

FIT TO RIDE

Collected Equestrian Fitness Tips and Articles Volume II

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Fitness & Sport Performance

FIT TO RIDE

Collected Equestrian Fitness Tips and Articles Volume II

*Selected from the Equifitt Newsletters and Other Articles.
Over 26 articles and extra exercise photos.*

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"I invest a lot in my horse's performance. I finally wised up to the fact that I was an important part of the equation." Equifitt Client

"I already notice a big improvement with my riding. I am able to use my aids more effectively and with less effort." Equifitt Client

Rider Fitness Books by Heather Sansom:

"Complete Core Workout for Riders"

"Handy Stretching Guide for Riders"

"Gentle Workout for Mature Riders"

"Fit to Ride: Collected Equestrian Fitness Tips and Articles Volume I"

"Fit to Ride: Collected Equestrian Fitness Tips and Articles Volume II"

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Introduction

Welcome to this second collection of fitness tips and article originally published for the Equifitt newsletter and other publications. Since not everyone likes to do their reading online, or has access to all the places these articles are published, they are collected here so that you can save them in one spot, print as needed or read them at your convenience without having to look them up on the internet or in your email archives.

Since I started Equifitt in 2007, rider fitness and biomechanics has become an increasingly popular topics. This is very exciting, since an increase in popularity of a topic leads to more information available, and more support for those who are interested. Still, many sports enjoy a wealth of information on conditioning training yet there remains comparatively little available for equestrian sport. The situation might be different if horses and humans were closer in size, or horses could talk. As it is, the horses can absorb many of the human weaknesses, imbalances and errors for a long time before we become aware that they have been doing so. They can't tell us. Or rather, they can't tell us in ways that make it easy for absolutely everyone to hear. Equine therapists generally agree that the horse issues they treat, are often mirrors of the rider issues.

Equestrian fitness principles are based on the fact that correct riding is always also biomechanically correct (ergonomic for horse and rider). Good and effective fitness training for riders is also based on all of the fitness and conditioning best practice principles for sport, such as the requirements for training outside the range of motion actually used in the sport, training that is balanced and harmonized within an overall training plan taking mounted and unmounted demands into account, and need for slowing things down from time to time for effective training of movement and muscle firing patterns.

There is a 'rider fitness training scale' which I developed several years ago and apply to all client training. There is an order of ground training priorities. First, release locked areas (stretching, manual therapies) to allow movement. Second, build core strength to support posture, position, use of aids and connection of aids. Third, train to correct muscle strength imbalances so that joints can remain soft and absorb motion as they should. Finally, fine tune and work on muscle firing sequence, movement patterns or specific goals depending on you, your goals and your riding discipline.

It may sound like a lot, but the best thing to do is just to get started. If an idea from an article jumps out at you, try it- consistently for a couple of weeks. Many people make the mistake of getting a great new idea, and abandoning it too soon to tell if it was helping. If you find an idea really difficult, or the way you are doing it is causing pain, stop and get some input from a medical or fitness professional. You may have uncovered something important that should be addressed anyway. Whatever you do, do not ignore problems or asymmetry. Your horse can feel them, and they are affecting him. The better you can carry and control yourself, the more you are able to apply consistent and clear aids. The fitter you are, the more stamina you will have to be able to follow your horse's motion, and lead him with clarity.

The articles in this Volume II collection were originally published in 2011 and 2012. They are written to be practical and easy to fit in to a busy schedule that may not include time at an actual gym.

Table of Contents

2011

January 2011: Plan a Little, Gain a Lot	p. 4
Bonus Article: Balance Yourself, Balance Your Horse	p. 6
February 2011: Keep Your Back Strong and Supple	p. 10
March 2011: Core Training Secrets	p. 12
April 2011: Training for Your Body Type	p. 16
May 2011: Don't Give Up	p. 20
June 2011: Easy Ways to Improve Awareness	p. 23
July 2011: Fitting the Fitness Into Your Life	p. 26
Bonus Article: Fitness for Equestrian Kids	p. 29
August 2011: Staying Hydrated	p. 31
September 2011: Cross Co-ordination	p. 35
October 2011: Building Stamina	p. 37
November 2011: Make the Most of Your Time	p. 39
December 2011: Easy Start to a Training Plan	p. 41

