

# Holding on with Upper Legs

Richard D. Alexander

©2002 Richard D. Alexander

Chapter 13 in *Teaching Yourself to Train Your Horse* is about safety with horses while riding. In it is a section (pp. 178-180) on learning how to stay in the saddle. In this section I describe what I do that I think enables me to stay in the saddle under trying or dangerous circumstances. The three things I do are (1) sit and stay deep in the saddle (all the time), (2) use my upper legs, including the knees, to grip the horse (when in danger of going off), and (3) keep significant weight on my feet in the stirrups (all the time). I am fairly sure that no one would ever quarrel with the first and third of these items. I am equally sure that some people would argue with the second. No one has said anything to me about it, but some things I have heard and read since writing *TYTYH* have caused me to wish I had explained this item a bit better in the book.

First, I would point out to the reader that I am here writing about how to stay in the saddle as a part of safety not as a system for, say, performing in a superior fashion in a dressage test. Second, I did not intend that the reader would think I meant that the upper legs should always be clamped tightly on the horse. Anyone who looks at my riding positions in the book's various illustrations will know that I do not ride that way. I don't clamp my upper legs when I am riding in any kind of safe or sedate arena situation. I clamp my upper legs on a horse when I believe it is going to use a significant athletic ability at any moment to leap in some kind of unexpected way or direction. This is the kind of thing that happens when one is riding an extremely enthusiastic and energy-filled athletic horse on a trail where a deer or other large mammal might suddenly leap up right in front of the horse, or sometimes when riding a green horse in almost any strange situation. Even then I don't ride with my legs clamped on the horse. As said in the book, I have educated myself to be able to adopt this action in a rapid and reflex-like way the instant anything that might unseat me occurs. And I relax out of it the moment things return to a semblance of normality. I firmly believe that this practice, this ability, has kept me in the saddle in many trying situations.

Some clinicians seem to be telling their audiences never to clamp their upper legs while riding, saying that it lifts the rider from the saddle in a harmful fashion. I think, somewhat differently, that everyone, including those same clinicians, uses some pressure of the upper legs against the saddle to stay with a horse that is doing something unusual. Surely it is only a matter of how much pressure is used in what situations. A jockey uses pressure with his lower legs to hang on, because the short stirrups enable him to, and they also limit or define his use of the upper legs for the same purpose. But jockeys have the advantage of a third controller of balance and position: the reins. As with English riders in general, jockeys ride with snaffle bits and tend to keep (and use) significant pressure on the reins. Similarly, the bronc rider in a rodeo obviously does not use strong and steady pressure with the upper legs to hold on. He uses balance. But, like the jockey and the dressage rider, the bronc rider also has a third balancer in his hands as well as those in his legs and seat. He can pull as hard as he wishes on that rope. Anyone riding a ranch, or trail horse is likely to be riding with a more severe bit and a loose rein. The horse so ridden will be used to both things and in any situation expect the soft touch of a neck rein rather than a hard pull on the reins. The rider of a cutting horse nowadays cannot legally rein his horse. But he can use a hand on the saddle horn for the purpose I am describing.

The western rider, and his horse, had better not think about depending on rein pressure to keep himself in the saddle. Unfortunately, many riders do, and probably nearly all of us do it now and then even if we try our best not to. How do we handle this situation? Maybe in 99% of our riding situations we'll be just fine, upright with our seats deep in the saddle and significant weight on the stirrups with our heels down. What about the rest of the time the times when we are most likely to become detached, fly through the air, and possibly suffer serious, disabling injuries? I use my upper legs to control my position, whether the horse undertakes a sudden change of direction, or leaps sideways. They keep me in the middle of the horse. And I relax them as soon as the dangerous episode is finished.

That last sentence is the one I left out of the section in TYTYH on how to stay in the saddle under trying circumstances. I can only say, as I did there, that this way of operating works for me, given the kind of tack I use, the way my particular body works, the kinds of things I do not wish to do to my horses' mouths, and the fact that I mostly ride young and green horses, often in novel and potentially frightening situations.