

Star Galaxy Stables

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Saddle Seat Riding: A Brief History and Summary

The different purposes of riding—for example, riding for short- or long-distance transportation, riding to herd livestock, or riding over obstacles to get quickly from one place to another—led the equipment, clothing, and type of horse to evolve over the years. While all styles of horseback riding shares a few fundamental principles, mankind has developed many different ‘disciplines’ of riding to accomplish different goals. These disciplines are divided into two main categories, English and Western.

Saddle Seat riding is a subcategory within the English riding style that evolved to show off the high-stepping, extravagant gaits of certain horse breeds. It evolved as a distinct style within the other English disciplines mainly in the American South. Here, farmers valued ground-covering, smooth-moving yet showy, high-stepping horses: these horses had to be smooth and comfortable enough for riding for long hours in the fields, yet stylish and showy enough for the ‘high society’ socialization in town. Because of the high-stepping ‘action’ of these horses, specialized equipment developed along with the style of riding. In Europe, a similar style of showy riding led to a flatter style of English saddle, particularly suited to the practice of riding the showiest horses in City Parks on Sundays. (The term “Park Horse” is still used today to describe competitions where the horse’s high action is paramount.) This saddle, called a Cut-back Saddle, is most commonly used in modern times when riding Saddle Seat.

All Saddle Seat riding takes place *on the flat* (this means jumping over obstacles of any sort is **not** involved.) Because of this, many consider Saddle Seat riding to be one of the safest yet most exciting disciplines of riding. Saddle Seat riders sit well back in the saddle, carrying their hands higher than in other English disciplines to allow for the higher, noble head carriage of most Saddle Seat horses. The ideal rider sits tall in the saddle, leaning neither forward nor back, with their shoulders back and their thighs and knees gripping the saddle. The position of the saddle on the horse’s back places the rider well behind the shoulder to allow the horse to lift his legs in the extravagant motion Saddle Seat riding strives to accentuate.

Traditional Saddle Seat riding attire consists of Kentucky jodhpurs (jods), which are close-fitting bell-bottomed pants with knee patches and a strap that crosses under the boots to keep them from riding up. For riding lessons, Star Galaxy stables ideally desires students to wear jodhpurs, jodhpur or paddock boots, a neatly tucked-in shirt with sleeves, dark-colored riding gloves, and a helmet; however, for the first few lessons, jeans and any boot with a heel higher than one inch and flat tread are also acceptable. Show clothing includes a long fitted coat; a vest and tie set of complementary colors; ‘jodhpur’ boots; a hat (usually a bowler or a fedora); and dark gloves.

While Saddle Seat riding can technically use any horse, a few particular breeds possess the distinct qualities of style, beauty, brilliance and power that the Saddle Seat discipline evolved to highlight. Some of these include the American Saddlebred (ASB), the Morgan, the Arabian, the National Show Horse, and various breed crosses, all of which Star Galaxy Stables proudly houses. Ask about the different breeds and their characteristics at your next barn visit!