

Discovering Your “Kreuz”

by *Lynne Sprinsky*

with thanks to Paul Belasik and Erik Herbermann

The Kreuz is another of those lovely German words, like *Dürchlässigkeit* and *Losgelassenheit*, for which there is no one-word English equivalent. Pronounced “kroytz”, Kreuz literally means “cross” (the noun), and for dressage riders that’s significant because a “crossroads” in riding is reached when the rider learns to use the Kreuz.

As a dressage term, Kreuz refers to a certain set of muscles that act together; that is to say, when you engage one muscle, it triggers another, because the muscle fibers have common attachment points. For us riders, these muscles lie on either side of the spine and also wrap around the sides of the torso and tie into the pelvis. Their function allows us to tilt, tuck or curl under the pelvis as we sit in the saddle, pivoting on our seat bones. Their purpose in dressage riding is to stabilize the torso or “core” despite any heaviness the horse may offer us by tipping more or less on its forehead.

Here’s a simple exercise to help you discover how your Kreuz works. I learned it from Paul Belasik. You’ll need either a placid horse, or a sturdy saddle stand that will bear your weight, plus a saddle, a longe line, and a friend (who doesn’t need to know much about horses except how not to get stepped on). Proceed as follows:

1. You sit in the saddle.
2. Your friend takes the longe line and passes one end behind your back, and then back to his/her hand.
3. You adjust the longe line so that it is riding about a hand’s breadth above your buttocks, in the “small” of your back.
4. Your friend holds one end of the longe line in one hand and the rest of the line in the other hand. The remainder of the line can be dropped on the floor if you’re using a saddle stand, but as a precaution should be carried if you’re dealing with a live horse. Your friend stands in front of the saddle stand or (for safety’s sake) slightly to one side of the horse’s head, facing you.
5. Your friend takes the slack out of the longe line and pulls it towards his/her own body and slightly downward. Gradually, s/he increases the strength of the pulling. Then s/he slacks off a bit, but without losing the taut quality of the line. She alternates between stronger pulling and not-so-strong pulling. Meanwhile....
6. As your friend pulls on the line, you (in the saddle) may either tip forward, or you may resist the pulling, depending on how well your seat bones are anchored in the saddle. For purposes of discovering your Kreuz, you’ll want to resist. As your friend increases the strength of the pulling, experiment until you find an angle for your pelvis that enables you to avoid being tipped forward off your seat bones. As you do so, take mental inventory of the muscle groups that you are engaging in order to accomplish this resistance. You don’t need to know the scientific names for them, but you do need to know which parts of your body you are using so you can, in future, engage them “on demand.” So identify them aloud for your friend.

7. Put one hand on the muscles of your back that you are engaging. Put your other hand on the muscles of your lower abdomen that you are engaging. Feel them work in concert with one another as your friend increases and decreases the strength of the pulling. At the same time, feel your seat bones being pulled more deeply into the saddle as your friend increases the strength of the pulling. There now. Congratulations! You've discovered your Kreuz.

But we're not done yet. Obviously, you usually ride with reins, right? So here's the second part of this exercise:

8. Have your friend take the longe line out from behind your back, and give it back to you to use as you would the reins. That is to say, your friend will still have both ends of the line in his/her hands, but you will now be holding the middle portion as though it were your conventional reins.

9. Now, your friend repeats the pulling with varying strengths.

10. Your job is to figure out how to engage your Kreuz to resist the pulling, but without using the muscles of your arms to do so! I cannot overemphasize the importance of maintaining a relaxed forearm and upper arm. If you use your arms to counteract your friend's pulling, the Kreuz will not be engaged and you will, when you ride your horse, be either pulling against him or acting as his 'fifth leg' as he leans on your rein connection for support.

11. Here's how you keep your arms relaxed.

a. Raise your ribcage. Think about increasing the distance between your bottom rib and the top of your pelvis in the front, but don't do it by arching your back. In fact, think about 'filling' the lower back.

b. Place the nape of your neck back against your collar (don't tilt your head back or drop your chin down; keep your head level as though you were carrying a book on it).

c. Rotate your shoulders back and down. You can help yourself by beginning in your "every day" position, then: 1.) roll the shoulders forward and down. Hold, and feel the stretch. 2.) lift the shoulders up but keep them rolled forward. Hold, and feel the stretch—in a different place than for #1. 3.) Keep the shoulders lifted up but roll them to the rear. Hold and feel the stretch (different place again). 4.) Keep the shoulders rolled to the rear and drop them down to hang in a relaxed way on either side of your spine. Do not drop your ribcage or sternum when you relax. Position #4 is where you want your shoulders to be, routinely.

d. Have heavy, pointy elbows. This you do by allowing your upper arm to hang perpendicular to the ground. Have your friend check the angle because if you're used to carrying your upper arms forward of your torso, this will feel quite strange at first. Once your arm is perpendicular, then bend your elbow so that there is a "point" where your "funny bone" is located. The degree of bend will vary with the length of your upper arm and also with the length of your horse's neck and the height at which he is carrying it. The important point is that there should always be a point in your elbow – the arm should never be straight.

e. Have "droppable forearms." That is to say, your forearms should always be easily

raised or lowered (making more or less of a point in your elbow). If you have too much tension in your forearm, you will lose that droppable feeling, and either you will be allowing your horse to lean on you or you will be pulling against him.

f. Now carry your hands without losing that “droppable” feeling.