2012

January 2012: Training Plans Step 2	p. 44
February 2012: Training Plans Step 3- Getting a Solid Base	p. 48
March 2012: Training Plan Step 4 and Nutrition	p. 51
Bonus Tips: Back Pain & Seat Symmetry	p. 54
April 2012: Maintaining Fitness When You're Busy	p. 55
May 2012: Fitting Fitness In & Improving Muscle Memory	p. 57
June 2012: Sorting Your Options & Finding Balance	p. 60
Bonus Tips: Ball Crunch with Weight	p. 62
August 2012: Plan Your Success	p. 63
Bonus Article: Back Strength for Jumping, Polo and Reining	p. 66
September 2012: You Are Worth It	p. 69
October 2012: Get a Better Seat & Avoid Low Back Strain	p. 71
November 2012: Easy Tips for Getting More	p. 73
December 2012: Join the Dance	p. 76

January 2011 EquiTip: Plan a Little, Gain a Lot

Quotes of the Month:

"Bad planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part." **Anonymous (could be your horse)**

"Planning is bringing the future into the present so you can do something about it now."
Alan Lakein (author of "How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life")

Happy New Year! Many people like to start the new year with resolutions around health and fitness. As a rider, you probably start your year thinking about your training season. If you compete, you may already have an idea about the competitions you are hoping to prepare for. With our horses, we know that getting ready for events in the summer takes time and preparation. Teaching a pattern, dressage test, or skills for advancing to the next level jump course all take preparation through breaking down the picture into building blocks. You train the building blocks, slowly putting them together as your horse becomes fitter and understands the different components.

You may start with a general plan, and some weeks you and your horse will move along faster than expected. At other times, you may find yourself taking two to three times the time you thought you'd need. Improving your performance is dependent on your horse's learning curve, your clarity as a trainer, and many other factors. Performance may mean competition for some. Others may define performance as more related to your communication and harmony, and ability to do those activities you find fun and relaxing, without injury. Performance isn't so much about competition, as it is about your horse's way of going under your guidance. Competition is meant to test your training habits on the way to the level of horsemanship you are aiming at.

While you may have already formed an idea of where you want your horse to be five months from now, it can be a little daunting for riders to create a similar plan for themselves. Messaging from the urban-based fitness industry promotes getting to a gym at least three times a week as the only way to be serious about your goals, so many people fall into an all or nothing trap. The time it can take to get to your horse, tack him up, ride, untack and get home again is significant. For many riders, there is simply not time to fit a gym visit in very often.

As a rider, you do not need to go to a gym or fitness facility several times a week to reach your riding fitness goals. The most important step you can take, is to make a plan, and then decide which types of activities you need to do to create the improvements you need. In the same way a little time planning your horse's training saves you time retraining, you can save time and help yourself stay motivated and on track by planning your approach to your training.

Start with your riding goal. Let's say that you have your first competition or long trail ride planned for approximately 5 months from now. For YOUR training, this means you need to peak your fitness about 4.5 months from now, because once you start getting busy on your summer season, you will only have time to maintain. This past week, I attended high

performance human athlete training for riders. The speaker underlined two points that are very important for your conditioning:

- a) You will lose fitness during the competitive season because of the demand on your body and time, so 'stock up' on fitness beforehand. This is easy to understand because we train horses the same way- you train to a higher level than what you are going to compete at, because it reduces stress, and allows you to focus on finer points closer to the time when it matters.
- b) Plan your training with 10% increases at a time. As she said in the clinic, you can't go from 'stall rest' to mini-prix in 24hrs.

The starting point for planning backwards, is to have clear goals. To survive a show day and have stamina for your riding test or jumping class in the heat of the day in the middle of the afternoon, you need a basic level of cardio-vascular fitness. Based on where you are, figure out what reasonable endurance goals would be each month. Let's say that you want to do two dressage tests at your first show. You should have enough cardio-vascular fitness to do a half hour of medium to intense cardio work by that time, with your heart rate coming back down within a few minutes of stopping exercise. This level of fitness, would ensure that you have trained your muscle cells and cardio-respiratory system to a level of fitness where your fatigued body can still provide sufficient oxygen to your muscles and brain to keep up with demand so you can performance at your best.

Let's assume you haven't been doing anything lately for your cardio-vascular training. In fact, let's assume the situation is so bad, you think your riding IS cardio-vascular training, because it feels that way. By the way, when this is the case, it does not prove that riding is cardio-vascular. It shows that you are not fit enough for the riding you do. You are guaranteed to be not responding optimally to your horse, and to be causing him to compensate for your lack of fitness. Except for galloping cross country, or in the middle of a jumper course, you should not feel as if you are getting a cardio-vascular workout while you are riding.

