

NO-STIRRUP WORK

Benefits & Progressive Exercise Guide

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WHY NO-STIRRUP WORK TRANSFORMS YOUR RIDING

Physical Benefits

Core Strength & Stability

No-stirrup work is arguably the most effective exercise for developing core strength in riders. Without stirrups, your abdominal muscles, obliques, and lower back must engage continuously to maintain balance and absorb the horse's movement. This constant engagement builds the deep stabilising muscles that allow you to move independently from your horse whilst maintaining a quiet, effective seat. Over time, this translates to better posture both in and out of the saddle, reduced back pain, and the ability to ride through more challenging movements without losing your position.

Independent Seat Development

The independent seat - where your seat bones, legs, and hands can all act separately without affecting each other - is the hallmark of an advanced rider. No-stirrup work forces you to find balance through your seat rather than bracing against the stirrups. This teaches your body to follow the horse's motion fluidly, allowing your hips to open and close with each stride. As your seat becomes more independent, you'll notice improvements in your ability to apply aids precisely, maintain consistent contact, and stay with your horse over jumps or through lateral movements.

Leg Position & Security

Without stirrups to rest in, your legs naturally lengthen and your heels seek the lowest point through gravity alone. This develops a truly correct leg position - not one forced by gripping with your knees or ankles. Your inner thigh and calf muscles strengthen significantly, creating a 'wraparound' leg that hugs the horse's barrel without gripping. The result is a leg that can apply aids subtly and independently whilst providing a stable base for your upper body.

Hip Flexibility & Suppleness

Stiff hips are one of the most common riding challenges, preventing riders from following the horse's motion and causing them to bounce in the saddle. No-stirrup work forces your hip joints to open, close, and rotate with each stride of the horse. This constant movement increases hip mobility, loosens tight hip flexors, and teaches your pelvis to tilt and follow naturally. Over weeks of practice, you'll notice increased range of motion, reduced stiffness, and the ability to sit deeper and more comfortably, especially at the trot and canter.

Balance & Proprioception

Proprioception - your body's awareness of where it is in space - is crucial for riding. Without stirrups, your body must constantly make micro-adjustments to maintain balance, dramatically improving your proprioceptive

abilities. You become more aware of subtle weight shifts, asymmetries in your position, and how your movements affect the horse. This heightened body awareness carries over into all aspects of riding, helping you make corrections before losing balance and respond more quickly to the horse's movements.

Muscle Memory & Automaticity

Repetition without stirrups trains your muscle memory to default to a correct, balanced position. Instead of thinking about where your leg should be or how deep your seat should sit, these positions become automatic. This frees up your mental bandwidth to focus on your horse, the quality of the paces, and more advanced riding concepts rather than constantly managing your position.

Mental & Emotional Benefits

Confidence Building

Successfully completing no-stirrup work builds tremendous confidence. Each ride without stirrups proves to yourself that you can maintain balance and control without relying on external support. This confidence translates to feeling more secure in unexpected situations - if your horse spooks, if you lose a stirrup over a jump, or when riding young or unpredictable horses. Many riders report feeling like 'a proper rider' after mastering no-stirrup work.

Focus & Concentration

No-stirrup work demands your complete attention. You can't zone out or ride on autopilot when every stride requires active balance. This develops mental discipline and the ability to maintain focus throughout your entire ride. Over time, this heightened concentration becomes habitual, improving the quality of all your riding sessions.

Problem-Solving Skills

Without stirrups, you must work out how to maintain balance, apply aids, and manage your horse using different strategies. This develops your problem-solving abilities and adaptability as a rider. You learn to think creatively about position, aids, and balance, skills that serve you well when facing any riding challenge.

Overcoming Fear & Discomfort

Let's be honest - no-stirrup work is uncomfortable at first, and for some riders, it's scary. Pushing through this discomfort and fear builds mental toughness and resilience. You learn that temporary discomfort leads to long-term improvement, a valuable lesson that extends beyond riding into other areas of life.

