

Tincture of Time

Learn to apply weight aids with the Pelvic Clock exercise

BY WENDY MURDOCH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY FRAN LOFTUS

THE WEIGHT AIDS ARE FUNDAMENTAL in dressage yet are misunderstood or misinterpreted by many riders. Even if your instructor tells you how to distribute your weight for canter departs, shoulder-in, haunches-in, half-pass, and other movements, you still may struggle to gain mastery over your body and to produce the desired results.

Difficulty in learning to apply the weight aids correctly generally is caused by one or more of the following:

- Your basic position is not straight and balanced, with your weight centered in the saddle and distributed evenly over both seat bones
- The timing of the weight aids is out of synch with your horse's movement
- Exaggeration of the application of the weight aids
- Where you think you are putting your weight is not where it is actually going
- You have no idea how to apply a weight aid in the first place.

Although I could go into a long discussion about each of these situations, I would rather give you one simple unmounted exercise that will help you understand how to apply the weight aids correctly. This exercise, commonly referred to as the Pelvic Clock, is an adaptation of a Feldenkrais Method® Awareness Through Movement® lesson. In its basic form, the exercise will give you more mobility in your pelvis. Greater mobility will allow you to find a balanced central seat position. From here, you will be able to make small,

accurate movements with your pelvis in order to apply accurate weight aids.

Feldenkrais Principles

Before we begin, let me give you a brief introduction to the Method from which the Pelvic Clock exercise is derived.

The Feldenkrais Method is named for its originator, Moshe Feldenkrais, DSc (1904–1984), a Russian-born physicist, judo expert, mechanical engineer, and educator. Feldenkrais drew on principles of physics, biomechanics, learning, and human development to develop a method of developing self-awareness through movement.

Practitioners believe that the Feldenkrais Method increases awareness of habitual neuromuscular patterns and rigidities and expands options for new ways of moving. Students are shown that this increased sensitivity facilitates living life more fully, efficiently, and comfortably.

Here are the major principles of the Feldenkrais Method:

- **If it hurts, do less.** If you experience any pain while attempting to do a lesson, make your movements smaller. If you think that you are already making small movements, try to make them half that size. Dressage riders must make countless minute position adjustments to influence and to remain in balance with their horses. Abrupt, rough, or gross movements can disturb the horse's balance and focus. Challenge yourself to develop the fine motor control needed to make very small movements.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

An increasing number of Feldenkrais practitioners work with dressage riders. To learn more about the Feldenkrais Method or to find a practitioner in your area, visit www.feldenkrais.com.

- **If you get tired during a lesson, stop and rest.** Give your brain and your nervous system a chance to process the feedback produced by the exercise. Our brains continue to learn when they are resting or thinking about other things—which is why we tend to “sleep on” major dilemmas and decisions.
- **Feldenkrais lessons are unlike aerobics, yoga, or any other type of physical exercise.** Although some of the movements may be similar, Feldenkrais lessons are designed to help you understand how to organize your body easily and efficiently. You may discover areas that are inactive or tight, thereby preventing you from moving in certain ways. You can then apply this new information in your riding and in your other physical activities. In other words, Feldenkrais lessons can allow you to access a greater potential for movement in all that you do.
- **Don't force the movements.** Although “no pain, no gain” is many athletes' motto, the opposite is true in the Feldenkrais Method. Forcing and “trying hard” will only inhibit your learning. This concept can be a difficult one to grasp. If you find yourself struggling at your maximum range of

- motion, then consider doing 10 percent of what you think you can do.
- **Visualize the movements instead of actually doing them.** If you find that even the smallest movements are painful or that you are unable to do certain movements, simply visualize them. Doing so actually produces a tiny amount of imperceptible physical movement. When you return to doing the movement, you might be surprised to find how much easier it is.
 - **There are no mistakes.** Many dressage riders are concerned with "getting it right." In the Feldenkrais Method, there are no "wrong" movements. Simply pay attention to your body. While you're doing a lesson, don't keep wondering about how it applies to riding, or inhibit certain movements because they seem unrelated to riding. Experiment with different possibilities. Later, you can decide which movements you choose to use while riding.
 - **Take time to explore the movements.** Going slowly is important so that you can observe the changes that occur. If you think you are already going slowly, try going twice as slowly. By going slowly in the lesson, you will discover how to make minute changes in position.