Starting from zero, you would need to do approximately 10 minutes of cardio-vascular work a couple of times a week in your first couple of weeks. You might increase the time by a minute or two, until you reach a total of 20 minutes. Then you might start increasing the intensity by increasing your pace for short spurts in 30 second increments, within your 20 minutes.

What you do isn't that important. Walk, cycle, run, swim, kickbox...do anything that gets your heart-rate up to the 'talk-test' point for at least 10 minutes. Since you are not training for these other sports but just using them as conditioning for your riding, it does not even matter if you do the same activity each week. The important point is making time at least twice a week, to do whatever fits your schedule/preference and lifestyle and will elevate your heart to sufficient level. You can significantly change your riding by improving your stamina and body control through improving your cardio-vascular. The 'talk-test' means that you can talk, but it's not that easy to carry a comfortable conversation. It does not matter if your intensity is pretty low at first. It's about starting where you're at, and nudging your training forward in a measurable way from one week to the next. Think about the old analogy of eating an elephant one bite at a time. Remember to warm-up and cool down by light movement for a few minutes before and after your more intense segment.

Bonus Article: Balance Yourself, Balance Your Horse

This article was originally published in Dressage Today magazine.

Your horse is a mirror. You have probably heard of this concept referred to with expressions like 'it's a rein issue' or a 'breeches problem'. These and similar expressions are intended to make the point that the horse will reflect what you tell him physically. He does not read your mind. He reads your body. Within that vocabulary, your posture and weight distribution are much louder to him, than what you do with your legs and hands.

In all disciplines, especially in dressage, most riders understand that the most important point of contact between horse and rider is the seat, and that the ideal is to keep weight distribution even between both seat-bones and both legs. There are moments in a ride when maintaining balance may require activity on one side more than another, or a feeling of putting weight on one side more than another. When this happens, it is a response to correct imbalance the motion of horse introduced to the rider, not a creation of imbalance on the part of the rider.

For example, some instructors will tell a rider to put a little more weight in the inside stirrup on a small circle. The goal is not to have more weight on the inside stirrup or seatbone. Discussing weight aids at this point would be a different topic for a different article. From the point of view of finding balance over the horse's spine, the goal is to counter-act the natural shift to the outside which occurs with centrifugal force acting on the rider's body. By resisting being thrown to the outside, the rider assists the horse in staying 'straight' and balanced as he moves around the curve of the circle. A rider who simply lets themselves get thrown to outside, will throw the horse to the outside. Drifting or tension in one side of the horse's back are common results.

There are many benefits of balance in your horse:

1. He has less tension, because he feels more sure of his footing and his ability to manage your weight.
2. He can move more correctly because you are not throwing him off.
3. He can achieve correct movement without having to use compensating patterns in his own body, which create uneven muscle memory, or worse- uneven wear and load on joints, back and legs.
4. His rhythm improves because he is comfortable, and able to move symmetrically.
5. When he has relaxation, rhythm and suppleness, he has better contact
6. You can see where this is going: when he has relaxation, rhythm and even, consistent contact, you will be able to achieve impulsion, straightness and collection.

Even outside the flat riding arena, a balance horse does everything better. He can jump and negotiate terrain much more efficiently, safely and accurately. These are main reasons why dressage is an important part of an Event horse's life.

Even though the rider may weigh only 15-20% of the horse's weight, the rider is leading the dance. The rider has responsibility for correcting, guiding and improving the horse, and for not putting undue strain on him. The rider is responsible for clear aids, and for making it easier for the horse to go better, as opposed to introducing unconscious challenges to the

horse's ability to perform the tasks requested. A good example would be the rider who sits to the left, but finds themselves kicking at the horse with their outside leg or pulling on the inside rein while tracking right. The rider cannot figure out why the horse drifts off the circle, or points to the outside of the circle when the rider believes they are giving clear aids to bend to the right- not realizing their uneven weight distribution is making the task of bending right and maintaining rhythm very difficult for the horse.

You must have at least the same degree of balance you expect of your horse. Balance and self-carriage go hand-in-hand. As the leader between the two of you, you are more responsible for self-carriage.

Balance on the horse is in two directions:

1. Left/Right Balance over the Spine: this is the even pressure of your seatbones and even weight distribution to each side of the horse. I once heard a clinician instruct a participant to ride both halves of the horse to make this point.
2. Forward/Backward Balance: When you are properly balanced in the saddle, there is even distribution of weight from front to back. You are not tipping forward, nor leaning back.

