

The seat in tolt – Playing with balance

By Tina Pantel / Translation: Christiane Soeffner



Correct seat in tolt: the rider sits vertically with an imaginary correct line from the shoulder to the hip to the heel; she is relaxed and balanced

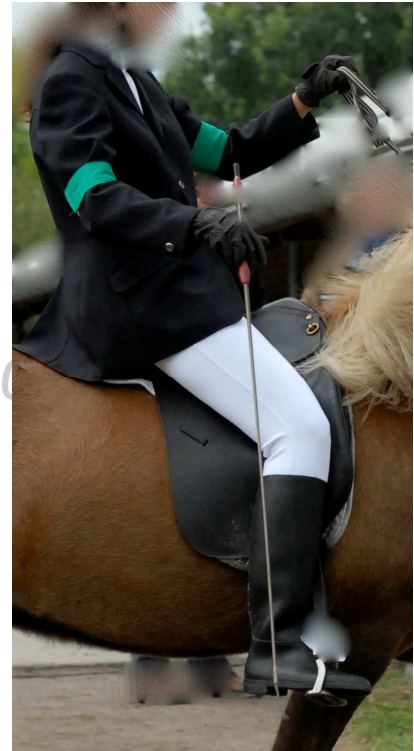
Get on, tolt on, have fun – sounds like a ‘how to’ manual for driving a motorcycle. However, the casual ‘Harley seat’ is a relic from the pioneer days of Icelandic horses. These days the seat is ‘normal’ in tolt. Also, there is no magic formula to enjoying the four beat; ‘riding correctly’ is enough.

If you have ever tolting across lava fields and hilly pastures during a sheep round-up at breakneck speeds, you will know that it would not be fun to fall off in that situation. Therefore you toss everything you ever learned in classical lessons out the window. Forget about sitting straight, upright hands and taking your shoulders back; you do what the Icelandic shepherders do: legs braced forward into the stirrups, pelvis tilted back, back rounded, and if in doubt – lean back altogether. At that moment, this is secure and comfortable, but has nothing to do with the modern and correct way to sit on gaited horses. Silke Feuchthofen, IPZV (German federation of Icelandic horse breeders) trainer and manager of the Sportressort, remembers the beginnings of the ‘tolt seat’ in Germany, “I know the most adventurous seat variations in tolt only from old pictures in Iceland and photos from the beginnings of the Icelandic horse sport here. In those days they did not know any better and there was not enough knowledge about riding tolt in general. The old style in Iceland developed out of utility riding and had tradition. In recent years a lot of things have changed positively in Iceland as well as on the continent.”

Many hobby riders in the beginnings of the gaited horses movement, and even today in parts, were and are quite happy with the ‘sit and let run’ mentality. Gymnastics is for riders of tall horses who ride their rounds in dusty arenas. Tolt is as easy as riding a motorbike. Uwe Brenner (32), IPZV trainer B in Bavaria, learned to ride Icelandic horses when he was a boy in a ‘wild and free’ kind of fashion. At least he managed to school his balance on the horse extremely well. Later he drew from a variety of trainers to optimize the correct seat and is

always open to new things. For a while now and several times a year he has been training with Bent Branderup to improve his and his horses' relaxation.

"The seat in tölt basically remains the same as in the basic gaits. It is very important to develop suppleness and a sense for balance. Nuances in the way the seat is used influence the tölt", Brenner says. The rider has to learn to regulate his core tension, i.e. tense individual muscles and relax them again. The trainer does not like the term 'tölt lessons'. He explains, "I pick up the rider where he is. Often we work on basic aids and the seat first. I cannot teach a 'tölt lesson' if the basics are off." When you see Icelandic horses for the first time, it is impossible to categorize the flying hooves, raised neck and head, and heart-stopping speed of the fourth gait, into some type of gait pattern; it is just too fast. Slow motion shows that Icelandic horses keep the cadence of walk in tölt, but the hooves are placed in a different order. Leg support in tölt alternates between one and two legs, between two and three legs in walk. The rhythm is made up of 8 phases in tölt, and can – depending on the horse's gait distribution – range from collected to racing tempo. There is no suspension in tölt. That is the reason why this gait gives the 'couch feel' in the saddle. Before taking off in



Riding in a chair seat: in addition the high hands are supposed to keep the horse raised in the front.



Seat back, legs forward: here we see a show version of the old tölt seat.

four beat, Icelandic horses should be well able to go supple and with cadence and contact. Only horses that are accepting of all basic aids correctly will be able to accept the fine aids necessary for tölt. The horse raises up a bit in the front but still also gives at the poll. The four-beat tölt should flow through the horse's body like a wave. The tail is relaxed and bobs back and forth – that's the ideal. And the gait has addictive tendencies: if you ever managed to fly across the trails on a well schooled tölt, you will not be able to lose the grin off your face.

