

## A Surmountable Problem: the Perils of Near-Side Mounting.

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Near-side mounting as a “rule” affects horse, rider, and saddle in a vicious cycle-- each aspect being affected by and contributing to the next. Fortunately, the remedy can be found on the off-side.

Consider the saddle; I like to include a review of the saddle/s most commonly used with each horse that I work with. Over time I began to notice that even saddles of excellent quality and overall condition exhibited twisting in the tree. Was this subtle flaw factory made or a product of time and use? To satisfy my curiosity, I began a self- study of fresh from the factory saddles vs. used saddles. What I found confirmed that *most* high quality saddles come off the line with symmetry. Since the twisting of the trees that I observed was to the same direction 99% of the time, I concluded that it is the common habit of 99% of today’s riders causing this anomaly: Exclusively mounting from the near-side forcing the saddle to bear the brunt of the rider’s weight on one side over and over.

Saddles are not rigid steel, thankfully. They give, they breathe, and they stretch. Growing up, I was taught to rotate my stirrup leathers because the leather on the near side always stretched. Most saddles are made from the same supple materials as your leathers. Just as mounting from the same side changes your leathers, so does it change your saddle. Mounting from both sides will cause your saddle to break in more evenly. Also, mounting from both sides means you get to forego the task of rotating your leathers monthly!

Consider the horse. No matter how skilled you are with your mounting abilities, your horse must brace his/her body as you hoist yourself up and swing a leg over. It is this repeated bracing to one side that causes horses, in part, to develop unevenness in tone and tension. The fact that the saddle may be twisting over time also contributes to unevenness and soreness, and definitely affects your horse’s performance and mental and physical well-being.

Consider yourself, the rider. Near-side mounting and twisted saddles also affect *your* seat, balance and evenness. If you don’t believe it, try mounting from the off-side. You may find that your right leg is weaker, less developed, and finding/keeping your balance feels awkward. Repetitive motions on one side of the body will also put undue strain on your joints. As a Therapeutic Riding Instructor I have realized the value in challenging both sides of the body (and thus the brain) when riding. Off-side mounting is one of the best ways to accomplish this.

Consider the reason for mounting from the horses’ near-side as a rule of thumb. “It’s always been that way,” is the only answer most of us can come up with. It’s true; it seems to have always been that way. But it started, like most cultural traditions, for a very practical reason. The word, “chivalry” originally referred to a man’s way with

horses. If he was an outstanding horseman, he was said to be “chivalric”. Men with ability to ride and train horses well also happened to be gentlemanly; hence the crossover of the word to today’s definition. Another shining example of this kind of evolution is near sided mounting, also dating back to the times of knights and cavalrymen. Without a doubt these chivalric men were predominantly right handed. This meant they fought with sword in right hand, which meant they wore and drew their swords from their left hip, which meant that mounting a horse from the right side (swinging left leg and sword over) spelled trouble, and tradition was born. As each generation of riders strived to emulate the habits of the “masters” before them, near-sided mounting became part of the culture and lore of “correct” horsemanship. But as you can see, it no longer has any practical place in today’s horsemastership, regardless of discipline.

I recommend that you begin mounting from the off-side with caution. Don’t assume that well-trained horses who have been mounted from the same side their entire career will accept a rider on their right side without batting an eye. Go slowly; monitor their comfort levels. Get on and off repeatedly, until they exhibit some relaxation with the idea. In other words, treat it as if you’re getting on for the first time. To help a horse begin to adjust to the idea, start tacking up, leading, and blanketing, etc. from the off-side. You may find that this will help horses become even more “bomb proof” overall. It also helps break the predictable monotony of being handled and gives them food for thought. Furthermore, expect your horse to struggle with his/her balance as much as you search for yours when initially mounting from the off-side. You and your horse both will be using new muscles. If your horse/saddle have never been mounted from the off-side, I would also recommend that you mount off-side 75% of the time to begin to combat the unevenness in horse and equipment (and rider). You will need to think about it. I still have a habit of going for my horses’ near-sides. Mounting from off-side may always be a conscious effort for those of us who have worn such rut on the near-side. If you have any reservations about your safety in attempting this with your horse, enlist the help of a qualified trainer. Finally, I would of course encourage the use of mounting blocks as often as possible. Being able to mount from the ground is an important “survival” skill of riding, but no rider needs to put undue strain on her and her horse’s body daily to keep limber enough to do it. Practice ground mounts occasionally to be sure you can do it if you need to when the time comes.

While the perils of near side mounting are steep, you will find the benefits of adding off-side mounting to your routine a real leg-up against them. Perhaps the most chivalric thing we can do for our horses is embrace off-side mounting as part of our horsemastership “culture”.