The Exercise

Now that you're acquainted with the principles behind the Feldenkrais Method, it's time to give the Pelvic Clock lesson a try.

Part 1. Start by sitting on a flat, level surface—a firm chair or a bench beside a wall is ideal—with a seat height that produces a 90-degree angle between your knees and thighs with your bare or stocking feet flat on the floor.

Begin the exercise by sitting at the front edge of your chair. Find a comfortable upright position. Do not force

yourself to sit erect if doing so causes tension. Then close your eyes and feel your two seat bones in contact with the chair. Notice whether your seat bones are making equal contact, or if one feels more heavily weighted than the other. Also notice whether you are sitting on the same part of each seat bone.

Next, imagine that you are sitting on the face of a traditional clock, as pictured in Figure 1. Twelve o'clock is directly in front of you, six o'clock is behind you, three o'clock is to your right, and nine o'clock is to your left.

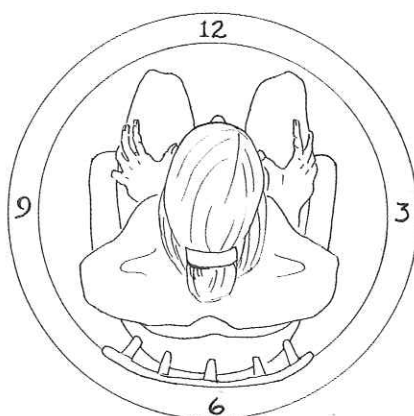


FIGURE 1. Pelvic Clock starting position. Envision the face of a clock beneath you.

Slowly advance the top of your pelvis toward twelve o'clock (Figure 2). You should feel your lower back hollowing.

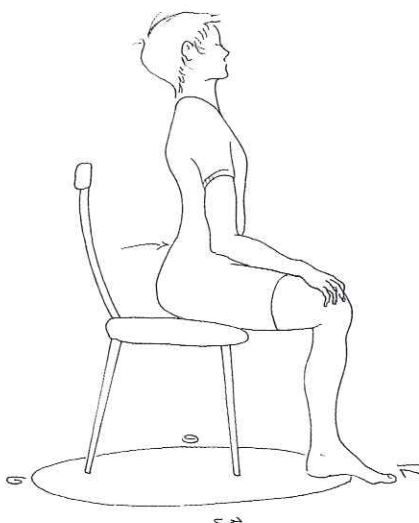


FIGURE 2. Advancing the pelvis toward twelve o'clock results in a slight hollowing of the lower back.

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low slightly as the top of your pelvis tips forward. Return to the starting position and then repeat this small movement several times. Notice what happens to the weight on your seat bones, to your breathing, to your hip joints, and to your spine.

After you have repeated the movement a number of times, relax and take a break. Give your back a rest by leaning against the back of the chair or the wall if you are sitting on a bench. If you wish, stretch out on the floor for a few minutes.

When you feel rested, return to the starting position for the next phase of the lesson. This time, tilt your pelvis back toward six o'clock, as shown in Figure 3. You will feel your back round slightly. Pay attention to how this movement affects other parts of your body. Do your feet tend to want to leave the floor, for instance? Return to your starting position and repeat the movement while you focus on how your chest, head, and feet are affected. Rest.

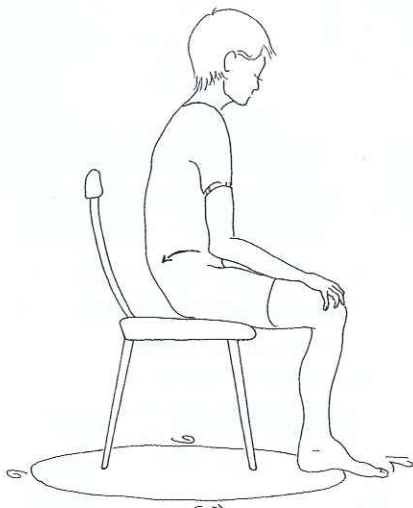


FIGURE 3. Tipping the pelvis backward toward six o'clock causes the back to round and may produce other physical changes as well.

