

Total Contact Saddle – User Guide

This user guide has been produced to help reinforce some of the subtleties of the Total Contact system – we prefer to use the term ‘system’ as it’s not just about buying and using a saddle but a method of riding (although the saddle is the most obvious difference). You do not have to follow the exercises we have described, although they may be of benefit to you, we do though ask you to read the fitting section for your comfort and security and that of your horse or pony. Here is a [link to YouTube](#)

About the system

The use of metaphor, analogy and images when trying to explain things is often an elegant way to pass on understanding and appreciation. So, here’s the first analogy. The Total Contact method is like a very elegant pair of ballroom dancers. Imagine the pair gliding across the floor in an effortless fashion, each one enjoying the company of the other as they move together without seeming to communicate with each other. The only problem with that image is that they are communicating all of the time – with their bodies. The man ‘leads’ the woman. He doesn’t ‘pull or push’ his partner around. When they need to change pace or direction it is completed with very small movements and changes of balance. The lady on the other hand reacts to these changes and so each moves with the other and not against, or in spite of the other.

For so many involved in horse riding the intent is about ‘control’. ‘Control’ of the horse or pony and control of each and every move often riding against the horse. This is one way that a horse develops a ‘history’. How many times have you heard someone say “This horse is bad mannered” or “This horse has a will of its own” or even “This horse has no brakes and just runs on”. Such riders rarely question their own actions preferring to ‘blame’ the horse or a previous owner. However, the horse aware rider will ask “What have I got to do to change that”. The net effect of such attitudes is often a harsher type of bit, a more controlling piece of tack. The horse responds against this as the root cause of the action hasn’t been rectified and so a stronger bit is sought and so it goes on. Total Contact on the other hand is about using the lightest of actions to elicit the desired motion.

Total Contact then uses the BALANCE of the rider to communicate with the horse. Changes in balance are communicated to the horse through the specially designed saddle which allows such subtle

changes to be communicated rather than trying to do the same through several inches of plastic, leather, padding etc as seen in a traditional English saddle. The rider needs to practice this three point balance – the balls of each foot and the hands just above the nape of the horse's neck. The rider rarely 'sits' on the horses back when in anything above walk pace to facilitate this balance. The balance must be practiced with a relaxed tension on the reins and bit that allow the rider to feel the horse's head move. Jean Luc Cornille (The Science of Motion) talks about the reins as being not something to 'control' the horse with but to 'read and understand his thoughts'. To do this you need to relax the hands and arms and allow the horse to 'speak' to you through the reins with his movement. Whether you choose to use a bit or not the practice of 'slight pressure' and then release of tension in asking your horse to move must be something you should aspire to. This so called, 'negative reinforcement' (where the word 'negative' is used in the mathematical sense of 'taking something away' or 'minus' will be understood by your horse and the reward gained by both of you will be palpable. In using the saddle system please do give your horse praise when he does well so that he understands what it is you want of him ('positive reinforcement' – where something is added).

Once balance can be achieved the next principle is for the rider to use their head and shoulders to 'look' where they are going. This **LOOKING** is important as it changes your balance. Try standing in a riding posture on the floor, now look to the left with head and shoulders. Can you feel extra weight being placed through the left (inside) leg? This balance change will be felt by the horse through the Total Contact saddle. Likewise if you look upwards to the ceiling – no, don't strain to do it just look. Your balance will be changed backwards – don't 'lean' to cheat at this point just look! This will become the slow down and stop 'signal'. Look parallel with the floor is to go forward and looking forward with a light forward seat is to change pace upwards. ***This LOOKING is crucial and needs to be practiced.*** Remember though just moving your eyes isn't the same thing, you need to 'look' with your body and mind together. Control of the line of the horse moving into a jump is achieved through moving one hand away from the other away from the horse. Not forward or backward as if steering a car just move one hand away from the neck line – open your hand away from the other.

Okay, so now we've looked at some of the principles behind the system lets move on shall we? Don't forget though; ride in balance

and *with your horse not against him*; three point balance; looking is important and how you look; you will 'feel' the horse much more than an English saddle but the horse can also 'feel' you!

