

# YOGA EXERCISES TO IMPROVE RIDING- Part 2

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There are numerous reasons how yoga can help improve riding that go way beyond the scope of this article. Yogic breathing, meditation, focus, and brain/body unity are beneficial to riders and, in my opinion, all people. Meditation and breathing are wonderful techniques for anyone working with their own fear issues or with animals, who can be fearful themselves. Horses are extremely good readers of our emotional state and a calm and steady presence is essential to having a good horse/rider relationship. For anyone interested in perusing these avenues, I heartily suggest investing in yoga classes, books, or DVDs on yoga.

This article, however, will just brush the surface of yoga exercises (poses or asanas) and discuss a handful of positions that I feel are beneficial to the rider looking for better balance and communication in the saddle.

As a riding instructor, these are the exercises that I prescribe most often to the majority of my students, no matter their ages or ability levels. As with all exercises, make sure you can do the positions comfortably and without undue strain. Use common sense when asking your body to work into new stretches.

The following poses are designed to increase flexibility and stamina. They should be slightly challenging without being painful (although, as we all know, sometimes stretching ourselves can be a bit uncomfortable... again, just be sensible and err on the side of caution).

## 1: Upper Body/Arm/Shoulder Stretch

Find a comfortable position on the floor, or in a chair, or even standing if you

can't sit. The traditional pose is done from a cross-legged position, and the reason I prefer this method is that in this position you can also loosen hips and work on balancing your seat bones easier. A not-too-soft chair is the next best option as you can also feel and ground your seat bones.



Maintaining balance over your seat bones equally, take one arm up and over your head and stretch your rib-cage, shoulder and arm. Your arm should be parallel to your ear and you can bend over through the body as much as is comfortable. Keep your chest open (not collapsing forward) and breathe into your underside lung to keep from collapsing too much to the side. Repeat on the other side.

This exercise helps to stretch the upper body and limbs and the hips. It helps in leveling the pelvis and in the separation of seat from upper body which is crucial to a well balanced seat while riding.

## 2: Down Dog

One of the most used and well-known yoga poses for a reason, down-dog stretches the entire body and, as added bonus for riders, helps improve the calf-stretch for keeping those pesky heels down!

From standing, bend forward and place your hands on the floor. Walk the hands forward to form an upside-down "V". Hips are kept high and chest should be pushing towards your thighs. Back should be straight and heels stretching down

towards the floor. You can bend your knees if your hamstrings are very tight.



saddle. Rarely do I find a rider who can't improve flexibility in these areas.



### 3: Plank

Plank is a strengthening move for the upper body, lower body and core - all good things for riders! There are a lot of plank variations - you can put your knees on the floor for starters and add push-ups if this becomes easy.



From down-dog, take one knee and place it between your hands. Slide your other foot backward and lower down to the floor. Try to maintain level hips. Variations: lower your torso to the floor over your bent leg or raise your straight leg up behind you for extra thigh/psoas stretch (challenging, but effective!). Remember to stretch both sides.

### 5: Wide-leg seated bend

Working on the external rotation of the hip and thigh, this pose seriously stretches the inner thigh, which is often tight in riders and most people in general.

From down-dog, move your body forward over your hands into "push-up" position and hold for as long as you can/want. To ensure your back is protected, engage core muscles. Having a mirror or someone to spot you at first can be very beneficial.



### 4: Pigeon

Pigeon is one of my personal favorite poses and wonderful for stretching the hips, thighs, hamstrings and psoas muscles (the psoas muscle is a deep muscle whose primary job is to flex your hip). Having loose hips and legs allows for a deeper seat, more mobility, and more security in the

Seated on the floor, spread your legs into a wide "v". If you can, bend forward from the waist, which stretches your glutes and low-back. Keep the back straight, don't collapse your chest. This pose can be modified in a lot of ways to be manageable for all levels: start with a small "v" shape

and work up to wider as it gets easier. Also, you can sit on a pillow, towel, or block if it is painful to sit this way on the floor.

Obviously a full yoga routine would/could have many more exercises and routines and there are a huge variety of schools and thoughts on yoga to suit any individual, but rarely do I plan or complete a yoga session without incorporating these five exercises. I find them to be extremely beneficial for my body as it pertains to riding and to my overall effectiveness in the saddle. I hope you can find the time to put some yoga into your weekly or daily routine. Your body, your riding instructor, and your horse will thank you!



**Editor's note:** This incredible woman doing the poses in the photos is four days away from her due date for baby number four. Solveig, you are something else!