12. Memorize the underlined portions of #11 and use them as your “pilot’s checklist.” This list constitutes the five components of the “Neutral Position,” and I thank my teacher Erik Herbermann for it.

Discovering your Kreuz is all about learning to ride in a way that allows your horse to learn to carry himself. When you ride in this way, he can no longer exploit the superior strength of his neck versus your puny little biceps. Instead of pulling against you, he will now be pulling against himself, and every time he does so, he will feel your seat bones being pulled more deeply into his back. While useful for momentary half-halts, a steady diet of strongly-engaged seat bones is uncomfortable for the horse, and he quickly learns that when he carries his own head and neck, stops using his underneck muscle against you and begins yielding softly at the poll and in the jaw, those irritating seat bones lighten up immediately. So when you use your Kreuz, he soon stops pulling or leaning.

Troubleshooting

From now on, whenever you feel excessive weight in your reins, you’ll know that you have lost one or more components of the “Zero or Neutral Position” – because if you keep them all in place, the horse can’t pull against you. From experience, I’ll tell you that the components most likely to be lost are the raised ribcage, the shoulders back-and-down, and the heavy, pointy elbows. Most of us have lousy daily posture, a product of the computer generation, and we’ll have to work 24/7/365 at this new posture before it becomes second nature.

In summary, discovering your Kreuz empowers your seat with what may be a new-to-you way of carrying your body in the saddle. It has several wonderful benefits:

- You can use the power of your seat to help the horse learn to carry his own front end.
- Your “core” becomes much more stable, and hence,
- Your hands become steadier, too.
- As a wonderful by-product, your rein-elbow connection becomes softer and much more sensitive, since you no longer have to “hold your horse up” with it.
- The result is a much more quiet, comfortable place for your horse to come into connection with you, and he will be more willing to go there – that is to say, to “come on the bit.”
- You’ll be able to feel minute variations in the amount of weight in each rein, and respond appropriately.
- You’ll look really elegant, too!

Discovering your Kreuz could turn out to be one of the most important riding discoveries you’ve ever made. Good luck in discovering your Kreuz!

Questions by Tricia:

Hi, Tricia, I'll try to answer your questions.

1. Does this help when you are doing the posting trot?

Depends on what you mean by "help." It is the position to which you return during the "sit" phase of the rising trot. The whole picture of long, stretched front line, broadly open chest with shoulders back and down, and filled lower back is still what you want. During the "up" phase, of course, your position alters a bit: you close your hip-thigh angle slightly, bringing your upper body slightly in front of the vertical just as you would when you are getting out of a chair. Then you allow the motion of the horse's seat to kind of boost you up into two-point momentarily, and at the height of the "rise" phase it may help to think of riding your horse and your hips through your elbows, as well as riding your chest through your shoulders. (Again, this is Erik Herbermann's terminology, and I thank him as my teacher.) Then, as you sit again, your upper body resumes the balanced position you began with.

2. Do you always ride in "kreuz position" or do you just do it when you want to get a horse to carry himself? Once he is doing what you want , do you stop the kruez?

Yes, you always ride in Kreuz position in that you want that alignment of your body with your seatbones in "neutral" and your abdomen toned but not tense. You will ride this way in sitting trot and in walk and in canter as well, but your lower back or sacroiliac joint will move differently as it responds to the varying motions of the horse's back at the different gaits. You want to be sitting on the pointy bits of your seatbones: imagine them as a rocker on a rocking chair (or rocking horse!). You don't want to be on the forward-most part of the rocker, which produces an arched back, or on the rear-most part of the rocker, which produces a slumped posture -- at least not ALL the time. You want to aim for the middle portion: neutral pelvis.

But then IF the horse gets heavy -- which, once the horse is far enough along in its training to be in self carriage, should be infrequently -- you are ready (if you are sitting correctly) with your more strongly toned abdominal muscles to receive that heaviness into your seatbones, rather than into your tensed forearms.

I hope that answers your questions, Tricia. If you are still unclear on any point, please ask again. I'm happy to explain further if need be.