The interesting thing about riding a horse as opposed to a bicycle or other sport requiring balance, is that the horse is in constant motion. On a horse, balance is a dynamic state- a little like staying upright on a windsurfer or with both feet on a skateboard.

Many riders make the mistake of trying to create balance through tension and rigidity. They may strike a correctly aligned position at the halt, and attempt to hold themselves there. In doing so, they tend to create tightness in their hips, legs, back and shoulders which is counterproductive. To remain in balance on the horse's back, your body needs to be able to respond free from tension, on several movement planes.

One of the best things about getting better balance as a rider, is that you actually CAN improve your balance.

Your body is constantly adjusting and re-adjusting to force that influences forward/back, up/down, left/right and even diagonally. You do not stand a chance of consciously controlling all the muscle movements required to maintain dynamic balance. Your body needs to learn to do it for you. They keep you balanced when there is the right mix of lack of negative tension (relaxed but not having a nap), and positive tension (muscle tone and muscle balance across your joints, limbs and core).

Imagine standing on a trampoline. It would be impossible to keep your balance on the trampoline, with rigid legs and locked-out knees, or tension in your back. To keep your balance, you need to bend your joints (triple-flexion in sports conditioning means equivalent 'ready' bend in ankles, knees and hips). You also need to maintain a feeling of softness in them, without floppiness. If you test your balance on a trampoline or BOSU® (exercise half-ball), think about 'low' or 'lower' and observe what happens to your balance when you tense up, or try and stand rigid.

If you use a trampoline, it is important that it be neither too rigid (hard as the floor) or too soft ('give' drops your foot an inch or more). When there is too much give on a trampoline, the

trampoline does the work of softening, and you do not get the important feedback from the trampoline that your joints are actually stiff. When you have practiced standing on both legs, progress to single leg-work.

Working on your balance on the ground is very valuable, even though the seatbones, not the feet, are the primary point of contact with 'ground' for a rider. For other sports, 'ground' is literally, the ground under your feet. Even though a rider's 'ground' is in their seat, the horse rises to meet your seat, raising the stirrup bars. In order not to block this motion, your joints need the same softness required for standing on a trampoline. Also, the core muscle recruitment that happens when you do balancing exercises on the ground, is still correct when you are balancing on your two seatbones. This is why it is so important for riders to actively strengthen their core through unmounted training.

Having good core and especially good back muscle tone will allow your torso to maintain balance without introducing 'need' for tension. Tension is of course not a 'need' when riding, but your brain/body think that it needs tension to create stability.

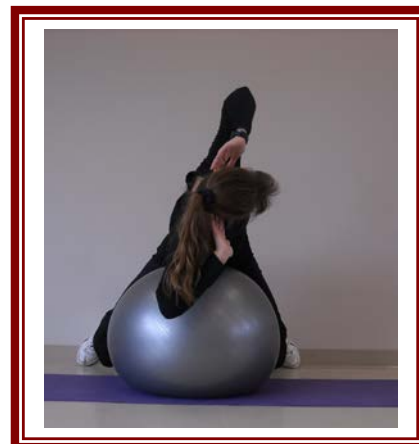
This article is just a scratching of the surface on the topic of balance. For this month, I have included two easy exercises you can use to improve your balance. One is the back extension with a twist. You want to do this exercise on a fitness ball when you can because the ball will roll and inform you if you lose your straightness. To do the exercise, lift your torso up to about 90 degrees with the floor, and then twist so that one elbow points to the ceiling, and one to the floor- without taking your hips with you and rolling the ball.

This exercise will improve your left/right balance, while simultaneously helping you strengthen the lower back/lumbar area muscles so important to good posture and good half halts.

Back Extension Start



Lift with Rotation or Twist



The second exercise is to stand on an unstable surface. Use a BOSU® (they can be pricey), trampoline (very affordable) or fitness sitting disk (air-filled- also very low cost), or even a big firm cushion. After you find you can stay upright (in a slight squat) quite comfortably without wobbling, graduate to a single leg stand or stand/squat. You will not only build up the muscles in your thighs, and improve joint integrity in your knees and ankles, but you will also improve your ability to achieve the relaxedness you need in your joints (to absorb motion) while maintaining positive engagement of muscles that support your posture in dynamic movement.

