like bugs on the horse's back, not interfering with the horse's movement.

A jockey holds his position by being in balance "over his feet." Remember, there are no knee rolls to grip on those tiny saddles! Being in balance "over your feet" means being able to maintain the correct position without pulling on the reins or leaning on the horse's neck. Exercising race horses is one of the best ways to learn balance at the gallop. Wash Bishop, a very successful eventing rider and coach from Middleburg, Virginia, has spent many hours galloping race horses. He puts it very simply, "I want to feel that the horse is fluid underneath me...that I'm not interfering with him. It makes the horse fast between the jumps."

Wash explains that much of what he sees at the novice and training level is what he calls, 'the posting gallop.' "The stirrup is too much on the toe. The rider's weight is behind the motion of the horse which causes riders to look like they're posting when they gallop, and that in turn makes them grip with their knee instead of their lower leg, so then their position is weakened," he says.

In choosing your position over the horse in the approach to a jump, there are two fundamental and equally correct styles: The first method tends to have an "upright" upper body position that rarely inclines towards the jump. Typical examples of this style are the British riders, Virginia Elliot and Lucinda Green. The second method tends toward a forward "staying with the motion" body position that is inclined toward the jump. American riders, Karen O'Connor and Derek DiGrazia, are good examples of this style. Which to adopt? All of these riders use both styles of position as the situation demands.

Says Wash, "The more vertical the fence, the more you need to be able to free up the horse's front end – the rounder the jump, then you can stay over your horse's shoulder."

The most important thing to remember is to be adaptable. You have to have balanced and flexible position – a position of strength. Wash teaches riders to square their shoulders and become taller in the approach. This, he says, will help to balance the horse and engage them so they can jump well. Wash believes that the lower level competitor does not have to ride with short stirrups because they are not going that fast, and riding with longer stirrups will help them keep their balance. “As the rider gains more experience and goes faster, then the stirrups can be shorter. The longer length gives more control for novice and training level riders. The main thing is to teach riders how to use their weight to control the horse – from the hip, through the knee to the ankle. The rider has to allow their weight to go down through the lower leg, instead of stopping at the knee. This will balance the horse immediately without too much adjustment from the hands. The lower leg must be there to keep the horse coming up underneath, using the balance the upper body creates.”

When galloping between the fences, a rider’s position should be more like that of a jockey – up and out of the saddle, in balance over the feet, and over the horse’s shoulder. It takes practice to learn how to gallop correctly, and remember that a certain amount of basic muscle strength is required, so putting in the hours in a galloping position is critical to your ability to maintain the correct position. If you cannot gallop frequently, practice the correct position while hacking or working in the arena. Wash advises, “If the rider is tired, they should put their foot home in the stirrup to balance themselves, rather than balancing off the horse’s mouth.”

It is important too, to teach the horse to gallop in balance. If the horse is lugging on your hand, he is unbalanced, and the horse will pull you out of balance, making it difficult to engage your lower leg when coming to a jump. With a horse that runs away, it is important that you teach the horse to canter around the course so you are not constantly changing pace and grabbing for control. On the other hand, a lazy horse needs to get the idea of what his job is by becoming motivated. Galloping alongside another horse will help him to become inspired and to use himself properly, making it more fun for the two of you.

Have your coach or clinician to spend time working on your gallop position. Learn where your legs should be, and how to use them properly when galloping in your approach to and landing after a jump. Learn where your upper body needs to be to suit both your physique and that of your horse. Learn how to adjust your position going up and down hills, and where you need to be in the approach to different types of jumps (i.e. vertical jumps like post and rail fences and up banks; square jumps like oxers and tables; or round jumps like steeplechase fences or brush jumps). Practice galloping and shifting your horse’s balance from the front to the hindquarters, all the while keeping him in front of your leg.

It can be difficult to put it all together at first, but keep working at it. The principles are really quite simple; it’s more a matter of practice, practice, practice! Because galloping and jumping are the essence of our sport, your hours of hard work will pay off with more pleasurable, safer and rewarding cross-country and show jumping rounds for you and your horse.