

why do we love to ride?

We ride because we love horses. For centuries there has been a special bond between people and horses and the sense of harmony with another creature that we sometimes experience while riding is a deeply satisfying feeling.

We ride because we love the challenge of mastering a complex skill. Riding looks so natural, but it is very difficult to do well and we are constantly striving to improve our abilities in the saddle.

And we ride because it is such an exhilarating and exciting thing to do.

We all recognise highly skilled riding when we see it. There is nothing as inspiring as watching a great rider smoothly taking a huge jump or performing a near-perfect dressage test. Excellent riding seems like an effortless combination of beauty and balance and excellent riders have a gift for bringing the horse to them. They have complete control over every action and the horse responds perfectly to their directions. It all looks so natural. Horse and rider work seamlessly together as a single entity and that is the essence of good riding.

Meanwhile, back at home most of us are only too aware that we are a long way off being outstanding riders. We find that improvements are very hard won, despite our efforts. Maybe your legs and feet don't cooperate while you're on the horse. Or you feel that you never have him in the right shape, no matter what you try. Or you're always too stiff in the sitting trot. Or your shoulders and arms are always tense. Or ... If you're a rider, you know your own shortcomings. It's frustrating to keep on trying to improve without fully understanding what you are doing wrong. What you're trying to do is to finally unlock the secret of easy, natural, graceful riding.



riding tall

The single element that unites all the various horse riding techniques is good posture. Put simply: good posture is the secret of good riding.

Instructors emphasise that to ride well means having an independent seat and effective leg aids with subtle rein aids and all this relies on a strong, stable centre. On the other hand, most inefficient riding styles can be attributed to poor posture. If you're struggling to improve your riding efficiency, the chances are you need to improve your posture.

This is not as straightforward as it may at first appear. There is more to good posture than pulling your tummy in or your shoulders down. It's about:

- identifying your postural type
- becoming aware of ingrained motor patterns
- bringing about permanent changes in your body.

Most of all it's about changing the way you do things off the horse before you can apply them while you're on the horse.

And it's about assuming responsibility for your body and the way it moves and responds, rather than expecting your riding instructor to fix you.



It's up to you

Taking responsibility for your posture and movement habits entails making a serious commitment to change ingrained patterns. These patterns feel intuitively right to you now, but only because you have been doing them for a very long time. New movement patterns will feel strange and won't become habit easily because your body will want to return to what is familiar, even when you know it's not good for you. The benefits of persisting in trying to change are worth the effort as you'll feel, look and ride taller. You'll also help to counteract the effects gravity has on the body as we age.

Riding from the Inside Out is a complete guide to posture for riders. It provides a series of riding-specific exercises and posture cues developed by an innovative physiotherapist that will retrain your body. It will also help you to think about your riding in a whole new way, one that is guaranteed to make you the better, more natural rider you want to be. All you need is about 20 minutes a day and some persistence and belief in your body's ability to change and you will discover new levels of mastery in your riding.

You will learn to love riding even more.

Lisa's story

I am a fitness professional. I have a master's degree in exercise science and have worked in the fitness industry for 20 years. I have taught group fitness classes, worked as a personal trainer, presented workshops at international conventions and I am a trainer of trainers. I've also been a keen athlete, competing in triathlons and marathons. Even after having four children, my body has stayed trimmed, toned and strong.



So, when I took up dressage riding five years ago I assumed that my substantial exercise history would allow me to become a pretty good rider in no time flat. I soon realised that all the strength and fitness in the world were not what I needed to be effective on the horse. I just couldn't get it and I didn't know what I was doing wrong. It was very frustrating. After all, I was motivated, fit, committed, analytical and knowledgeable—how hard could this be? Little did I realise that the answer lay in thinking about my body in a way that was completely outside my experience until then.

I was fortunate to find the brilliant dressage coach Larissa Chadwick and we continue to train two or three times a week. Over those early months we carefully unpicked what was happening in my body. Session after session, she would point out how tense I was and instruct me to relax. Intellectually I knew what I had to do, but the harder I tried the more tense I became. I couldn't let go of the tension in my limbs and 'just relax'. I worked hard at producing a quality of softness in my riding, although it became increasingly clear that the softness I was looking for is the product of intuition and skill rather than strength and determination. My fitness background was helping to an extent, but there was a still a piece missing.



I turned for advice to my friend Anna-Louise Bouvier, the most out-of-the-square physiotherapist you can imagine. Her gift is for improving posture and developing sport-specific exercises to either stretch or strengthen different body parts, depending upon the body's habitual responses and the skill or movement required. She didn't know much about riding but was still able to provide startling insights into the problems I was experiencing. My essential difficulties lay not in what I was doing on the horse but in my posture. I was astounded as I took it for granted that, as a fitness person, I had great posture.