Balance Exercises on BOSU and Trampoline



February 2011: Keep Your Back Strong and Supple

Quotes of the Month:

“Prepare yourself for the world, as the athletes used to do for their exercise; oil your mind and your manners, to give them the necessary suppleness and flexibility; strength alone will not do.”

Lord Chesterfield, British statesman

“Nothing destroys authority more than the unequal and untimely interchange of power stretched too far and relaxed too much.” **Sir Francis Bacon, political philosopher**

The quality of your horse's back is like the holy grail in riding: that goal of long and strong, swingy suppleness that supports your weight and allows your horse's hind end well under him to create impulsion without tension. If I were able to tell you exactly what to do to get this elusive chalice, I might not be writing fittips in my spare time late at night.

There is a contribution to this goal which your conditioning plan can play. When you think about how easily your self-carriage and body usage affects the way your horse is going, you can remember to switch tactics mentally: instead of focusing quite so much on his back, spend some extra time on the quality of your own back and how your back muscles work. So often when I do clinics and work with riders, I see the horse's back reflecting a mirror image of what is going on in the rider. I'm sure you've noticed a rider with tense shoulders and hollow low back, on a horse with a rigid back, tight neck and hind legs out behind him. Or perhaps a rider with a loose and imprecise seat, on a horse that can't seem to stay straight down the centre line.

Riding is a unique sport in that it is the only one where a rider's 'feet' are their seatbones. Most sports involve a transfer of energy from the connection between an athlete's feet, and the ground. In a rider, the rider's seatbones are the primary point of contact with the working surface (the horse's back). A second major difference is one that separates riding from most other seated sports: the horse's back is a dynamic surface which requires the rider's pelvis and spine to move in at least three planes to follow the motion created by the horse. The effect is not the same as for other seated sports. For example, bicycle seats do not move anywhere near as much as a horse's back. Cycling does not require a great deal of pelvis motion. Watersports like canoe/kayak are similar to riding in the requirement for core control to respond to dynamic motion under the seat while managing weight shifts. However, the two seatbones are not asked to work separately in these sports. In riding, each seatbone is independent, and moves forward, up, back and down independently. The rider's spine has to move forward and back (undulating softly), up and down, and in rotation (ie: turning your shoulders while maintaining hip direction forward in lateral movements).

All of this movement puts a lot of load on the spinal column. When riders do not have sufficient back strength and control, they can develop stiffness as the body tries to protect the spine by tightening soft tissue to create stability. A stiff back, back injury or tension can all work to cause a rider to block motion with their seat, instead of absorbing it. When that happens, it's like poking your horse in the back or clamping down on his back muscles. It is very very difficult for your horse to use his back properly if you are not doing so. As you work him through incorrect back usage, he will anchor muscle firing patterns that are not optimal

for the way you want him to use his back. He will develop the type and quality of muscle fibre along his back, which corresponds to the work he is being asked to do, whether the asking is conscious or unconscious.

Doing some work to keep your back flexible and strong at the same time will go a long way to giving you the ability to maintain a soft and responsive spine, within correct carriage for the duration of your time in the saddle. Unmounted work can really help a rider's back, because you do not have the opportunity in the saddle to fully stretch the muscle fibres, or to put your back muscles into enough range of motion to evenly build strength through the length of the muscles involved.

If you have blocked or tight areas of your back, your body does not have an opportunity to fix these problems while you are riding. Instead, it will organize itself to absorb the horse's motion anyway by using compensating patterns. For example, you can frequently see a rider with a stiff upper back (exaggerated roundedness or tension) have what I call a 'whipple-waist'. Since the rider's whole spine does not move properly, motion not distributed through the 'stuck' segment is released through a more pliable segment- usually the lower back. So then the rider has too much motion in their lower back. No wonder there are so many low back pain issues among riders.

It's important to do activities which favour building strength and suppleness in the whole length of your spine from your pelvis to the base of your skull.

I suggest three rules of thumb for improving your back:

1. Do exercises to find the 'neutral spine' posture. Squatting slightly against a wall is a good one. Remember to tuck your tailbone under slightly, and see if you can teach your body to recognize a straight, neutral spine. If you can't recognize it under stable conditions like 'sitting' against a wall, your brain will not know how to recruit the right muscles when you are in dynamic motion in the saddle. You will think you are straight, when you are not.
2. Find stretches that mobilize your spine in all directions. Yoga poses and stretches are great examples. Getting the tension out of your back muscles is really important.
3. Do exercises that strengthen your back in all directions, in order to stabilize it. Flexibility on it's own without tone means a floppy back that puts too much pressure on your disks. You need as much back strength as you can get. Strength on it's own without flexibility can result in a rigid or injured back. So you need both in order to achieve suppleness.