Performance Benefits

Improved Communication with Your Horse

With a more independent seat and refined balance, your aids become clearer and more subtle. Your horse no longer has to interpret confusing signals caused by balance issues or compensatory gripping. The result is a more responsive, willing partner who understands your requests the first time.

Enhanced Feel & Timing

No-stirrup work makes you acutely aware of your horse's rhythm, balance, and movement. You can feel which hind leg is pushing, when the horse is about to change pace, or if they're losing impulsion. This enhanced feel allows you to time your aids perfectly - asking for a canter depart at exactly the right moment or applying a half-halt precisely when needed.

Better Jumping Position

For jumping riders, no-stirrup work is invaluable. It develops the leg strength and balance needed to maintain a secure lower leg over fences, prevents you from getting 'left behind' or 'jumping ahead', and teaches your seat to follow the horse's bascule naturally. Many top jumping trainers require extensive no-stirrup work precisely because of these benefits.

Preparation for Higher-Level Riding

Whether your goals include dressage, eventing, showing, or any other discipline, no-stirrup work lays the foundation for advanced movements. Sitting the trot, riding collected paces, executing tempi changes, or holding a light seat over a course of jumps all require the skills developed through no-stirrup work.

Long-Term Health Benefits

Injury Prevention

Riders with strong cores, balanced positions, and independent seats are far less likely to suffer riding-related injuries. You're better able to absorb sudden movements, less likely to fall, and when you do fall, more likely to fall safely. The muscle strength developed through no-stirrup work also protects your joints from the repetitive impact of riding.

Longevity in the Saddle

Riders who develop good habits and strong foundational skills through exercises like no-stirrup work can continue riding comfortably into their later years. The strength, balance, and body awareness you build now will serve you for decades to come.

Cross-Training Benefits

The core strength, balance, and body awareness developed through no-stirrup work enhance your overall athleticism. Many riders notice improvements in other sports, better posture in daily life, and reduced back pain from sitting at desks or in cars.

CHOOSE YOUR METHOD: DROP ONE STIRRUP OR BOTH

You decide! Drop both stirrups for maximum challenge or use the one-stirrup method for a safer, gradual approach. Both methods count equally towards your 10 rides.

How To Drop One Stirrup, Gradually:

- Whilst riding at a walk, practise taking only one foot out of one stirrup (e.g., your left foot)
- Ride a few steps, then practise putting that foot back into the stirrup without disrupting your horse's walk rhythm
- Repeat with the right stirrup, alternating sides
- As you get more comfortable, cross the stirrup and leather over the pommel of your saddle to prevent it from swinging and hitting your horse's side. You can then progress to walk circles, serpentines, and transitions.
- When you're ready to trot, we recommend keeping your outside stirrup and dropping your inside stirrup for better balance and support.

Why Dropping Only One Stirrup Also Works:

- **Less compensation:** With only one stirrup dropped, you're less likely to grip or tighten elsewhere
- **Increased awareness:** The looseness required to replace your foot naturally increases awareness of both your seat and independent legs
- **Spot imbalances:** Alternating sides helps you notice any imbalances you may have
- **Long-term benefits:** Build proper leg position and reduce over-reliance on stirrups for balance

Both methods count! Whether you drop one stirrup or both, you're developing the independent seat and balance that matters. Mix and match throughout your 10 rides based on how you feel.

PROGRESSIVE NO-STIRRUP EXERCISE CHECKLIST

This checklist is optional - feel free to pick and choose exercises that suit you and skip any you don't fancy. Tick them off as you master each one. Move to the next level when you can complete the exercises in a level comfortably for at least 2-3 rides.