Fitting and care of your saddle

You will have noticed that your new saddle has no definable shape like an English saddle. To ensure the saddle remains stable and in place as you ride we strongly suggest you use a gel pad – or similar - (available from Shires, Gel-Eze etc) which will be placed just behind the high point of the withers of the horse. The Total Contact saddle then goes on top of this with the front edge a little behind the high point of the wither (on the downward slope to put it crassly) Between the saddle and gel pad you can use a normal saddle cloth, a poly pad or light numnah if you choose. Try which one works for you. A full-sized pad is preferable and it should end below, or at, the bottom of the lower saddle flap. You might consider using the specially designed Total Contact Pad (below) which has been designed by a TCS client and has extra d-rings to hang water bottles etc from for long hacks, Trec or endurance type activities. More info on this can be seen [on the online shop](#). However, clients do successfully use a range of padding solutions, including sheepskin pads, Western pads and 'blankets' and so long as it's right for the needs of the horse then it's right...



Either way, providing you have some substance to tighten the saddle to, that will normally be fine. If your horse is very 'bony' – or you are ! – then Gel Eze do a range of pads offering good compressive features and poly pad also do a range of thicknesses to cope with such things and the above pad may also help. The picture below shows the relative position of the saddle and aspects of the horse.



In the above picture a 'standard' length of girth is used for the Total Contact saddle with short straps (billets). We try not to be too prescriptive over tack etc and your horse will let you know if the girth you're using is the 'right one' for it. In this case the use of elastic ends to the girth may prove to be of some advantage. However, other girth styles will suffice although a dressage girth is normally too short and a saddle with longer straps (billets) is available for this type of girthing – [see the online shop for details](#).

With the saddle placed in the appropriate position on the horse – with the curved side and D-rings to the front and the finished side of the saddle to the top (I'm just saying this as one client actually sent me a photo of the saddle on upside down and wondered why it didn't feel comfortable!) - attach one side of the girth on the first hole on one side. Repeat this on the other side and then move the girth up one hole on each side before repeating this on the other side. When doing this ensure the area on the top of the saddle (it's

about 4 inches wide) remains in line with the centre of the horse's neck – the D-rings can be used to align the saddle as well and we now have our centre logo that may help as well to keep it centered on the horse. If this is done then the saddle will be even on both sides. Walk the horse around for a little and then tighten up the girth for the final time. You may find that you need to shorten your stirrups a little more than normal due to the lower position of the stirrup attachment beneath the flap on the saddle. This is another benefit of the saddle as the absence of the stirrup bar prevents the injuries that can result from this area on an English saddle.

Once you mount the horse sit lightly and then adjust the girth and stirrups as needed to ensure a secure fit. This should be easy to do with the various straps running freely through the rings provided. You do not sit on the saddle itself but with your bottom a little way behind it (depending on the rider's anatomy be prepared for more, or less, of your bottom to be on the saddle edge). This will ensure your legs 'fall' down the line of the girth. At first it may feel as if you are too far forward or that it feels 'odd'. This is a natural feeling as you have been used to the 'comfort' of such things as knee rolls to 'hold' you into the saddle. Total Contact allows you to be in the right position for riding with more freedom to move which will be evident when we start the exercises below. Please persevere with the feeling. It will become more naturalised as your body quickly adapts to what it experiences. In offering these familiarisation exercises it should be stressed that if you don't have a manege or arena to ride in a field is fine. If you don't have a set of jumps (we mention them below) then you could use bollards or any other item to 'steer' around. The most important thing in Exercises One and Two is that you end up performing patterns in a



very random way. This is to check the horse is really paying attention to you and you are having an effect. The other thing to say is that you should be patient and practice. You are both learning a new set of behaviours and this can take time. Using the prescribed system below along with the one you are familiar with to start with and then gradually dropping the 'old' behaviour is a good idea at this time.

Cleaning your TCS

Your saddle can be cleaned using a range of proprietary leather cleaning products like cream cleaners, leather balm or similar and normally a quick wipe over is enough to keep it looking good. However, should your saddle get more than light dirt on it please **DO NOT** use hot water or soapy water on it as this may affect the leather. In this case remove as much of the heavy dirt as possible with a soft cloth and then clean with a cream cleaner or leather balm. **Leather is NOT inherently waterproof and neither is your saddle.** Ensure that your saddle is stored in a damp free place and not put away in anything other than a dry condition. In case it gets scuffed then the use of a good quality boot or shoe polish/concealer and a buff up will help to restore the surface. The use of a product that is oil based should only be used lightly and on the back side of the saddle. It should be applied lightly with a sponge and then left to dry overnight. A wax based product is better suited to try and keep the saddle leather soft and, to an extent, water resistant - saddle leather is not 'water proof' but you can make it 'water resistant'. Failure to take reasonable care of your saddle may be treated as client negligence if you ask us to put right your wrongs and we will charge you for this - albeit it at cost