Come to your starting position again. Now slowly tip your pelvis toward three o'clock (to the right), either by lifting your left seat bone or by pushing down slightly with your right

seat bone (Figure 4). Repeat this movement several times. Do your heels want to lift off the floor? Think about how you're moving your pelvis toward three o'clock. Which leg and foot help you to move in the desired direction? What happens to your back during the movement? Do you tilt, lean, or collapse your ribcage as you move toward three o'clock? Rest.

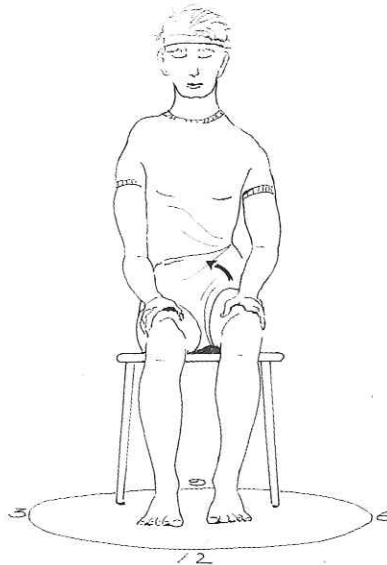


FIGURE 4. Tipping the pelvis sideways (here, to the right, or three o'clock) "collapses" the left hip. A collapsed hip is a common cause of rider imbalance.

Repeat the exercise in the opposite direction, tipping your pelvis to the left, or nine o'clock (Figure 5). Does your pelvis move toward nine o'clock differently than it moved toward three o'clock? In which direction does the movement feel easier? Are other parts of your body affected in different ways? Rest.

Part 2. Now it's time to further refine the movements that you learned in part 1 of the Pelvic Clock lesson. From the starting position, move your pelvis toward twelve o'clock. Then continue around the outside of the clock toward one o'clock. Continue on to two o'clock; to three o'clock; and back to two, one, and twelve, finishing where you started. Repeat this quarter of the

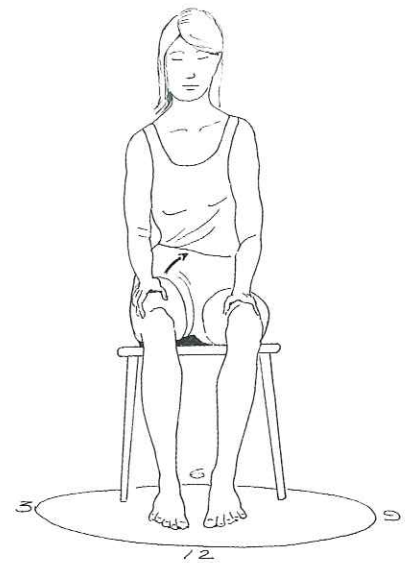


FIGURE 5. Tipping the pelvis to the left, or nine o'clock, collapses the right hip and affects other parts of the body as well.

clock several times. Notice which "hours" feel easy and which are not so easy. Does the line of the arc remain consistent as you move from twelve o'clock to three o'clock and back again? Does the movement feel smooth or jerky? Curved or flat? Rest.

Now try moving your pelvis halfway around the clock face, from twelve o'clock to six o'clock and back again. After you have repeated this arc several times, moving slowly and easily, return to your original starting position in the middle of the clock. Notice the difference between the two sides of your pelvis. Rest.

Repeat the movement in the opposite direction, beginning at twelve o'clock and moving counterclockwise until you reach six o'clock, then returning to twelve. Repeat several times, slowly and easily. Note which hours are difficult to find and which ones are easy. Feel the difference in the two sides of your pelvis. How much of your body becomes involved in this movement? Rest.

Next, move your pelvis clockwise, hour by hour, around the entire clock face (Figure 6). How smooth can you make the circle? What happens to your

hip joints, ribcage, and head? Reverse and circle your pelvis counterclockwise. In what ways does this direction feel different? Rest.