In summary, you need a balance of strength and flexibility in your back to be able to follow your horse's motion enough to lead him effectively and clearly with your seat.

March 2011: Core Training Secrets

Quotes of the Month:

"There are two mistakes one can make along the road to truth...not going all the way, and not starting."

Buddha

"The beginning is the most important part of the work." **Plato**

Last month we looked at how the spine works, and why you need core strength to support your spine for riding. The stronger and more balanced your core muscles are, the better control you have of your pelvis and shoulders- and better balance. Better balance will translate into helping you maintain correct pelvis alignment, keep your legs from gripping the horse/knees riding up, and a host of other negative compensating patterns.

The big question is how to train your core. The reason that a strong core is especially important for riders is that you mostly ride with your torso. Whether you realize it or not, your limbs are completely secondary aids to your horse in comparison with your seat, weight and torso orientation. Observe a para-equestrian such as Canadian Olympian, Gold medalist Lauren Barwick who is paralyzed from the waist down. ([YouTube Link to Lauren riding.](#)) She and similar riders show that neither balancing on your horse, nor giving correct and effective aids depends as much on limbs as torso position and usage.

Your limbs have a completely secondary impact on your horse's way of going to your seat and torso. If confused between a leg and a seat, your horse will follow the seat/weight. This explains why he may seem to drift in one direction even though you are giving him leg aids to the contrary.

Tipping forward with a weak core is not the same as deliberately putting your body in two-point position. A correct jumping position must include a strong core to help the rider maintain hip and heel alignment and grounding through the seat, even though the seat is in the air and the back is tipped forward. Otherwise, the rider would be falling onto his horse's neck, or involuntary shifts of body-weight might cause the horse to bear onto the forehead.

Your body weight distribution and motion affects your horse's movement with the tiniest shifts.

Muscles in your core layer like plywood, some of them orienting horizontally, and some vertically, and some responsible for angled or rotational force.

Your core muscles are the bridge connecting your upper and lower body and providing an 'anchor' for your shoulders and your legs. Many riders with pulling hands often turn out to have weak core muscles. The pulling hands are the body's compensation for it's inability to stabilize your position through the core.

Without a strong core, your body starts to use compensating motion patterns to perform tasks you ask of it. Compensating motion patterns cause hypermobility or stimulation of other muscles, which uses other muscles and joints more than they were meant to or in movements not best suited. This introduces un-necessary wear and tear on that area. For

example, a rider with stiff hips and weak lower abdominals will have a tendency to absorb more of their horse's motion in their lower back, which can lead to pain and strain over time.

Working the core makes so much sense for riders, that if I am working with clients who are under time pressure, I will frequently advise them that if they have to drop exercises for the sake of time one area they have to keep is core training. You can improve your core strength and maintain it with just a few minutes a day. Once your body learns how to integrate your core properly into all motion, you need very little time using specific exercises to maintain your strength.

When I am designing a training program at a clinic or for a private client, I will emphasize different exercises and degrees of core training that depend on several factors: the individual (age, fitness level, physical issues), the discipline requirements (cross country fences introduce much heavier demand in more directions on a rider's back than other events), and the amount of time and tools available to the rider for training. However, most riders can benefit from any core training as long as it is well-rounded enough for a rider, consistent and keeps you interested in doing it faithfully. To get results you also need to always push the envelope just a little bit further each time you work out. With core training, you have to monitor yourself. You are the only one who will know if you are giving an exercise 100%, or just going through the motions. Actually, you may be the only human who will know. Your horse will notice right away.

The principles and rules of thumb I use when training clients individually, in groups, or even in writing my ebook "Complete Core Workout for Riders", are always the same.

Here is the formula I use for designing core workouts:

1. If you are just starting out, train for just a few minutes each day. Start with a commitment to do 30 repetitions of something. Anything. It will take 2 minutes. You'll feel successful, and find it motivating to continue when you see immediate results in feeling more toned in the tummy and better posture. When your core workout starts to take 15-20 minutes, you can drop it to several times a week. When you reach a good base of core fitness, you can maintain it with just a couple of core training sessions a week because you will have also taught your body to integrate core stabilization into everything you do.