But, how do I make a gaited horse tolt – is there a secret recipe? No, because there is no ONE tolt aid – the horses' genetic potential for gait is just too varied. In that all trainers agree. Silke Feuchthofen tries to explain, "Tölt happens when driving and restraining aids come together, finely regulated and tuned to the individual horse. A typical mistake is the tendency of riders who lack knowledge or skills, to carry their horses' heads too high. They have the idea 'my horse has to raise its head to tolt'. Uwe Brenner, IPZV trainer B, says, "The seat is basically the same as it is in the basic gaits. Suppleness and a sense for balance are the be all and end all because slight changes in the seat aids will influence the tolt." In general it is easiest for gaited horse riders to find the balance in tolt on a well-schooled horse. Unfortunately, it happens that tense or insecure riders throw off good tolters. Uwe Brenner explains, "Many



In order to create pressure and tension in tolt, many riders tense their hips and clamp with their thighs and knees to 'hold' the horse... What happens then – as shown on the photo – is that the lower legs slide back and often flare off the horse

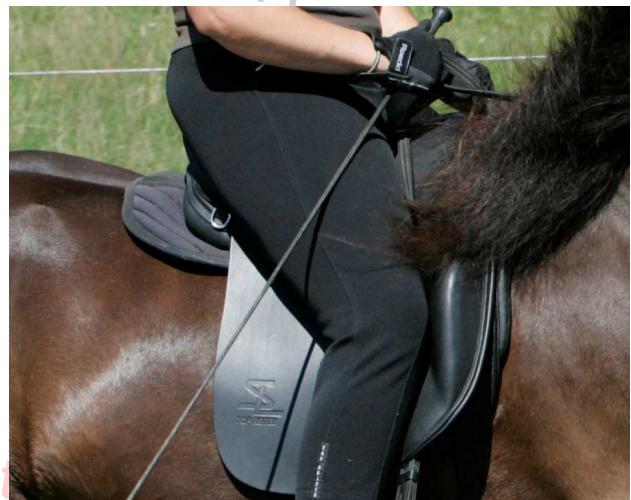
riders don't even know that their seat somehow prevents trot but does definitely not produce nice tolt." The reason why some riders do not notice that their horse is completely tense in tolt is the fact that even poorly ridden gaited horses are still often very comfortable. Signs that something is wrong could be a tense neck, fighting the hand, a ewe neck, 'lowering' of the withers, inverted back and lost clear beat. The rider owes the horse a good seat so that the horse can find and keep its balance.

Especially when it comes to gaited horses, there is no bypassing good riding lessons and seat training. Only a flexible, supple horse can give at the poll and – at the same time – tip its pelvis, i.e. use its back when tolt. The rider can regulate the tension and it does not have to turn into tenseness automatically, when the movements become more spectacular. When horses are afraid to let go of their tenseness and stretch forward and down towards giving hands, something is wrong with the suppleness. When this lesson does not work in tolt, it should be practiced in walk or trot! In order to tolt a well trained toltter with no tendencies towards trot or pace, the rider uses a half halt in walk. He straightens his pelvis lightly from the hips, sits deep in the saddle, brings both lower legs slightly against the horse and closes both fists

as if to squeeze a sponge. Most important though is to give again with the hands, i.e. slightly opening the fists when the horse accepts the aids and increases the walk cadence to tolt. It rises up a bit in the front and the rider lifts his hands slightly to maintain a straight line between his lower arm and the horse's mouth. So you always start tolt from behind (seat and leg aids) and never just with your hands. Everything takes time, even when it comes to the new insights into anatomy, sports and training science. "We try to adopt these ideas in the Icelandic horse sport scene but it does not happen overnight", Silke Feuchthofen explains. If you do plan a trip to the Icelandic sheep round-up, you might save yourself some surprises if you consider the Harley-style seat during that time to prevent a fall.

Comparison to trot

It's interesting to compare the seat in trot. In this forward gait the rider keeps his pelvis a bit more rigid. The up and down movement in trot, created by the suspension phase and quite jarring for unskilled riders, cannot be cushioned by the rider's passively relaxed sitting alone. He has to actively try to move with the horse via a regulated tensing and relaxing of the core muscles in stomach and back. This tensing cannot be present in tolt and the pelvis is more passive, according to the principle of 'let it flow'.

