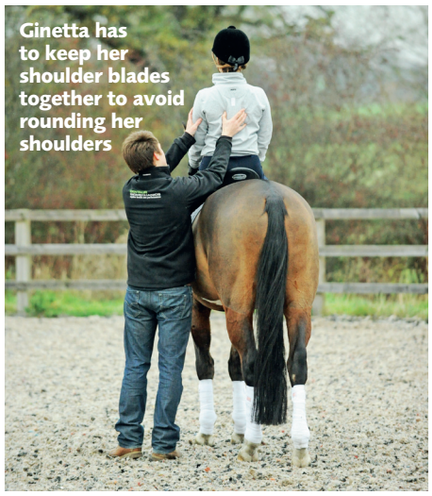
Ginetta has to keep her shoulder blades together to avoid rounding her shoulders

EJECTOR SEAT

It's a very cold, windy day, and Hugo starts in high sprits, putting in the odd buck. Much of Russell's work focuses on making the rider's position as safe as possible, and this is a perfect example.

"When he spooks, you adopt the 'brace' position, which is actually 'eject'," says Russell. "It's a natural response to scrunch forward, in a sort of foetal position, but by doing so you're taking your weight off the horse's back, which makes it easier for him to buck and send you out the saddle. Your position is ready to send you straight over his ears. By sitting up and keeping your shoulders back, he'd have to work much harder to buck."

Russell explains this is a common fault when showjumping, too – riders throw their weight forward on the approach to a fence, which puts them in an ideal position to fall should the horse stop.

is surprised when she looks at the screen, saying: "I knew I hunched forward, but that highlights how much. I had no idea it was that extreme."

She is also prone to tilting her head to the right and drawing that shoulder up. Russell points out: "We're trying to ride our horses symmetrically when everything else we do is asymmetrical – driving, being on the phone, mucking out. When you spend time cradling a phone under your ear, you lengthen the muscles on the other side of your neck and shorten the ones around the phone. It takes time to correct."

Russell also notes from the video that Ginetta's pelvis isn't always straight and it's obvious when she canters away from the camera that she collapses her body to the right and Hugo brings his hindquarters in to compensate. "I'm very aware that his quarters come in," says Ginetta. "But I didn't realise I collapsed like that."

The solutions

Does any of this sound familiar? Russell says that Ginetta's issues are common, but he has solutions.

He asks Ginetta to take her feet out of her stirrups and think about sitting directly on her seat bones, which will help straighten her hips, so that she is not collapsing. Russell shows on a skeleton dummy how close together our seat bones are, and how imperative it is that we sit straight with our weight evenly distributed on both to make sure we are not asking the horse to carry more of our weight on one side.

To stop Ginetta rounding her shoulders, Russell asks her to bring her shoulder blades together behind her. And the tightness in her back can be improved by thinking about lengthening her abdomen. "Think about elongating the area that would form a six-pack as much as you can," says Russell. "Open your chest out, and lift your chin."

The forehand

Standing still, all is perfect, but as soon as Hugo moves off Ginetta's habit of collapsing her middle and rolling her shoulders forwards returns.

"Before you go anywhere, think about engaging your seat bones," says Russell. "Then lengthen your abdomen, open your shoulders, chin up, and then walk on. You need to think of that three-step process for every transition."

This way, rather than starting out on the forehand, Hugo's hindleg steps underneath his body and he keeps his shoulders up.

Russell explains: "Your horse already has to carry 60 per cent of his bodyweight on his front end, because a horse's weight is unevenly distributed. By leaning forward, you're giving him even more weight to carry on his front legs."

For both dressage and jumping, we want a horse to carry more weight on his hindlegs, and if you sit up and take your weight off his shoulders then you enable him to do that. Then you can achieve the collection you want when moving up to Elementary dressage. "Think of it like a tube of toothpaste – you want to sit on the back end and squeeze the toothpaste out the front," says Russell.

Proceeding in trot, it proves harder for Ginetta to maintain her new position. When asked to sit up straight, her shoulders are still hunched and on the video she can see the line between the white stickers on her joints is not straight. So Russell tries a different approach, asking Ginetta to lean back.

"It feels like I'm about to lie on his back," says Ginetta. But the video analysis proves that she is now very upright. Russell explains: "That's because your brain adapts to thinking your hunched position is the norm. It's a common problem for people sitting at a computer all day to feel like they are leaning back when they're just sitting up for a change."

Ginetta says that Hugo is now feeling lighter on his forehand and she can feel him sitting more.

The conclusions

"You've got to work on these things," Russell tells Ginetta. "You're not going to fix everything in this session, it takes time to retrain your muscles, but thinking about it is the first step. Just don't go away thinking you're rubbish, you ride beautifully, but everyone's got room for improvement. This technology allows us to identify weaknesses that you wouldn't ordinarily see.

"Discipline is the key. If you work on three things – finding your seat bones, lengthening your middle section and opening your shoulders – I can guarantee you will have an improved horse. The judges will take you more seriously, too," he says.

Ginetta says: "I want to get on and do well with our dressage, and this session has made a real difference. Hugo does go on his forehand, but now I've realised that I'm not helping him."

Catching up with Ginetta a week after our shoot she added: "Even out hacking now I'm thinking about lengthening my body and keeping my shoulders back – I'm much more aware of my position now, and am going to Pilates tonight!"


For Ginetta, seeing is believing


Ginetta's shoulders are back and Hugo is off his forehand

● *Filmed at Centaur Training and Livery Yard. Rider analysis sessions start at £60 and can be held at your yard, Centaur's facility in Moreton Morrell, or Hartpury College. Discounts are available for clinics. Centaur holds clinics with osteopath Liz Launder at Hartpury College. For more information, visit the website at: www.centaurbiomechanics.co.uk; tel: (01926) 651 657; email: info@centaurbiomechanics.co.uk.*