Riding in a Total Contact Saddle

Exercise One: Familiarisation for you and the horse and 'steering' Now that you're on the horse let's move onto familiarising you and the horse to the saddle and system this will involve using, and developing, your balance and 'looking' skills. With the horse standing still stand on your stirrups. Now achieve the three point balance – the ball of each foot and your hands close together just above the horse's neck. Feel comfortable in this position and recognise the 'firing' of small effector muscles that allow you to remain in balance. With the head and eyes looking forward and parallel to the floor quietly invite the horse to move into a walk. Remain in the balanced position. Should the horse be moving too fast for you raise your head and eyes towards the ceiling/sky and he will slow down and eventually stop. Test and begin to be confident in this looking and balance by moving from walk to pause to walk.

Now still in walk and in the balanced standing position turn your head and shoulders to one side allowing your weight to go through your inside leg but not 'pushing your weight down' 'give' a little with your outside hand to allow the horse to move its head without

pinching the side of the mouth and so reluctance to move. The horse will turn as it feels the transfer of balance. Begin to move from walk to pause and turn each way but remember to actively look, turn your head and shoulders, give a little with your outside hand and use your balance. Continue this exercise until you feel confident in your balance ability and the horse recognises your changes. Practice is required to achieve balance so persevere with it.

It's important to consider the use of the reins at this time. Instead of thinking of them as a device to 'steer' with consider them as a link to the horse's head. Think about when a car tows another car with a rope. At times the rope goes slack as the front car slows and the driver being towed has to react. At times the rope is taught as the car towing the other speeds up and again the driver being towed must react but hardly ever does either reaction occur at just the same time as the front driver. When a car is towed using an iron bar the car behind always moves at the same time as the one in front. There is no need to 'react' as the bar ensures one moves with the other. In just the same way consider the use of the reins as being 'taught' (here we really do run into problems of language – 'taught' does not mean 'tight' nor does the use of the term 'iron bar' mean 'rigid' or 'strong' simply the image of one moving with the other with the other – rider with horse and horse with rider (no pulling teeth out please!!). 'Soft tension' may be a better description?



Exercise two: steering from a seated position. This exercise will require four jump poles set out as if in the 12, 3, 6 and 9 o'clock positions of a clock face on a 20 m circle. From your balanced standing position very slowly lower your bottom towards the horse. The feeling you need to achieve is as if you were wearing corduroy breeches you should not sit deeply enough to 'squash' the nap of the ridges in the material. Make sure you maintain your balanced posture, with a straight back – deviations will change your centre of balance – and head straight but not stiff. Now use your head and eyes looking to look slightly downward to ask the horse to move from pause to walk, then head and eyes level with the floor to continue to walk. Use your upper body and head and eyes to look left on a left rein as you give a little with your right hand walk over the centre of each pole in turn on the circle. You should ensure you aim for the centre of the pole and use your upper body to do so. Change rein and move across the poles as before. When you feel able to move to a rising trot position using your looking, head and shoulders to change your balance as you do so slightly forward. Look to the sky to slow down and pause. Practice this on both reins. When you sit back to the horse in the trot do so as if not to crush the nap of the imaginary corduroy breeches.

From these transitions you can move onto a light canter by looking downwards and forwards ensuring that you move your head and eyes back to the parallel afterwards but with your upper body adopting a slightly forward seat and the seat of your breeches now having a gap of a pencil's width between them and the saddle. You should be in the balanced position and 'standing' on your stirrups. Practice turning and upwards and downwards transitions in this fashion on both reins. Now, use these new found skills to move in a very random fashion around, through and over the poles. This



will ensure the horse is listening to you and not simply doing what he thinks is required. These random movements can be made in each pace on a variety of reins and with sharp turns around, through and over the poles. Remember, balance, looking, upper body, soft

tension on the reins, giving with your outside hand, lead the horse and pace his movement.