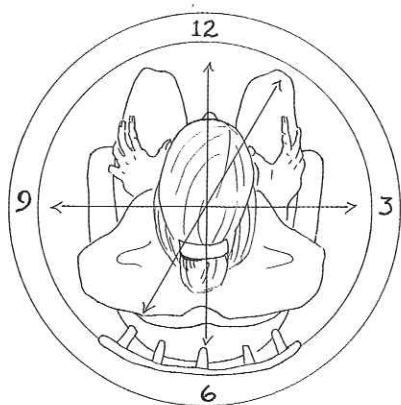


FIGURE 6. Move your pelvis around the entire clock face, hour by hour.

From the starting position, instead of circling your pelvis around the clock face, make straight lines between opposite points. Start by tilting your pelvis backward toward six o'clock and then tipping it forward until it's pointed at twelve o'clock. Then move between three and nine. Do these movements feel easier, now that you've progressed through the previous stages of the Pelvic Clock lesson?

Beginning at one o'clock, "draw" each diagonal—one to seven, two to eight, three to nine, and so on—finishing at twelve o'clock (Figure 7). Which diagonals felt easy, and which were tighter or more difficult? Rest.

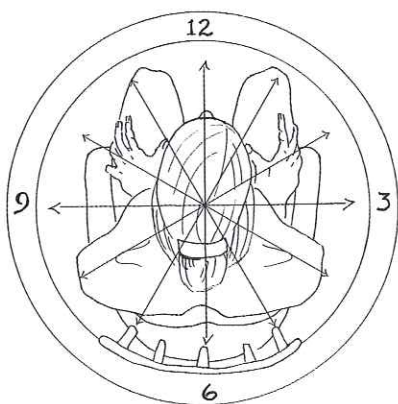


FIGURE 7. Diagonal movements around the clock face.

INSTRUCTOR TIP

Instructors, you can use the Pelvic Clock to help students find a more balanced seat. If a rider is sitting too much to one side, ask her to move her pelvis toward the hour on the clock that will counter the position. Using this method, you can coach a rider into a central position. From there, you can use the clock analogy to teach the subtle weight shifts that are instrumental in effectiveness aiding.

Finally, beginning at the central starting position, move your pelvis around the clock and then across the clock face. See if you can determine the exact middle of the clock, where the hands would attach. This would be a balanced central position if you were sitting in a saddle. Pay special attention to the way your seat feels in this position. Does it feel different from when you began the Pelvic Clock lesson? If so, what has changed?

Back in the Saddle

By comparing the degree of ease in which you could move your pelvis in various directions during the Pelvic Clock lesson, you may glean valuable insights as to why, in riding, movements in certain directions are smoother or easier than movements in others. We tend to move or position our bodies in ways that we find most habitual, even if those positions involve misalignment or crookedness. If certain hours on the clock were easy and the opposite hours were difficult, you might get "stuck" in the more familiar positions, thereby preventing yourself from sitting evenly when you ride. If moving your pelvis toward certain hours proved especially challenging or nearly impossible, then you may not be able to shift your weight effectively in certain directions in order to influence your horse.

The final phase in the Pelvic Clock exercise is to repeat the lesson while in

the saddle. Choose a quiet horse—one that's not overly reactive to seat movements—and practice the pelvic movements at a walk. Make the clock diameter much smaller than when you were unmounted, and notice what happens to your horse's balance as you tilt your pelvis toward the various hours. Your trouble spots may be the same as they were before, or the "sticky" spots may have shifted to different hours.

See if you can determine when the clock is even and level as you ride at a walk. Then, when you want to shift your weight, think of making a barely perceptible movement toward the hour that corresponds to the direction in which you wish to place your weight. Remember, the more aware you are of a balanced central seat position, the more accurate your weight aids will be. ▲

MEET THE EXPERT

Wendy Murdoch is a certified Feldenkrais Method Awareness Through Movement practitioner, a Tellington-Jones Equine Awareness Method (TTEAM) Practitioner and clinician, and a Senior Centered Riding instructor. A student of various equestrian disciplines, including dressage, she is the author of *Simplify Your Riding*. She lives in Washington, VA.