

Why Do We Mount from the Left?

By Lynn Acton

Xenophon gives the earliest answer still in print in “The Art of Horsemanship”, circa 350 B.C. It has to do with the hand in which you hold your spear. He describes a mounting procedure that involves grasping the mane with both hands and leaping aboard, or if you prefer, using your spear to vault onto your horse. They did ride fairly short horses, if that makes you feel any better. However, Xenophon strongly recommends learning to mount from both sides, so that one is always prepared for battle. Apparently the rigid rule that one must mount from the left came later when cavalry officers wore a sword on the left (for right-handed draw), and it was safer to swing the right leg over the horse.

So here we are with neither spears nor swords, just a tradition whose reason has long since expired. Is there any reason to change it? The answer is yes, a very good reason. Mounting builds one-sided muscles in people, as you’ve noticed if you’ve tried mounting from the off (right) side. It also builds one-sided muscles in horses because they must brace themselves for mounting. Just watch a youngster scramble for balance the first time he’s mounted. Even after the horse learns to brace himself, the rider’s weight pulls on the horse’s spine. These one-sided stresses are an orthopedic hazard for horse and rider, and interfere with the goal of being evenly balanced. School horses are particularly vulnerable to sore backs when they are mounted numerous times daily, often by inexperienced riders.

Students can be taught any or all of the following techniques to reduce strain on horses and themselves. Though it’s good to be able to mount from the ground when neces-



Incorrect 1: “The saddle has already begun to slip before Whitney, holding pommel and cantle, puts her full weight in the stirrup and reins are too long.”

sary, one need not prove it every time. They show due consideration for the horse.

1. Use a mounting block or an informal equivalent such as a stool with a good base of support so it does not tip over as you are getting on. An excellent trail rider I know keeps a tree stump in her yard, replacing it as needed. To re-mount on the trail, look for a log, or stand the horse in a ditch or downhill from you. For an arena, a mounting platform is the deluxe version, and doubles as mini-bleachers. Caution: never dismount onto a mounting block. It’s too easy to land wrong and too embarrassing to explain you injured yourself falling off a mounting block and you can spook your horse.
2. Get a leg up. The rider, in mounting position, bends the left knee. Assistant, or groom, places left hand under rider’s knee, right hand under lower leg. (Allowing the groom to grasp the leg in both hands is a recipe for a sprained knee.) On the count of 3, grooms lifts, and rider leaps gracefully into the saddle. Though many riders worry they are too heavy to get a leg up without embarrassing themselves, such fears are usually ill-founded. With practice and good timing, this is an elegant maneu-



Incorrect 2: “Tension shows in Shiloh’s posture as her rider’s weight hangs off her side, and the saddle slips further and reins are not gathered up.”

ver. It degrades into a comedy routine mainly when the timing fails, or the groom overestimates the amount of force required to lift the rider. The first time my husband legged me up, he nearly tossed me clear across a 17 hand horse. I barely caught the saddle as I flew over.

3. Have someone hold the off-side stirrup or stirrup leather to keep the saddle from slipping.
4. Vary mounting between left and right sides. While some of us might find this so awkward as to defeat the purpose, the young and the agile would do well to cultivate this skill. It is a distinct asset for trail and cross-country riders who might need to re-mount in awkward situations from either side. Horses rarely have as much trouble adapting to this as people do. For safety reasons, all horses should be comfortable being handled, led, and saddled from both sides. All that’s needed then is proper warning of the rider’s intent. My first off-side dismount caught my horse by surprise and he lost his balance. With a new appreciation for how much a horse must brace himself, I now weight my stirrup and wait until I feel the horse adjust his balance before proceeding.



Correct 1: "Sarah is using a mounting block, and holding mane and pommel. Her left toe is angled so it does not poke Shiloh in the side."



Correct 2: "Sarah's weight is over the saddle, resting on her hands as she swings her leg over, careful not to bump Shiloh's rump. The saddle is still straight and Shiloh is relaxed."

Whatever mounting technique you use, think of the horse's comfort as well as your own safety. Hold mane with your forward hand. If both hands hold the saddle, there is more pull on the horse's spine and more danger of the saddle slipping. The other hand reaches across the saddle to hold the pommel, so the saddle won't twist as it does

when the rider holds the cantle. When jumping up, throw your weight over the horse's back and lean on your hands while swinging your leg over, to avoid hanging off the horse's side. Finally, sit down gently, as if sitting on eggs. When a rider thumps her bottom in the saddle so hard the horse's spine flexes, it makes my back hurt!

The horse should do his part by standing still until asked to move off, and not amuse himself by pivoting away just as you step onto the mounting block or gather up your reins. Dramatic though it may look to scramble onto a moving horse, it's not necessary or safe. Many horses have simply not been taught to stand for mounting. With patience and clear, consistent expectations, they can learn.

The best mounting technique(s) to use will vary with the horse, rider, and circumstances. What's important is to be safe and to be thoughtful of the horse. Horses do notice these courtesies, as shown by the fact that they work better for considerate riders, independent of skill level. And then there is that moment, after you've thrown your leg over a favorite horse, and settled in the saddle. You take a deep breath and just sit there, savoring the feeling of being right where you want to be. ☺

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