So, the three heads combined—the coach, Larissa, with her skill and knowledge of riding technique, the student, me, with my determination to improve and the physiotherapist, Anna-Louise, with her specialised analysis of muscle and movement. Between us we devised a revolutionary approach to enhance riding technique.

I have learned many things about my body along the way and I am anxious to share what I have learned with other struggling, frustrated, eager students. Take it from me. While my journey to become a better rider is still ongoing, I can honestly say that I have improved enormously—proof of just how effective *Riding from the Inside Out* can be.

Larissa's story

Larissa Chadwick has achieved the dream shared by thousands of young riders around the country—taking a horse from Pony Club to Grand Prix dressage.

Larissa started riding at the age of four and became a member of the Cobbitty Pony Club when she was six. When she was 10, her mother, Patricia, bought a three-year-old Morgan horse, Brandy (Aura Dell Alexander). They were to form a lasting partnership. 'From the first moment Brandy and I rode together I have never once felt scared or unsure. We clicked from the start and I have always felt that there was nothing we couldn't do,' she says.

By the time she was 12, Larissa had chosen dressage as her preferred riding discipline and Patricia began looking for the right trainer to assist her development. They decided upon Vickie Robertson, who went on to work with Larissa and Brandy for over 10 years.

Still at the age of 12, Larissa won the Pony Club NSW State Dressage Championships in the under-13 age group. By the time she was 14, she had entered her first official Dressage Council (DC) competition. By 15 she was riding Prix St George level and she competed at Grand Prix when she was 22. For the last seven years of their career (up until 2000), she and Brandy were among the top 12 dressage riders in the country. She is now a professional rider and trainer who teaches riding full-time while training and competing horses for various clients. She has also spent time overseas, improving her skills and broadening her knowledge of and experience in the dressage world.



Larissa is a natural born talent—an artist on the horse. She has the ability to feel what is happening in the horse's body and to bring out the best in each one she rides. She is in that top 5% of riders who naturally have a stable core. Years of correct training have built upon and refined her natural talent. The result is a rider who is effective, balanced, strong and soft, all at the same time. When one of Australia's leading teachers of the Alexander Technique, Mary Cerny, watched Larissa ride, she commented, 'She has a complete connection between the top of her head and the soles of her feet.'

Larissa also has the rare ability to see what is happening in the bodies of her students as they ride. She believes in teaching her students how to use themselves in a balanced way, thereby enabling the horse to balance itself better.

Larissa says

So much of what I see when teaching my students is a mirroring of the movement habits of the rider in the movement patterns of the horse. If a person is really stiff, the horse tends to be stiff. If a person is quite sloppy or slumps, the horse ends up moving in a similar way.



When I am riding, I am always searching for a balance between softness in my body with stability and correctness in my position. I then wait and encourage the horse to mould his body around my correct position. I see many students trying to lean, push, pull, collapse and move excessively and then expect their horse to perform perfect school shapes. By looking at the simplest lines—shoulder-hip-heel; elbow-wrist-bit; shoulders level; hips level—I can see how my students need to improve. I encourage them to think of how much their body position and stillness can influence the horse. This is not as easy as it sounds, because without the correct riding posture it's really difficult to get a horse truly forward with all the right elements in place—not to mention with beauty as well.

I have been greatly influenced by my experiences overseas, especially with Wolfram Wittig in Germany. He is an incredibly balanced rider who never seems to waiver in his postural integrity.

I returned home with such a clear image of how German trainers ride, how they sit and what they ask of their horses and I want my students to have a small glimpse of the balance and forward I was able to feel on Wittig's horses.

Riding on magnificent horses from one of the world's best stables is out of reach for most riders, but the skill to ride with strength and integrity is something that is available to anyone who wants to try. We have a long way to go in Australia towards improving our riding positions, but the work I have done with Lisa and Anna-Louise contributes to helping us all achieve balance with beauty. It is worth pointing out that the exercises for us humans in this book often reflect the exercises I get the horses to do under saddle. The suppling, correct positioning and degree to which I bend or straighten is all like doing active physiotherapy for the horse.

If you are trying to improve your own riding, my words of encouragement are:

- trust your body
- work on getting honest feedback on what you can improve
- do the exercises off the horse
- when you get in the saddle, believe that if your position is correct it will encourage your horse to be balanced and move more correctly.