

Mounting and Dismounting

By Charlie and Milda Minter



Chen Prill Photo

Mounting your horse is the first step to riding and seems simple—just get on and go—but proper mounting sets the tone for a safe and enjoyable ride. During a mount, the rider is in a vulnerable position. If the horse moves, the rider can become unbalanced and must decide right then whether to continue mounting or get off. This is the time when a rider could get knocked over, stepped on, or get a foot hung in the stirrup. Our hope is that this article will help you avoid these dangers.

Once your horse is tacked up properly, pick a good area in which to mount - preferably outside and away from the barn door to reduce bad behavior of a 'barn sour' horse. Also, do not mount on concrete due to the danger of falling. Choose an area with level ground and safe footing that is free from obstructions. Check your equipment from both sides to make sure everything is fastened, including the curb chain or strap and pisador (attached lead line on Colombian type bridles), and make sure your reins are not twisted. Check your girth and tighten it if necessary. Always walk your horse a few steps after tightening the girth to make sure it is not pinching the skin behind the elbows and to make sure your horse is relaxed. He should be breathing quietly and not tense in the body. Before mounting, square up the horse's feet by moving him as needed or by rocking the pommel of the saddle a few times - this will encourage the horse to balance on his feet. A horse standing square won't tend to move as much as one standing crooked.

While you should be able to mount and dismount your horse from either side for safety reasons, we will discuss only the left side for this article. When you are ready to mount, step to the left side of the horse and stand beside the saddle at a 45 degree angle to your horse, facing the withers, with your right hip close to the horse's side. Hold the reins in your left hand, and place that hand either on the mane or the pommel of the saddle; rest your right hand on the saddle. This position allows you to watch the horse's head. His eyes should be soft; if they look tense or worried, then your horse may be stressed by what you are doing. The ears should be relaxed and "happy" (pointing forward or moving back and forth paying attention to you). If the ears are flat back, your horse is either mad or worried and likely won't stand well when you mount. If the horse's ears are focused forward and watching something else, he's not paying attention to you and may be startled when you get on, despite how settled he usually is. If you see that your horse isn't paying attention to you, take a slightly tighter hold on your left rein and bend the horse's neck and head towards you. This practice will bring back your horse's focus and will allow you to keep control if your horse tries to move when you get on; your horse will move in a left hand circle around you, allowing you to maintain your balance.

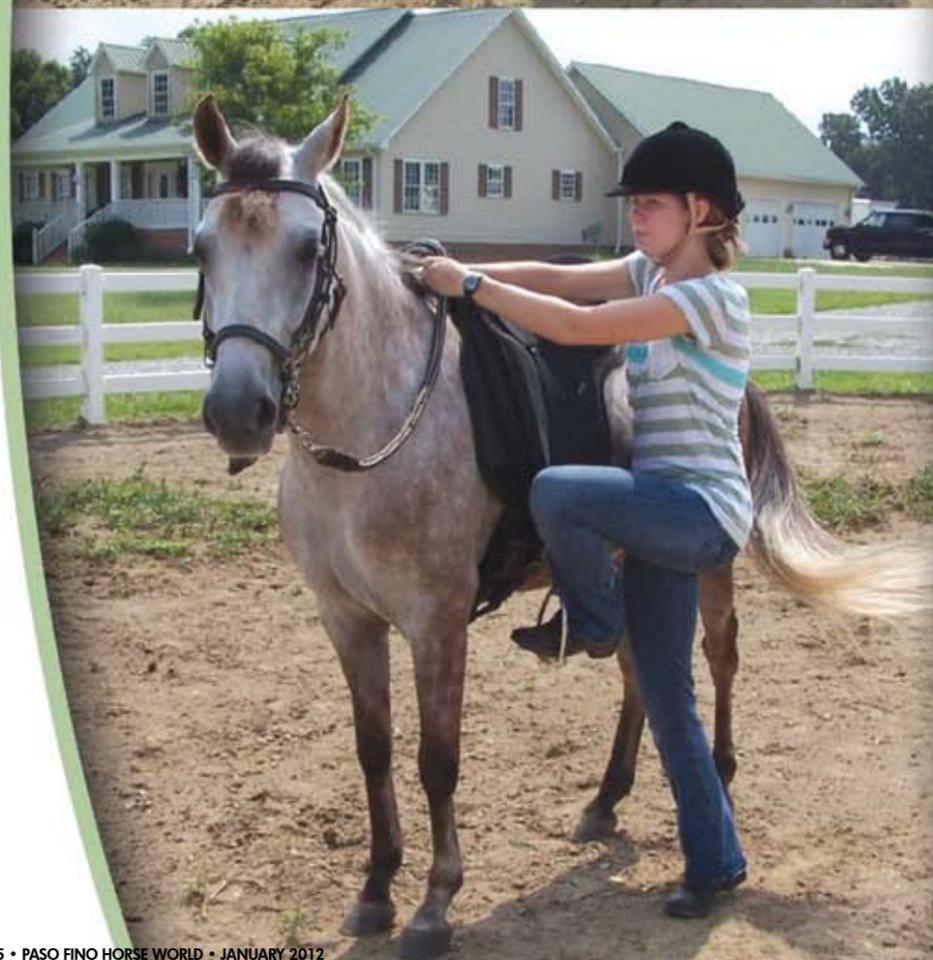
Continue to mount once the horse is paying attention to you. Standing in the position noted above, keep a small amount of slack in the reins; this keeps you from pulling on the horse's mouth while getting on

