

## 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 then 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, and the question, Is there a reason to change it? The answer is yes, several good reasons. Mounting builds one-sided muscles in people, as you’ve noticed if you ever 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, there is a pull on his spine when the rider’s weight hangs off the side.

These one-sided stresses are an orthopedic hazard for people and horses alike. They also interfere with the goal of having horse and rider even and balanced. Fortunately, there are ways to reduce these stresses for both of us.

1. Use a mounting block or its informal equivalent such as a stool. This is not a “sissy” option; it shows due consideration for your horse, and is often used by professional riders. An excellent (trail) rider I know keeps a tree stump in her side yard, replacing it as needed with a new one. To remount 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 for guests. A 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.

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 maneuver. It degrades into a comedy routine only 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. 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 also an asset for trail and cross-country riders who might need to remount in awkward situations. 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 Bronzz by surprise and he lost his balance. As he staggered to the right, I lost my balance and hit a gate. Bronzz spooked, shot forward, and hit the end of the reins (ouch). With a new appreciation for how much a horse must brace himself, I now weight my stirrup and wait till I feel the horse adjust his balance before proceeding.

4. However you mount, think of your horse's comfort as well as your own safety. Hold *mane* with your left hand. If both hands hold the saddle, there is more pull on the horse's spine and more danger of the saddle slipping. When jumping up, throw your weight *over* the horse's back and lean on your hands while swinging your right leg over, to avoid hanging off the horse's side. Finally, sit down *gently*, as if sitting on eggs.

Whatever method you choose, the horse should stand still until *asked* to move off, and not amuse himself by pivoting away just as you step onto the mounting block or put your foot in the stirrup. Dramatic though it may look to scramble onto a moving horse, it's not necessary or safe. Many horses have simply never been taught to stand for mounting. With patience and clear, consistent expectations, they can learn. A special treat offered from the saddle *after* the horse has stood still for mounting persuades most horses to plant their feet until the treat is served.

It doesn't matter which side we mount from or what technique we use as long as we are thoughtful of the horse in the process. 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 at home.