The Secret to Riding—Engaging Your Psoas

There are many ways to say it: bringing your seat under you, sitting on your pockets, finding your balance point, ride from your center and tucking your horse under with your seat. They all mean the same thing—ENGAGE YOUR PSOAS!

Just what is the Psoas? It’s not a new energy drink, herbal supplement or dance craze.

The following is copied from Tom Nagel’s website and book “Zen and Horseback Riding” and is used for educational purposes only:

The PSOAS (pronounced so-as) are the deep core muscles that link the upper and lower girdles of the body. They lie below the surface muscles of the body and are the “missing link” riders must learn to use in order to feel their horses’ movement and to follow the directions of their riding instructors. By mastering the use of these muscles, riders will be able to develop self-carriage and have independent seats.

Riding instructors use their psoas muscles when they ride, but most do not consciously know what specific muscles they are using. Most instructors began riding when they were young and learned through trial and error on a body level. This is called unconscious competence. How riding instructors use their bodies is different than how many of their students use their bodies.

Many riding instructors refer to the stomach and back muscles as being the ‘core’ muscles their students need to use to stabilize themselves on their horses. However, these are only the surface muscles of the body. Students hear things like:

- Sit deep in the saddle
- Sit on your pants pockets
- Heels down
- Find your balance point
- Ride from your center

What riding instructors actually mean is to engage the psoas muscles.
Students also hear:
  Chest out
  Shoulders back
  Chin in

What riding instructors mean is to engage the hyoid muscles. This enables the chest to lift and expand, yet remain flexible. Instruction and information about engaging the hyoid muscles can be found in *Zen & Horseback Riding*.

**Where are the Psoas?**
You cannot see them and they do not appear on charts of the surface muscles of the body. They are located deep in the abdomen, on both sides of the lower spinal vertebrae. We do not think of the psoas muscles because the functions they perform are done in conjunction with one or more of the surface muscles. This is probably the reason the riding world does not look further than the surface muscles at the front and back of the body when determining how riders stabilize themselves on their horses. Out of sight, out of mind.

The psoas muscles are the bridges between the upper body and the legs. They are the only muscles that directly link the spine to the legs. The psoas attach directly from the lower spine to the top of the inner thighs at the lesser trochanter of the femur. They do not attach directly to the pelvis, but influence it through their connection to the iliacus muscles, which are attached to the walls of the inner pelvis.

![Muscles of the abdomen and legs](image)

**How do the Psoas flex?**
The muscles flex your thighs at the hip, enabling you to raise your knees, thus lifting your feet off the ground. Since the tendons of the lower part of the iliopsoas attach to the inner thighs, when flexed, they also tone the adductor muscles located on the inside of your thighs.

The psoas muscles flex differently depending upon the curvature of the lower spine and the position of the pelvis. If the lower back is concave, with the front of the pelvis tipping downward, the psoas will tighten and become shorter as they are flexed. When the psoas muscles are flexed in a balanced body, they
lengthen and fall back toward the spine. Balanced flexion takes place as the pelvis is leveled when the lower back flattens. This aligns the lower back in the pelvic girdle.

Balanced flexion of the psoas muscles enables riders to tone the inside of their upper thighs and to follow the movement of their horses with their pelvises. The psoas enable riders to influence their horses with their seats and legs. By mastering the use of these muscles, riders will be able to maintain self-carriage, both on and off the horse.

**THE POWER SEAT**

**Here’s a simple way to practice engaging your psoas in and out of the saddle and make everything come together at once ("one stop shopping"-Karen Irland, Level IV Centered Riding Instructor):**

1) Stand or sit in the saddle with knees flexed and soft, feet and ankles movable and relaxed. You should be able to move your feet at the heels and lift the toes off the ground, as well as spread your toes in your boots/shoes.

2) Lift the pubic bone by allowing your back to lengthen and WITHOUT contracting your abdominal muscles. Your belly should be soft and “mushy”. If it is not, take a breath in and out and use soft pressure with your finger tips of both hands until you feel the relaxation of your abdominals. Once the abdominals are soft and relaxed, you will feel your rib cage drop slightly.