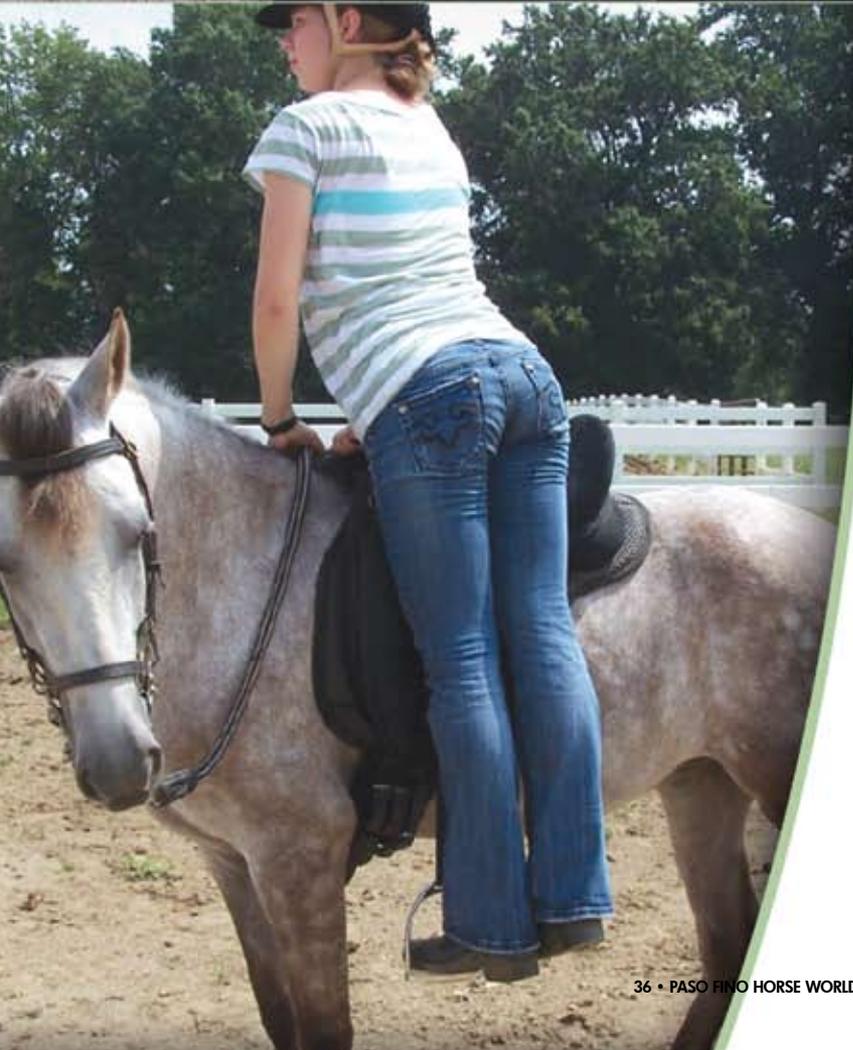
but also allows you to have instant control of the reins once mounted. A long draping rein allows your horse too much freedom and is not safe. Use your right hand, if needed, to turn the stirrup and put only the ball of your left foot on the stirrup pad. Putting more of your foot in the stirrup is dangerous in the event you need to pull your foot out quickly. Next, put your right hand on the pommel (front) of the saddle, not the cantle (back). Using the cantle to pull yourself up causes you to pull the saddle sideways, making it crooked, and also causes you to move your hand to the pommel midway through your mount, putting yourself in a vulnerable position without a base of support. Using the pommel keeps the saddle straight and gives you a secure hold at all times. Once your foot is in the stirrup and your right hand is on the pommel, push off your right foot and stand in the left stirrup. Again, your right hand should be on the pommel and your left hand on the pommel or mane, holding the reins. Hold this position for a few seconds, as this is the time you must decide to get on or get off, based on your horse's reaction at this point. If you feel that it is safe to do so, go ahead and swing your right leg over your horse. Keep your leg straight as you swing it over, and your leg will act as a counterbalance, helping to keep your upper body straight and upright. This keeps you from leaning over your horse as you mount, which would allow you to get bumped in the face if your horse suddenly raised its head. As you swing your leg over the horse, make sure not to bump the horse's rump (this is easier to accomplish with a straight leg, not a bent knee), and sit down softly in the saddle. Sitting down hard or fast is harsh on the horse's back and gives him a good reason not to stand still. Put your right foot in the stirrup and your right hand on the reins. Your horse should stand still and wait for your instruction. Take a deep relaxing breath—you are now ready to ride!

