

Quick Tip One – Still Vs. Stiff - Parts 1-4

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Still vs. Stiff Part 1 – Beginning riders are often told that they need to keep their hands still, keep their lower legs still and their heads still. In their good efforts to please their instructors, they do what they are told and hold these body parts still. They keep still by inhibiting their body's movement – they stiffen.

But what exactly does being still mean? According to Webster's, "still" is to make motionless. (It is also a device used for distilling alcohol, but that is another story.) But motion and motionless are relative concepts. Uh-oh here comes the Einstein. When you are sitting still in a moving car are you motionless? You are motionless relative to the car, but not the ground. How about when you are skiing? You are relatively still in relationship to the skis, but you are not still relative to the mountain.

If you send a pair of skis down a mountain, they bump and bounce as they moved along. If you watch a horse's back as it gallops along in its pasture, it undulates. In order to stay upright on skis you must follow the motion. You become part of the skis. If you use too much muscle (i.e. stiffen), you do not go with the motion, instead you hit every bump and it jars your body to soreness. You are also much more likely to fall. (Believe me, I am this skier.)

If you stiffen the joints of your legs, arms and neck as you ride (in order to be still), you end up hitting every bump the horse creates and you bounce out of the saddle, which has the effect of making you stiffen even more. Webster define stiff as "rigid, inflexible, inelastic, taut, tense." These are not terms we want to associate with our riding!

So when your instructor tells you to hold some body part still, try to reinterpret the message. She wants you to hold that part still relative to the moving horse, not to the ground. What you want is to better follow the motion of horse, be one with your horse and remain relatively still without being stiff. This relativity will create the illusion of stillness to the ground when in actuality you are moving with your horse. So how the heck do you do this? We will explore this quandary over the next several segments with "How to Hold a Body Part Still Relative to the Ground without Stiffening."

Still vs. Stiff Part 2 – How to Hold a Body Part Still Relative to the Ground Without Stiffening – Hands and Arms

Let's face it, your instructor tells you repeatedly to hold your hands still and you try, you really try. But the more you try the more it seems that they bounce around. My first piece of advice is to try to figure this out off your horse. If you are not really aware of what your body is doing off the horse, you don't really have a prayer once you are on and moving.

So sit down at a table the height of which allows you to bend your elbows and place your forearms flat on the table, mimicking how you hold your arms while you ride. Take a moment and just notice the tone of your muscles in your fingers, hands, forearms, and upper arms, and upper back, both singly and as a whole. (Please note that we don't focus on the joints of the wrist, elbow and shoulder, because they are controlled by the muscles around them.) Now starting with your fingers, tighten the muscles without moving your bones and then release them. What you are doing is learning to use sets of muscles isometrically. Work your way up your arms. You should be able to contract and relax these muscles at will.

Now stand up and hold your arms as if you are riding. Practice your isometric muscle control as above in this standing position. Next bend your legs and bounce a little – practice your isometrics.

Once you are able to contract and relax these muscle groups while bouncing on the ground, it's time to practice on your horse. Start at the halt with your arms like you had them on the table with your reins short enough that you have slight contact with your horse's mouth. (Remember that you are not moving your bones in this exercise, so don't worry about pulling your horse's mouth.) Once you are able to contract and relax at the halt, try it at the walk and then a slow jog trot. Over time slowly increase the speed of the trot until you are back to a working gait. For those of you who just learning to post the trot, you will have a harder time practicing this. Your brain is going to be working overtime to coordinate your body's ability to post and to contract and relax arm muscles at will. Don't fret; you will eventually be able to do this. The bottom line is that unless you are using your fingers, hands or arms consciously, they should hold their position in a relaxed, not contracted way. If this is the case, your joints will be able to follow the motion of the horse and your hands will be still relative to your horse's motion.

You will notice as you work on this exercise that your abdominals will start to kick in, taking over some of the work that your arms were inadvertently doing – i.e. helping you balance. Your tummy may get sore. Yeah! That means you are on the right track.

Still vs. Stiff Part 3 – How to Hold a Body Part Still Relative to the Ground without Stiffening – Lower Leg

Flopping lower legs are another common issue among many riders. Without a steady lower leg, it is impossible to give clear, concise aids to your horse. The poor guy can't decipher between inadvertent and conscious directions. In the end, most horses either start to ignore all leg aids or get mad and become naughty. (Who can blame them?) Similar to the issue of moving hands, moving lower legs are usually a by-product of stiffness somewhere else – usually the thigh and hip.

In an exercise sequence similar to the one we did for our hands, we will start to address this problem off the horse. Start by sitting on a sofa or on the floor with your legs extended out in front of you (i.e. – your whole leg is on the sofa.) Take a moment and just notice the tone of your muscles in your toes and feet, calves, thighs and buns, both singly and as a whole. (Please note that we don't focus on the joints of the ankle, knee, and hip, because they are controlled by the muscles around them.) Now starting with your toes and feet, tighten the muscles without moving your bones as little as possible and then release

them. What you are doing is learning to use sets of muscles isometrically. Work your way up your legs. You should be able to contract and relax these muscles at will.

Now stand up, bend your legs and assume a riding stance. Practice your isometric muscle control as above in this standing position. Next bounce a little – practice your isometrics. I will tell you that this is much more difficult than the arm work, but persevere. It will be worth it.

Once you are able to contract and relax these muscle groups while bouncing on the ground, it's time to practice on your horse. Start at the halt, with your feet in the stirrups. Once you are able to contract and relax at the halt, try it at the walk and then a slow jog trot. Over time slowly increase the speed of the trot until you are back to a working gait. (Please note that your horse will probably slow down or stop when you contract your thighs. Don't punish him. This is an aid for him to slow down.) For those of you who just learning to post the trot, you will have a harder time practicing this. Your brain is going to be working overtime to coordinate your body's ability to post and to contract and relax leg muscles at will. Don't fret; you will eventually be able to do this. The bottom line is that unless you are using your feet, calves, thighs or buns consciously, they should hold their position in a relaxed, not contracted way. If this is the case, your joints will be able to follow the motion of the horse and your lower legs will be still relative to your horse's motion.

You will notice as you work on this exercise that your abdominals will start to kick in, taking over some of the work that your legs were inadvertently doing – i.e. helping you balance. Your tummy may get sore. Yeah! That means you are on the right track.

Still vs. Stiff Part 4 – How to Hold a Body Part Still Relative to the Ground without Stiffening – Your Head

We've all seen it – the dreaded chicken head. With every stride the horse takes, the rider's head moves forward and back like a chicken pecking. It's ugly and what's worse is that this motion is putting a lot of muscular strain on the rider's neck (kind of like mini whip-lashes with each step - ouch). When your instructor tells you to hold your head still, the most common response to this command is to stiffen the neck. Instead of whip-lash the rider essentially begins to pound the spine up towards the brain stem, compressing the vertebrae together (major ouch). Either way you look at it, this neck thing is not good.

So how do we correct this problem? Yes, we can work on isometrics of the face, jaw and neck, and these are all well and good, but will more than likely not help with the chicken head. The chicken head is usually a symptom of stiffness somewhere else in the body. So to fix this, you need to work on being able to isometrically control your hands, arms, feet and legs. Check out prior posts to discover how to accomplish this skill both on and off your horse.