LEVEL 1: Foundation Exercises (Rides 1-2)

Goal: Build basic balance and confidence at the walk

- **Walking on long rein** - 5 minutes, allowing horse to stretch whilst you find your balance
- **Large circles (20m)** - 3 circles each direction, maintaining steady rhythm
- **Change of rein across diagonal** - Walk across diagonal without stirrups, 4 times
- **Halt transitions** - Walk to halt and halt to walk, 8 transitions total
- **Leg yields at walk** - 3 steps each direction, focusing on independent leg aid
- **Arm circles at walk** - 10 circles each direction to loosen upper body
- **Touch toes at walk** - Reach down to touch left toe, then right toe, 5 times each side

LEVEL 2: Walk Refinement (Rides 2-3)

Goal: Increase complexity and body awareness at walk

- **Serpentine loops** - 3-loop serpentine down long side, twice each direction
- **Walking figure-8** - Complete smooth figure-8 pattern, 3 times
- **Shoulder-in at walk** - 5 steps each side, maintaining balance without stirrups
- **Turn on forehand** - 2 complete turns each direction
- **Lengthen and shorten stride** - 5 transitions between medium and free walk
- **Walk with hands on hips** - One full circle each direction, focusing on seat bones
- **Torso twists** - 10 gentle twists each direction whilst walking
- **Two-point position at walk** - Hold for 30 seconds, 3 times

LEVEL 3: Introduction to Trot (Rides 3-4)

Goal: Begin sitting trot work with short intervals

- **Sitting trot - 1 short side** - Sit through one short side of arena, 4 times
- **Sitting trot - half circle** - 10m half circle in sitting trot, 2 times each direction
- **Trot-walk transitions** - 10 transitions, focusing on smooth seat following
- **Rising trot without stirrups** - 20 rising strides (if comfortable), focusing on thigh strength
- **Sitting trot diagonal line** - Sit the trot across diagonal, 4 times
- **Small circles at walk after trot** - 8m circle after each trot set to rebalance
- **Hip circles at sitting trot** - Make small circles with hips, 5 each direction
- **'Following' exercise** - Focus on allowing hips to move forward/back with horse's motion, 1 minute

LEVEL 4: Trot Endurance (Rides 4-5)

Goal: Build stamina and consistency at sitting trot

- **Sitting trot - full long side** - Complete one long side in sitting trot, 4 times
- **Sitting trot - half arena** - Trot half the arena without stirrups, 3 times
- **20m circle in sitting trot** - Complete 2 circles each direction

- **Trot serpentine** - 3-loop serpentine in sitting trot, 2 times
- **Extended intervals** - Sitting trot for 2 minutes straight, then walk break, repeat 3 times
- **Trot-walk-trot** - Quick transitions: trot 20 strides, walk 5 strides, repeat 5 times
- **Rising trot without stirrups** - Full long side rising, 2 times each direction
- **Sitting trot rhythm counting** - Count horse's strides out loud for 50 strides to focus on rhythm

LEVEL 5: Trot Complexity (Rides 5-6)

Goal: Add challenging movements at trot

- **15m circles in sitting trot** - 2 circles each direction, maintaining bend
- **Trot figure-8** - Complete figure-8 in sitting trot with simple changes through walk
- **Spiral in/out at trot** - From 20m to 10m and back out, sitting trot, twice each direction
- **Leg yield at trot** - 5 steps each direction in sitting trot
- **Trot lengthening** - 3-5 lengthened strides down long side, 4 times
- **Sitting trot to halt** - Direct transition from trot to halt, 6 times
- **Change of bend at trot** - Through short side, maintain sitting trot, 4 times
- **Two-point at trot** - Hold two-point without stirrups for 15 seconds, 3 times

LEVEL 6: Introduction to Canter (Rides 6-7)

Goal: Begin canter work with controlled intervals

- **Canter depart from walk** - Without stirrups, achieve clean depart, 3 times each lead
- **Canter - half circle** - 15m half circle in canter, once each direction
- **Canter - short side** - Canter through short side only, 4 times total
- **Canter-trot transitions** - 8 transitions, focusing on sitting through downward transition
- **Large circle at canter** - 20m circle, one full circle each direction
- **Canter without stirrups** - 30 seconds continuous, 2 times each lead with walk breaks
- **Walk-canter-walk** - Direct transitions skipping trot, 4 times
- **Count canter strides** - Count out loud for 30 strides to maintain focus and rhythm

LEVEL 7: Canter Development (Rides 7-8)