2. Include a mix of active movement exercises and isometric exercises. The active ones force your core muscles into greater range of motion than when you are riding. This is what allows you to build supple strength along the full length of the muscle, whereas hoping to get stronger just by riding causes your body to strengthen in short segments. Under pressure, these become knots. Isometric exercises require you to hold a position for a period of time, stimulating your body to integrate all layers of core stabilizing muscles. You need to train both movement and isometric capacity in your muscles because you need to both hold your posture through a long period of time, but also change position on purpose, and in the moment you want to.

3. Train endurance. As noted above, you need endurance. 30 crunches on a ball or your floor are more useful training for a rider than a set of 10-15 repetitions using an abdominal crunch machine at the gym with weights. You do not need to use your core to powerlift, just support your own body against constant pressure (the horse's movement) for an extended

period of time. Building endurance in muscles is about more than just repetitions. It takes time to change the muscle fibres so that they are capable of greater endurance.

4. Train eccentric and concentric motion. This means, train going through both the 'up' and 'down' phases of an exercise. Resisting motion is just as valuable for strength training as motion, and most of what your torso does is resist motions so your body doesn't block your horse's movement, and so that it can apply only those motions you need to give aids to your horse. An example of eccentric/concentric training is doing leg raise/lowers on the floor. Most people think of the leg raise part only. Lowering your legs slowly while keeping a neutral spine on the floor actually builds your lower back and abdominal strength more than the lift phase did.

5. Train all four sides and rotational movement. Select exercises that train your abdominals, back muscles, obliques, and also train rotational movements.

6. Train the full length of your back and abdominal muscles. Select exercises to cover lower, middle and upper back/abs.

7. Advanced Options: when you get more practiced at core training, mix it up for variety and 'layer' your exercises for maximum effect. The same workout will not work for you the same way, forever. Having a mix of seated, exercise ball, lying and standing type core exercises gives you more ways to train a muscle/movement, without getting bored. Standing exercise have the added advantage of also giving you a bonus workout for thighs, glutes and hip stabilizers. Layering your exercises is where you do one after the other to give the muscles maximum workout by using them similarly but differently back to back. An example would be doing a plank after some crunches on your ball. You will find you do not need to hold the plank as long to get the same burning effect on your deep core muscles and lower back. So you get to save time.

There are dozens of exercises in the Complete Core Workout. Another book I recommend is "Strength Ball Training" (no, I don't get commission for endorsing it.) Pilates classes are an excellent place to learn good core strengthening and posture technique.

Here are three exercises you can do which would cover all 6 principles above. I have included a YouTube link beside each exercise so that you have an idea of how to do it. (Please note, I can't fully vouch for other people's training methods/technique. If you feel any discomfort from doing core exercises, you should consult a physiotherapist to make sure you are using correct technique, and that there are not other biomechanic issues you should be aware of.)

1. **Ball Pass** (should do 10-20 x)

Key: Keep your spine 'neutral' on the floor as you lower the ball between your feet. Bend your knees on the way down if you cannot keep your back pressing on the floor with your legs straight. The fellow in this video is quite fit. Most people- athletes included- can lower the ball about half way before needing to bend the knees. It does nothing for your lower back to put undue pressure on it. In the up phase, reach the ball up as high toward the ceiling as possible to make your body give 100% effort to your abdominal contraction.

2. **Side Plank** (should work up to 60 seconds each side)

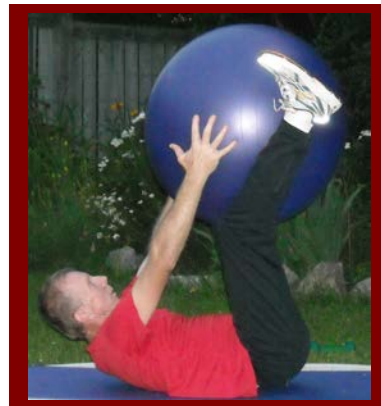
Key: It is easier on your shoulders to lean on an elbow on the floor. An advanced version could be up on one hand, while doing a simultaneous side leg raise.

3. **Back Extension** (should work up to 30x)

Key: Raise your body no higher than 45 degrees to the floor to protect your lower back from strain. You will find ample examples online of people doing variations of this exercise with far too much lift which is incorrect, and dangerous for your lower back. The fellow in this video uses correct form. You can do them with your feet under an object or on the wall. You can use wide legs, or bend your knees like a frog to hug the ball with your knees if it is easier to maintain your position. A simpler version would be lying stretched out on the floor to do the exercise. The ball forces you to keep your hips stable while your shoulders are turning, which is very useful for a rider.

