

Mounting Blocks to Mounting

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I have heard it said that it's easier to learn how to sit a horse than it is to properly get on one. I can't deny it. My first horse, Brown Jug, was a neighbor's gift. He was an old thoroughbred campaigner from England turf courses that stood 16.3 hands and arrived without a saddle.

My first mounting block was a homemade picnic table. When I finally located a saddle, the stirrups--when properly adjusted--hung down only as far as my temples. The rest was up to me, the contortionist. Both hands gripped the stirrup leather just above the iron, high kick with the left foot into the iron and balance on the other tiptoe. With a grunt, I scrambled and clawed like mad for mane and leather. I swung back and forth with my head below my left knee as my right leg knocked him in the guts, right toe hooked under the stifle ... the horse was a saint.

Inserting one's foot into a stirrup that hangs above one's ear day-after-day inspires small people to seek other means of getting horseback. The picnic table soon fell apart and by the age of ten I greatly improved the odds of getting on safely by swinging up Indian-style. That wonderful old horse would drop his head to put a handful of mane in my reach. I'd bounce off my left foot and land in the center of his back, and we were ready to rock 'n roll.

Other methods I tried--*and don't recommend*--included lowering myself onto Brown Jug's back from a maple tree and taking flying leaps out of the hay mow. It wasn't long until his well-timed steps to the side, added to the impact on his high withers when I did make it on board, made a leg-up from the neighbor kids appear more reasonable. This was my least favorite method because *I could never be 100% sure what the horse or human was going to do until they did it*. That's still true.

If you haven't prepared your horse for mounting safely (*Translation: If he's allowed to shuffle around and walk off while you get on, isn't sacked out, and can't change eyes*), the consequences can be very serious. If you aren't sure how well prepared your horse is, find someone who can tell you and show you. Before you scout out the closest stump or boulder, climb the nearest fence or recruit a friend to boost you up, *be sure to learn how to prepare and position the horse* so that he can stand comfortably while you get on.

10 Mounting Don'ts

1. Don't face the front of the horse from a position behind the cinch unless absolutely necessary. In this position, you are blind to the action if the horse is of a mind to kick you with a hind foot. A horse can reach your head with a hind foot even if you're standing in front of the shoulder. You are also behind the action when you mount behind the cinch. From this point it is more difficult to stop the horse's feet if he walks off or bucks as you get on.
2. Don't haul yourself into the saddle using your reins for balance and support. Take the reins and mane together in one hand, hold onto the front of the saddle with the other.
3. Don't haul yourself up with both hands gripping onto the saddle--your balance will be severely compromised. If your cinch is loose, you'll pull the saddle over on yourself and could slip underneath the horse as the saddle turns under the horse's belly. If the horse moves off, your options are limited because your hands will be too far back on the reins to have any timely effect on his feet. There is no effective way to get a manehold with your hands behind the horn.
4. Don't grab the back of the saddle when you're pulling yourself up alongside the horse prior to swinging your leg over. Here's why: 1) Your base of support for balancing and centering your weight in both hands prior to swinging a leg over will be too wide and you will be forced to displace too much weight in the stirrup on the mounting side, and 2) you'll have to release your hold on the back of the saddle in order to swing your leg across his back. This will leave you with a single hand to balance and support your own weight, as well as control the direction and speed of your horse's feet. If the situation deteriorates as you shift your weight across the horse's back, both hands need to be in a position where you can provide immediate direction and support to the horse. Then he can regain his confidence and turn his attention towards you.
5. Don't kick him in the belly when you pull yourself up. Whether you mean it or not, it says, "Move your feet."
6. Don't crash onto the back. When you land on your backside in the saddle, pretend that it is your back.
7. Don't ask someone to give you a leg up unless you are sure they know how to safely help you. Don't put your foot in the booster-upper's hand even if they tell you to. This forces your body away from the horse and will probably result in losing your balance and your confidence before you rudely snatch the horse in the face as you bail. Several episodes like this and your horse may also lose his balance and confidence.
8. Don't use the stirrup as a stepladder when you are dismounting. Get both feet free of the stirrups before you land.
9. Don't get on if you're afraid. Always think safety first and get qualified help.

