

THAT 'Aha!' FEELING

Sometimes it's the tiniest tweaks that make the biggest difference. From rein length to stirrup adjustments, the right details can unlock your confidence, improve your position and help you feel truly in sync with your horse, finds **Catherine Welton**

HAVING A 'LIGHTBULB' moment in your riding can be transformative. With one small adjustment, things just seem to click into place as you master a movement or clear a fence in a newly confident way. These small tweaks can seem obvious when you know what they are, but they're also easily overlooked. So, paying attention to the little things can add up to big successes in your schooling.

Devon-based Andrew Lovell is a BHSAI who trains riders of all abilities and ages across a multitude of disciplines including dressage, jumping and showing.

He says: "A lot of it is about getting the horse to be comfortable and secure, then about making the rider comfortable so they can focus on riding."

Sitting comfortably

One of the first things we think about is the saddle fit on the horse. However, the rider's saddle fit is sometimes overlooked — and that can have a big impact on rider position and performance.

"I think some people do ride in saddles that are too big for them," says Andrew. "That can make you more insecure in the saddle and when you're insecure, the first thing you do is grip."

When the saddle is a good fit, you let go and become much more independent."

Alaina Webster, a BHSAI and dressage judge, agrees. She highlights one saddle adjustment for the rider that's often overlooked.

"Many riders don't realise their knee rolls move or how much it can help them just to have a bit more support in the right place," she explains. "For example, if you're trying to do flatwork in a GP, you can put the knee roll down a bit to have a more dressage-y leg — and that's a really practical solution."

Say no to seat savers

Andrew also advises against using seat savers for schooling.

"It changes the balance of the saddle, which has been designed to give you the best opportunity to stay in the middle and be secure. The seat saver fills the space, changing the balance of the saddle."

Another seemingly small detail is the stirrup irons. "Some riders struggle with the ones that have rubber insets on the side as the tread moves. They can find it an unstable base and the rider ends up gripping with their calf to keep their leg still," states Andrew. "On the flip side, some people don't like the ones with the 'cheese grater' [these have a textured, metal tread with sharp, raised edges and are designed to maximise grip], because their foot can't move. They feel a bit too held. Find out what works best for you."



When a saddle fits the rider as well as the horse, both are able to perform at their best

Small tweaks to your tack or position may seem insignificant, but their influence on both rider and horse can be enormous



Bridles and bits

Consider the horse's bridle, too. Andrew says there's a common mistake people make with the bit, which can affect the consistency of the contact.

"People worry that it's too high, so it can end up too low and if you touch the reins it moves. It should sit still in the mouth, so that when I touch the rein, I know which part of the mouth it's affecting," he explains. "And don't forget the noseband, as the fit or type will affect the bit's effect on the horse and therefore the contact."

Alaina points out that choosing the right size reins for your hand can make a big difference, too.

"Having a pair of reins that sit comfortably in your hand makes you ride with a better contact," she confirms.

"I don't like anything too wide as I don't feel I can close my fingers correctly around it. It needs to sit in the bottom joint of the hand and for a lot of women that's quite small."

WHAT YOU WEAR MATTERS

Even the clothes you choose to train in can make a difference to your schooling session. Alaina gives 'sticky-bum' breeches as an example.

"Some people don't feel comfortable without them, but some don't like the feeling of being glued to the saddle," she explains.

What you're wearing might seem like a small detail in the grand scheme of things, but Andrew says it's all about minimising distractions. Other examples he notes include: "Appropriate underwear! Plus, coat done up and hair tied back, so it's not coming into your line of vision."

Personal preference counts when it comes to being able to ride at your best



If you keep tack and kit for 'best', use it at home enough for it to feel familiar and comfortable

Every rein inch counts

Rein length is something many riders wrestle with, but as Andrew points out, it's worth spending time getting it right.

"The right rein length will put you in the most economical position. If the rein length is wrong, it knocks out your whole balance. The 'comfortable' length will encourage soft, effective hands and contact."