**HINT:** belly breathing will create this relaxation and can be initiated by placing your tongue on the back of your upper teeth as if holding a bubble with your tongue

3) Once your knees are bent and psoas is engaged you should be able to move your hips independently right, then left. Put your hands on your waist at iliac crests and feel the hip move up and down as you alternate left and right movement. Your inner thighs should be soft as your pelvis tips back on to your seat bones and not on your “pube” which creates tension in psoas attached to your leg/inner thigh.

4) Now, before using the reins in your hands, it is important to align the upper
spine as you have now just aligned the lower spine. With your inhale, bring your ears back until they are lined up with the top of the shoulders.

Imagine dangling earrings that reach from the bottom of the ear lobe to the top of both shoulders. If your head or chin moves too far forward or too far back, the earrings will dangle out away from your body and put you off balance. Keep the earrings over your shoulders:

You can combine the two alignments with a simple inhale (bring your ears back over your shoulder to align your upper spine) and a simple exhale (soften outer abdominal muscles and allow your lower spine to align as you engage your psoas).

Alignment of upper and lower spine with breathing

Your upper body in alignment now allows for easier movement of your arms. Forward extension of the arms with the horse instead of pulling back, will release their head and neck for balance and movement.

5) Add your hands by bringing them forward with elbows bent at 90 degree
angle. Thumbs are up and the line from your elbow to back of hand is straight with no bend in wrist. If you are on horseback, the width of your forearms should be the same as your horses shoulders and create a ‘funnel’ with the narrowest point at the horse’s head and nose, widening as it reaches your forearms.

5) **Look up** over the horse’s outside ear and you will now be lined up from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet.

6) Remember to keep your feet stable in the stirrups by imagining yourself standing on the ground, your foot making contact with the stirrup on the ball of your foot just behind your first and second toe (“the bubbling spring”).

7) With your upper and lower spine aligned, your body balanced from head to toe, your arms free to extend forward with the horse’s head and neck and your hips moving with the horse’s hips, as you remain grounded, you are now riding with a **POWER SEAT!**

CONGRATULATIONS!
Hip Movement-More Up and Down than Forward

Many instructors emphasize moving the hips forward on the horse to ‘mimic’ his movement. The truth is, the horse moves you forward as they step under with their hindquarters. Your job is to move your upper thigh and knee up and down, alternating one side, then the other, as you open and close your hip joint and let the horse do the rest.

Think about the piaffe—A movement performed in advanced dressage and classical riding, in which the horse executes a slow, elevated trot without moving forward. The rider maintains their upright position and moves their upper leg and knee up and down as the hip opens and closes with the lifting and dropping of the horse’s hip as he lifts and lowers his hindquarter on alternating sides. There is no forward motion in the rider because the horse has not created that forward motion. We FOLLOW the horse into the forward movement, by maintaining flexible hip, knee and ankle joints that absorb the “upward thrust” of the horse’s energy beneath us.

Feeling Alternating Sides of the Horse’ Body
Using a Trampoline

1) First find your hip joints while standing on the trampoline (remember they are deep in your pelvis, not at your waist). Touch the front of them.

2) Without taking your whole foot off the trampoline, flex one hip joint, knee and ankle softly so that just your heel comes off the trampoline. Flex the other side and then alternate from one side to the other.

3) When your knees flex, they should point a little outward rather than straight ahead. Your lower back must be free to allow the pelvis to move a bit as knees bend (with psoas engaged-see above-this is effortless).

Think of your trampoline as your horse’s back. As you alternately flex each leg, one side of your horse’s back comes up a little and then goes down.

4) Keep transferring your weight from one foot to the other with these small
joint flexions. As you work all the joints of your leg, they will become increasingly soft and mobile.

You should also notice how much of the lift comes from the trampoline as you keep receiving its upward push and allow it to travel up through your body and the top up your head moving softly up and down.

5) Take a moment to discover when the rhythm of the bounces is such that the thrust UP feels equal to the drop DOWN and experiment with a change in tempo and rhythm that will create a heavier downbeat when too fast, or upward thrust that is stronger when you slow your tempo.

6) Try stiffening the joints as you continue to step downward with alternating feet. It should feel awkward and uncomfortable (think of your poor horse) with little or no up or down motion in your body. BREATHE and engage your psoas to find a softer feeling with all joints moving effortlessly.

7) Imagine lines extending from your foot and hip on one side diagonally across to and out the opposite shoulder. Bounce these lines back and forth. ENJOY!