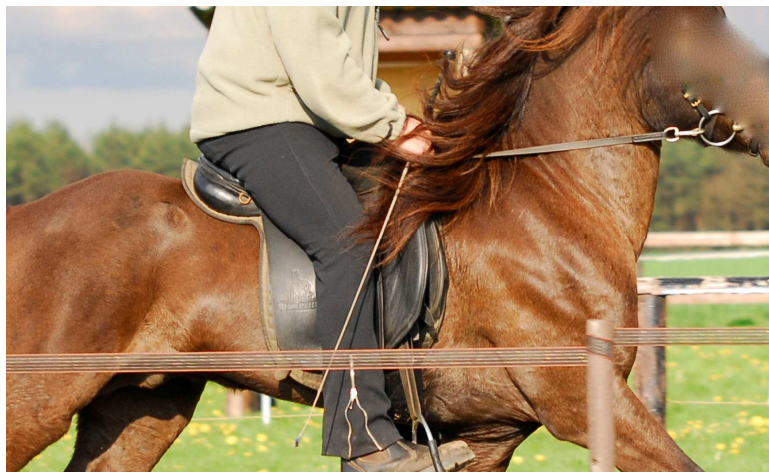


The typical 'perch on the cantle' can be seen with saddles that are too small for the rider, or with riders who want to put more weight on the horse's hind quarters to get it off the forehand.

Do you need a tolt saddle to ride tolt?

Not necessarily. The saddle has to fit the horse but has to also be adjusted to the rider when it comes to the model, size, seat width, length of panels and stirrup attachment. In tolt the rider's hips have to move freely to allow the pelvis to make the 'figure 8' rotation Andrea Jänisch, well-known trainer of gaited horses, describes. Modern dressage saddles usually restrict the rider too much between high cantle and thick knee rolls; he cannot move enough in his seat. Ideal for gaited horses is therefore a dressage/tolt saddle hybrid where the deepest part of the saddle is in the middle and not set back. This puts the rider in the correct position. Many tolt saddles have their deepest part too far back. The saying goes that horses tolt better and easier that way. But it is not a real, well schooled tolt because the saddle is not comfortable

that way and pokes the horse in the loin area. These days, more and more saddles are



When pelvis and hips are rigid as seen on this photo, the rider can cushion the jarring movements of a tight back. A good and relaxed seat though looks different and might get the horse to raise its back and give at the poll.

available in a variety of gullet widths that have their deepest point in the correct location. Do watch out for saddles that are too short: they do not distribute the weight well, especially for riders with a longer seat and horses with a short back. In that case longer panels are no solution either. They do distribute the weight differently but they often lengthen the saddle past the chest vertebrae that can carry the weight best.

If your saddle has to be kept in place with an anti-slip pad, crupper or fore girth, it does not fit.



Freedom for the shoulder to achieve more front leg action and reach cannot be gained by placing the saddle further back onto parts of the horse's back not meant to carry weight; it has to be trained.

Do we have to place the saddle further back on the Icelandic horse?

The answer is a vehement "NO". A horse is a horse and centre of gravity is centre of gravity. The saddle has to be behind the shoulder so it does not impede the shoulder's movement. It must not go beyond the chest vertebrae into the area of the loin vertebrae though since there are no ribs in the loin region to stabilize the back and it cannot carry weight in that area. For that reason alone gaited horses should not be saddled back as it is

practiced sometimes. The vertebrae in the loin region are immobile – unlike those in the chest region where ribs are attached. "There must never be a saddle there (in the loin region)!" Gerd Heuschmann writes in his book, "Finger in die Wunde" (English: 'Tug of War'). Pressure in that area is very uncomfortable for the horse and often leads to pain. On the other hand, a saddle on the shoulder is no better for the horse. To be clear though: freedom for the shoulder is not



The modern Icey back has no room for long panels or tolt saddles. If centre of gravity and the location of the saddle are correct, as seen in this photo, the rider's weight will be distributed over all of the weight bearing structures.

determined by the leading edge of the saddle but the position of the tree points. Saddle maker Natascha Gauert has had her own business since 2006. She learned her craft under Passier and completed her apprenticeship with excellent marks. She says, "Placing the saddle further back does not gain true freedom for the shoulder. In order to achieve that it takes planned training and a correctly fitted saddle, not one that put the rider as far back as possible. I can only recommend to train your eye and to look at pictures and videos and to determine whether a horse hollows its 3back and pushes out its lower neck. Often horses like that have saddles that place the rider in the loin area. In my opinion this is animal cruelty and anybody who speaks against this and for the horses' health – judges, riders, trainers – should be supported."

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