Exercise three: starting to jump - Set up a small jump of cross poles (for instance) in the centre of the school. Start from a walk pace to working trot using your looking and balance skills as you do so. Turn at the top of the school and approach the jump in trot in the balanced position. Do not use the reins to control the horse and 'fight' with him but use your balance and looking to affect the pace and direction. Allow the horse to jump and allow yourself to recognise what movement you felt from the horse and how it affected your balance. Repeat this and on both reins. Change the jump to a simple upright and repeat above but in a light canter. Remember, you need to be balanced, use your body to look ahead not down to the jump as this will be a confusing aid/signal by now. Allow your body to have the pencil width between your bottom and the saddle and be slightly forward – almost a Caprilli type seat. Again allow the horse to jump and recognise the changes to him and you. Ask yourself two questions – HOW do you feel ? (an emotional response is required here) and WHAT do you feel ? (a feeling or kinaesthetic response is required here of you and the horse). Repeat on both reins – balance, upper body, looking, soft tension on the reins, lead the horse and pace his movement, how do you feel? What do you feel?

Repeat the above using all transitions from walk to trot to canter and the walk straight to canter. This time have a helper give you some directions. The moment you land from the jump the helper should shout “Left” or “Right” and you should change to that direction as they do so – upper body, looking, balance changes, reins, leading and pacing. Change the jump height as you gain confidence, add another jump etc



Exercise four: jumping with your imagination - Now that you will feel increasingly confident using the system and have started to master the upper body, the looking (direction and up, down, straight ahead) and balance (not quite touching the saddle but using your feet to support you – yes your quadriceps will ache as they adapt to the extra stress placed upon them!) you can progress to the use of your imagination in jumping.

Set up an upright in the centre of the school that is above your current perceived level of ability – height and/or spread. From one

wing of that jump place a second upright with a height and/or spread that is only slightly above your current perceived ability level. Place a small marker in the sand about three strides away from the larger fence. With the horse in the pause position in front of the larger jump and about four strides away from it run through in your own mind exactly what you would need to do to jump that fence – the more detail you can add at this stage the better so really think about what balance you will need, how you will have to communicate with the horse, what pace you will need, what posture you will have to adopt, where you will jump from etc etc Move from walk to trot to canter – remember the Total Contact principles above – and turn as if you are going to jump the larger fence. Don't change your body from thinking about just what it needed to do to jump the fence when you were standing in front of it. Keep your attention on the fence and what you have to do at all times. This feeling set will be communicated to the horse and give him confidence. When you reach the marker in the sand turn your shoulders and head to look at the new fence but keep the internal thoughts going as you approach it and simply allow the horse to clear this fence. If it does not then make sure you were looking ahead of the fence and your balance was right and approach again after re-thinking what you will need to jump the large fence. As you gain in confidence the style/height of each fence can change as you 'test' yourself.

Okay, that's about it for now. Have fun with your riding and remember:

- The horse is bigger and stronger than you are so ride WITH him as if ballroom dancing and you are the 'lead' as you lead and pace him rather than fight with him.
- Upper body movement
- Looking is important and where you look/when
- Three point balance
- Soft tension on the reins
- Lead and pace the horse's movement
- Don't squash the 'corduroy' of the imaginary breeches pencil width between you and the saddle
- Keep practicing and don't give up if it doesn't 'work' the first time round
- Congratulate the horse each time it does what you want by stroking him or just placing your hand on him rather than patting him which can be interpreted as a 'smack' by the horse

One more thing to remember, please don't try to read these notes when actually riding! I thought I'd better mention it!! Enjoy

and let us know how you go on sometime. We'd love to put your photos on our website or Facebook page. Just send them to stuart@total-contact.co.uk with a short description of the activity, horse's name, venue, your name etc or post them directly to the Facebook page – [Total Contact Equine Solutions](#).

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Our saddles are hand made by a UK Master Saddler and we take care to source the very best materials for each one that we can. Client reaction to product satisfaction is very high (94% Very Satisfied) but from time to time niggly things do go wrong (that's life I suppose). When they do we will put things right for you if we can. If something fails on your saddle within six months then we'll fix it free of charge (you just pay the postage back to us) and we'll get it back to you as quickly as we can. If something fails after this then we'll do our best to fix it and only charge you 'cost' and our postage to do so but we'll give you an idea of that cost first. If it looks like that thing that's not right is due to incorrect usage of the saddle or, what might be called, your negligent care of it then we'll see what we can do and discuss the options and costs with you. We want you to use the saddle and have enormous fun doing so but just as we take our responsibilities seriously we also think it's fair that you do too. We hope that's okay and fair.

Total Contact Saddle - the ultimate treeless saddle for horse and rider