



# SIT FOR SUCCESS

Guiding your horse starts by properly positioning your body. Learn how mastering your posture in the saddle can take your reining skills to the next level, with NRHA Professional Abby Mixon.

By *Abby Mixon*, With *Kaycie Timm*  
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**W**hen you practice, you always ensure that your horse has his maneuvers down pat, but it's important to be sure you're setting him up for success before you start schooling. The key to effectively guiding your horse through any maneuver or pattern starts with your body position. Every piece of your body—from your seat and back to your hands and eyes—impacts your communication with your horse. Here, I'll give you my tips to improve your body position as you guide your horse through his maneuvers. →

How aware are you of your body position when you show? It can make a big difference. For example, centering your bodyweight and positioning your hand right in front of your saddle horn before you ask your horse to spin sets your horse up for success.





Before you ask your horse to lope, check yourself: relax your body, sit deep in the saddle, and center your weight on your seat bones.



Keep your elbow straight, your hand forward, and your eyes up all the way around the pen. This body position guides your horse through a smooth circle.

**Before You Go**

It sounds simple, but check your stirrup length at the start of every ride. You don't want to reach for your stirrups (too long), but you shouldn't feel like a jockey (too short), either. Find a comfortable spot where your knees are slightly bent and your heels are down. Scoot forward and sit down deep in the saddle. You don't need to sit too straight, just upright and relaxed. Keep a straighter back—not arched—but don't allow yourself to tense up. Try to keep a relaxed feel throughout your body, especially in your back and seat.

Position yourself on your seat bones with your weight centered in the saddle. The farther back you're sitting, the better you can execute your maneuvers. Find a comfortable spot on your seat bones, place your feet a little bit ahead of you, and your weight will fall where it needs to for you and your horse to stay balanced.

**Guide With Your Hands**

When you lope off, relax your body and put your hand forward. If you get too tight or pick up your hand, your horse won't be able to give his all. Think of your hand as a guide instead of using it to force your horse around the pen. Follow your hand with your eyes by looking in the direction you want to go. Keeping your eyes up is especially helpful when you're circling. It allows you to ride ahead of your horse. Your eyes tell your body what to do, and your body tells your horse where to go. If you start looking down at your horse, you can't effectively communicate to him where you want him to be.

Once you ask your horse to move, don't move your hand back to tighten your reins. You might hold onto your horse because you're worried about making mistakes. Instead, keep your elbow straight, put your hand forward, and point your hand where you want to go. Your horse will respond better this way because you're showing him where to go instead of riding with the brake on. If your horse isn't sure what you want, he might start making decisions on his own, which is never good. Tell your horse where to go so you're in control, not the other way around.

**Take a Spin**

Before you ask your horse to spin, be sure your body is centered, relaxed, and still. If you move your body or hands a lot before you turn, that can give your horse

false cues. Picking up your hand like you're going to set your horse's face, but never actually following through, will confuse your horse. When you're ready to ask your horse to turn, he won't be sure if you actually want him to spin. Instead, sit still, with your hand motionless and centered above his withers. Keep your hand in front of your saddle horn—not too low, but not up in the air. That way, your reins stay loose, but you can still balance your horse if you need to help him out a little bit.

Before you ask for the spin, focus your mind on which direction you want to go. For a right spin, think about turning to the right and let your body give the first cue, traveling down to your hand. Follow up with pressure from your left leg and use vocal cues, depending on how your horse was trained. If your horse is a little fidgety and you need to settle him, pick up your rein hand, hold it steady for a second, take a breath, and then ask for your spin.

Once you start your spin, sit back with your weight centered, but don't exaggerate your body position. Throughout the turn, look between your horse's ears and keep track of your location with your peripheral vision. Don't look too far ahead, or your weight might shift and confuse your horse. The only time to look past your horse's position is in last half of your last turn when you need to find your shutoff spot. When you're about halfway through your third spin, start turning your head and find that marker. Lock your eyes on it, and when you get to that point, say "whoa," pick up your hand, and take your legs off. Remember to be smooth and slow with your hand. If you're too quick, your horse might throw his head up in the air. Keep all your movements slow and smooth.

**Sit Your Stops**

When you're running down the pen to stop, have yourself in stopping position. That means sitting deep in the saddle, with your weight shifted back and your eyes up. As you come around the end, sit down deeper in the saddle, lean back, and keep your leg forward toward the cinch. Stay in that position through the stop and into the rollback.

Find a spot to look at on the end wall before turning the corner into your rundown. As you come around the end, look for a clean spot of ground where there's fresh dirt. From there, look down to the fence at a fixed point, and keep your eyes it. Sit back and let your horse carry you down the pen toward that spot. That way, when you get to the stop, you're already where you need to be to say



Maintain consistent hand position and look straight between your horse's ears while he moves around his spin.



Improving your body position helps you more effectively guide your horse through his maneuvers and keeps you from giving him mixed signals in the pen.





Sit deep in the saddle with your weight shifted back and your eyes up all the way through your rundown and into your stop.



Setting your body for the stop before you reach the end of the pen will help you maintain proper position after you say, 'whoa.'

"whoa." Maintaining that stop position with your body can help you keep from throwing yourself back when you ask for the stop. It can also prevent you from sitting too far forward while you're pushing your horse down the pen. As your horse comes to the bottom of his stop, give him the time he needs to fully finish his stop and stand back up. Then be slow with your hand as you enter your rollback. Take your hand back toward your pocket and then point it down the pen to guide your horse through his rollback, showing your horse where to go back down the pen. ❖



**Abby Mixon** is an NRHA Professional based at Winfield Farms in Marietta, Oklahoma. As the daughter of NRHA Professional Don Boyd, Mixon grew up in the reining industry and began showing at an early age. With NRHA LTE of more than \$371,478, Mixon achieved success as a youth and non pro rider before transitioning to become an NRHA Professional in 2005. Since then, she's competed in and been a finalist at major events including the NRHA Futurity and Derby.

## GET CENTERED

Proper body position can also help you find the center marker, which is always important. While you're practicing, it helps to break up the circle into four quarters: center, the first quarter point by the wall, the half point by the end wall, and the three-quarter point on the opposite wall from the quarter. Keep your hand forward and check your body position at each point, then aim for the next spot. When you're in the center, look to your quarter point and ride all the way to it. When you get to that spot, find the half point and aim your eyes and body there. Then, do the same from the three-quarter point back to the center. If you keep your eyes on those four points, you'll start to develop a rounder circle. Focusing on each point keeps you looking ahead at where you need to go.