10. Don't think mounting correctly is a short-time deal. Practice every time you get on any horse.

10 Mounting Dos

1. Do learn how to prepare and position your horse to stand still while you get on and to wait until you present him with a feel that means you intend him to move his feet. If you don't set any time limits for this, it may come together for you and your horse more quickly.
2. Do ask a capable person to hold your horse while you experiment with the best way to get on. This is rarely practiced enough.
3. Do practice raising and lowering your stirrups on both sides of the horse while you are on the ground and in the saddle with someone holding the horse. There is an old rule about only leading, mounting and dismounting your horse from the left side. It is just that: an old rule. This was developed by predominantly right-handed humans for their own convenience. It probably contributes to the "one-sidedness" in many horses.
4. Do learn to recognize the difference between a stirrup that is adjusted for mounting a tall horse and one that is well-adjusted for riding.
5. Do practice--from the ground--adjusting your reins in preparation for mounting on both sides. Do practice the adjustment you will need to keep control of the feet when you are halfway up and when you dismount. This is appropriate practice for beginning riders of all ages.
6. Do face the back of the horse when you prepare to mount unless some physical limitation requires that you mount facing the front. It is a harder, but safer, way to mount. Here's why: When you face the back of the horse with your hip at, or ahead of, the horse's shoulder, you are in a better position to see what is shaping up. Therefore, you are ahead of the action. Example: If you choose to mount from the left side and your horse walks away as your right foot leaves the ground, you are better positioned to bring his head around to hold it with your left hand until his feet stop. With the western horn or english pommel in your right hand you'll be able to pull yourself up to a point where you can straighten your left knee and both elbows. This positions you to center your weight in your hands while both legs remain--for as long as is necessary--on the same side of the horse. It is very important to wait until the horse's feet have stopped moving before swinging your right leg over his back.
7. Do take care not to drag your leg or boot across his rump and do land your butt lightly on his back after you've made contact with the right side of his body with the inside of your right leg. As your right leg comes in against him, transfer your weight from your hands and arms to your seat. The opposite applies when mounting from the right.
8. Do practice with your full weight centered over the withers in your hands and arms--not hanging off to one side in the stirrup--kicking your toes out of the stirrup and

dropping back to the ground instead of getting on. In some cases, this will be the wiser choice.

9. Do remember when someone is giving you a leg-up to 1) bend the knee so that your shin is at a right angle to the ground, 2) be sure your helper's hands are not propelling the boost from directly under your kneecap, not pushing from a place on your thigh or ankle, 3) keep your hip joint locked to ensure a boost straight up with your shoulder, hip and knee in alignment (don't fold up), 4) spring off your other leg in sync with their boost and realign your weight as quickly and completely as possible onto both hands, directly over the horse's withers (this assists your helper from lifting your dead weight), and 5) swing your leg across the horse's back only if the following conditions are met: The horse's feet are still, your weight is over the horse's withers in your straight arms, and your crotch has cleared the horse's back and you are looking through the horse's ears with your shoulders tipped forward toward the front of the horse. Otherwise, you will fall across his body with your torso and plow your knee or foot into his spine or loin. Who knows what might happen then!
10. Do have your horse stand still once you have mounted. Do this every time. Stand until your horse is relaxed and then stand a little longer. This will keep him from wanting to walk off.



Grab a manehold and, to the extent possible, bear down on the neck with your hand instead of hauling yourself up by the mane. Reach for the stirrup with your other hand and pull it toward your foot.

Reach for the horn with your right hand and pull yourself up as you push off with your right foot. Control the position of your left foot to keep your toe out of his ribs. Transfer your weight from the ground into your arms.