Goal: Build endurance and balance at canter

- **Canter - full long side** - Complete long side at canter, 3 times each direction
- **Canter half arena** - Canter halfway around arena, 2 times each lead
- **Canter 15m circles** - Smaller circle maintaining balance, twice each direction
- **Canter serpentine** - Simple canter down centre line with simple changes, 2 times
- **Extended canter intervals** - Canter for 1.5 minutes straight, walk break, repeat 3 times
- **Lengthen canter stride** - 5-7 lengthened strides down long side, 3 times each direction
- **Canter-walk-canter** - Same lead, practise sitting through transitions, 4 times
- **Two-point at canter** - Hold position for 10 seconds without stirrups, 3 times

LEVEL 8: Advanced Balance (Rides 8-9)

Goal: Refine aids and master complex patterns

- **Counter-canter** - Short side in counter-canter, 2 times each direction
- **10m circles at trot** - Small circles maintaining rhythm and balance, 3 each direction
- **Shoulder-in at trot** - Complete long side in shoulder-in without stirrups, twice each side

- **Haunches-in at walk** - 10 steps each direction, focusing on seat aids
- **Walk-canter transitions on circle** - 6 transitions alternating directions on 15m circle
- **Full arena in canter** - Complete full arena without stirrups, both directions
- **Trot-canter-trot within circle** - On 20m circle, 3 transitions maintaining path
- **Ride entire pattern** - Design and ride a dressage-style test without stirrups

LEVEL 9: Endurance Challenge (Ride 9)

Goal: Sustain no-stirrup riding for extended periods

- **20-minute continuous work** - Mix of all paces without stirrups, minimal breaks
- **Multiple 10m circles** - 5 circles at trot, 3 circles at canter, each direction
- **Extended canter work** - Canter for 3 minutes straight with walk break, repeat twice
- **Complex pattern work** - Combine lateral work, circles, and transitions in flowing pattern
- **Rising trot endurance** - Rise entire long side and short side without stirrups, twice
- **Sitting trot endurance** - Sit trot for 5 minutes with short walk breaks
- **Working without reins** - At walk and trot, complete circles with arms extended or crossed
- **Reverse pattern** - Ride previous patterns in opposite direction to challenge balance

LEVEL 10: Mastery & Integration (Ride 10)

Goal: Ride complete session as if you have stirrups

- **Full warm-up without stirrups** - 15 minutes incorporating all three paces
- **Jump position practice** - Hold two-point over ground poles or small jumps (if applicable)
- **Lead changes** - Simple or flying changes (if trained), maintaining seat security
- **Collected work** - Practise shortening frame and stride at trot and canter
- **Extended work** - Push for true medium or extended paces without losing balance
- **Lateral work combination** - Shoulder-in to haunches-in to half-pass
- **Ride 'test'** - Ride a complete dressage test or show jumping course simulation
- **Cool down without stirrups** - Complete 10-minute cool down, all on long rein
- **Self-assessment** - Reflect on improvements: position, confidence, feel, and horse's response
- **Celebration ride!** - Take a moment to acknowledge your accomplishment!

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- **Start Small:** Begin with just 5-10 minutes without stirrups and gradually increase
- **Stay Relaxed:** Tension creates more imbalance - breathe deeply and keep shoulders down
- **Use Your Core:** Engage your core muscles rather than gripping with your legs
- **Pick the Right Horse:** Start on a steady, rhythmic horse with comfortable paces
- **Don't Fight the Motion:** Allow your body to move with the horse rather than against it
- **Take Breaks:** Rest with stirrups between no-stirrup sets to prevent muscle fatigue
- **Listen to Your Body:** Some muscle soreness is normal, but sharp pain means you should stop
- **Progressive Challenge:** Don't rush - master each level before moving to the next
- **Mix Methods:** Combine one-stirrup and two-stirrup drops based on daily feel
- **Celebrate Progress:** Acknowledge every milestone, no matter how small!

Remember: Consistency matters more than intensity.

Ten rides with focused, quality no-stirrup work will transform your riding more than occasional heroic efforts.

Trust the process, and enjoy watching yourself become a stronger, more balanced rider!

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