And he explains that the difference is less than you might think. "An inch either way will make a difference, we're not talking about huge amounts," he says.

Put yourself first

Some riders choose to keep a set of tack and kit for competition-use only. While having 'best' tack for show day might save on washing and cleaning, without

regular use, it's unfamiliar and possibly not as comfortable as your everyday kit. Consequently, there is a risk that it may affect how you ride.

"It's nice to have competition stuff, but ride in it on a regular basis," agrees Alaina. "The horse will feel the difference if you're not comfortable, for example if your boots are stiff and you don't put your leg on them in the same way."

Once you've done your tack and kit check, it's worth thinking about when you'll get the most out of your training sessions.

"The time of day can make a difference; you need to find the slot when you're best able to focus," says Andrew. "Get to know yourself and if that's before or after work."

Remember to fuel yourself as well.

"I think riders are particularly bad at looking after themselves," adds Andrew. "Make sure you've had enough fluids and something quick to eat before you train."

He also points out that it's useful to go back to basics on occasion.

"Sometimes when we've heard something a million times, it stops having a meaning," he says, giving 'looking up' as an example. "It's not about staring ahead — it's about planning ahead. If your body is balanced, it's much easier to keep your head up, but if your body's unbalanced, you immediately look down again."

Set smaller targets

Gemma Hallett is a UKCC level 3 coach and sports mindset coach. She says focusing on small steps can help hugely from a psychological and motivational point of view.

"I think a lot of the time riders don't realise how easy it is to make a simple, small change. Riders tend to look at the end goal, and that often seems so far away. It can be overwhelming and thus difficult to start."

Instead, she advises breaking the end goal down into smaller targets.

"These are far more attainable and with each target being met, the rider is encouraged by the success to continue to the next stage," she explains. "It feels great to achieve even something small."

TOP TIP

Aim to ride when you're feeling at your best. For some of us that's first thing in the morning, for others it's later in the day. Not feeling it? Consider whether it's better not to tack up at all. Both you and your horse will enjoy it more and get the most out of a session when you're feeling good.



The difference made by a bit being a hole higher or lower can be huge

THE CHANGE I DIDN'T EXPECT

I was inspired to write this article by a breakthrough I had during a clinic with Andrew Lovell. I lacked confidence on the approach to a fence and was 'taking the canter' away from my horse while I tried to over-organise him. One of the first things that Andrew noticed was my flexible stirrups, which he felt weren't helping with my lower-leg stability.

I changed the stirrups and noticed an immediate difference. I now feel more secure in my position, am able to keep my leg on, and as a result feel more confident riding a bigger, more forward canter on the way to the fence, which of course my horse is much happier with, too. Small changes, especially those you might not immediately think of being of great influence, really can — and do — work!



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The smallest detail that made the biggest difference

Small changes can have big benefits. These riders are reaping the rewards after re-evaluating their systems:

"For those of us who are maybe of an older age, years ago we were all taught to 'fold forward' when we jump, but the reality is that unless you're jumping over 100cm, you rarely need to 'fold'. My instructor said to think more about doing a star jump in the stirrups when going over the fence. It sounds crazy until you try it, but my position and lower-leg security improved massively."

Claire Vallis

"I was told to ride like I was on a big, bouncy ball and if at any time it was to be taken away from underneath me, I'd fall on my feet. If I was too far forward in my seat, I would face plant, and when too far behind, I would land on my bum. That has stuck with me and made a huge difference."

Kelly Butterfield

"My instructor told me to stick my feet out in front to stop the falling forward, collapsing and folding. It gave me an easy visual image."

Helen Brophy

"Coming back to riding after having my baby and not riding for 18 months, I would run up and down the yard a few times and touch my toes before getting on. Then I would stand up in my stirrups for the first 5-10 minutes to help with my balance and feel more secure in my position."

Rosie Keirle

"Turning my heels slightly outwards really helped engage my thighs without gripping. Sitting tall in the downward transitions has also made a big difference for me."

Aileen Field 🐾