TROUBLESHOOTING

One thing to be aware of is the position of your left foot as you mount. Depending on the location of the stirrup against the horse, you may need to point your toe underneath the horse's belly or put your foot alongside the horse's arm or foreleg. Either one of these positions will keep you from poking the horse in the elbow, which would cause discomfort and make him less likely to stand quietly. A short rider would need to point the foot forward, parallel to the horse's body. A taller rider whose stirrups hang below the horse's girth could point the toe underneath the horse instead.

Make sure to avoid pulling on the horse's mane. You should hold just enough to stay secure during the mount. If you are an athletic person and don't need to hold the mane, simply balance your left hand over the horse's neck just in front of the saddle, but be careful to not pull on the horse's mouth with the reins. Some horses are very sensitive and could get aggravated if the mane is pulled. A heavier rider could unbalance a horse by pulling on the mane and could cause the horse to step on or bump the rider as he is trying to mount. If you find yourself tending





to pull too much on the horse's mane or the saddle, your best solution would be to use a mounting block.

If your horse tries to move when you mount, keeping the left rein tighter will cause the horse to turn around you. Most horses will try a few steps, find themselves in a tight turn, and then stop. If you are in the middle of the mount and balanced over the stirrup, you should be able to wait until your horse stops his feet and then finish your mount. Keep holding the left rein tighter until you are securely seated in the saddle and have both hands on the reins. Never use a right hand turn when mounting from the left, as this pushes you away from the horse's body, thereby causing you to lose balance and control.

If your saddle slides, there are a few things you could try. Make sure before you mount that your right hip is close to the horse so that you can push straight up and can balance over the top of the saddle. If you stand farther away from the horse, you won't have the power to get up smoothly and you'll pull the saddle sideways. You'll also have to bounce off your right foot several times, which creates the possibility of a misstep. You may need to use a breastcollar to keep your saddle in place, especially if you have a horse with low or round withers. You should also check your girth to make sure it isn't too stretchy, especially if you have one with elastic ends that may have worn out. Some saddle pads may be slicker than others, so experiment with different pads to find one that has more grip. Finally, make sure you don't put a coat conditioner or shining agent on your horse before riding, as these will make any saddle or pad slip on your horse's back. Using a mounting block will also put you in a better position to step onto your horse without moving the saddle.

When it's time to dismount, you essentially reverse the mounting process. We suggest you "wiggle" the saddle first, as this becomes a sign to the horse that the rider is going to dismount and allows the horse time to square its feet for balance. To dismount, put your reins in your left hand (taking a little hold of the left rein if necessary, for the same reason you did at mounting) with your left hand on the pommel or mane and your right hand on the pommel. Remove your right foot from the stirrup. Make sure your left foot is as far back in the stirrup as possible so that it won't get caught if your horse tries to move or jump. Stand up in the left stirrup, with weight on your right hand, and swing the right leg over your horse; again, keep your leg straight and make sure not to bump the horse's hip or rump. Pause for a moment, and if all is safe, step down. **An alternative dismount:** after you swing your right leg over the horse and are standing in the left stirrup, you can lay your upper body over the saddle (you'll have to move your right hand to the cantle), remove your left foot from the stirrup, and slide down, landing on both feet. This last technique is better if you have a very tall horse or otherwise can't step down, or if you feel safer removing both feet from the stirrups to avoid the chance of getting hung up. After you dismount, you can loosen the girth slightly to take the saddle pressure off the horse's back until you're ready to untack.

Mounting is literally the first step to riding and sets the tone for a good experience with your horse. Dismounting hopefully is the end of a good ride. If you start and stop with calmness and control, you have set the stage for your horse to be calm and controlled throughout. The way you leave your horse after a ride is the way he will come out the next time. We hope that these tips will be helpful to you. Be safe in all your riding.