Many more core exercises are available in the ebook [Complete Core Workout for Riders](#).

Ball Pass



Side Plank



April 2011: Tailoring Your Training for Your Body Type

Quotes of the Month:

"There is just one life for each of us: our own." **Euripides, ancient Greek playwright**

"To thine own self be true. At it must follow as night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man (or horse!)." **William Shakespeare, Hamlet**

Sometimes people ask me questions about when the best time to train is, or what the best exercises for riders are. Those are hard questions to answer- just as hard as similar questions about horse training. Most trainers and coaches know that an exercise that works well for one horse, may not have the same result with another- or even with the same horse on a different day or under different circumstances.

There are rules of thumb of course. In last month's EquiTip we talked about why core training is so important for riders of all disciplines, and how to build an effective core workout. I consider core training a foundational building block, along with stretching, for any rider's program.

Usually when a rider asks me when the best time to train is, my answer could be summarized as 'whenever you'll actually do it'. Regardless of scientifically optimal training time in relation to your metabolism and bio-cycles....the best time is the time you can fit in your schedule and are likely to maintain. For a more complete answer, I think it's important for a rider to think about the timing of their personal training in relationship to other duties, and their riding time and personality.

If you start with the base assumption that you want to bring a balanced, supple and self-controlled body and mind to your ride, then the timing and choice of your training can be very important.

I have recommended that a type-A client with a responsible day-job, go and do her more rigorous cardio training before her ride. After an entire day of getting progressively more keyed-up, she was contributing tension to the ride. Stretching beforehand did not sufficiently exhaust the 'fast-twitch' muscle fibers and mental patterns for her to be calm and balanced in her ride. The cardio workout recommendation was for a short but intense 15-20 minutes of powerwalking or running to release built-up energy from the day, restore hip mobility after a day at the office, and spare her horse being the outlet of that high a level of intensity.

In other cases, alternating days with rigorous workouts, and riding days had the same effect of helping the rider find a place to channel mental energy, and bring a chemically and emotionally calmer self to the work with their horse. Your muscles respond to the chemicals coursing through your brain during the day. A build-up of mental intensity can create a physical need for activity intense enough to re-calibrate your muscles so that they do not signal tension to your horse, and so that they respond when and how you need them to.

A highly keyed up person sometimes cannot mellow out with the same low-key techniques a calmer person can, until they have wrung every bit of high-intensity out first. A person who finds themselves having to resist drumming their fingers in a yoga class, might be someone who would benefit from high-output bursts of shorter but intense exercise before stretching or riding.

A different rider with a different personality might find that running before riding created tensions instead of releasing them. A calmer more easygoing rider with trouble getting the responses out of their body that they want during the ride, might consider 'waking up' neuromuscular connections and muscle tone through some lower intensity exercises that focus on technique, just before the ride. I had one rider with trouble engaging her back muscles (she tended to grip and rely on biceps as an unconscious default) do rowing exercises with exercise tubing in the barn before riding. Doing the exercises at the barn was a good way to find the time to do them. Also, engaging the muscle group before riding re-inforced the connection and helped her brain route more automatically to her back instead of her arms and grip while she was riding.

Generally, you do not want to work important stabilizing muscles to exhaustion before you ride. I would not do a 300 rep core workout immediately before riding. You also do not want to do deep stretching immediately before riding because you will reduce the effectiveness of muscles you need to support your structure, and place yourself more at risk of injury. However, several hours earlier in the day, would probably be fine.

I sometimes find that I can fit more in when I get home from the barn, already sweaty, dirty and wearing stretchy clothing. I just head straight down to my basement training area for about 15-20 minutes before showering. If your day is very tightly packed, a timing factor for you might very well be around not having to shower and change multiple times.

If you are a highly social person, it's a great idea to structure your training plan to include a group activity or a friend at least once a week so you can kill two birds with one stone, and have more fun. Introversions/extroversions really are important factors in the types of exercise you choose for your crosstraining.

Another personality and scheduling factor has to do with all the other things you put your body through in a week. If you have a job that is very physical (like barn work) and you ride, then a large percentage of your cross-training will have to be about balancing and stretching. You do not want to overtrain. The same would apply for a rider who is on multiple horses a day. A professional trainer has risks of repetitive strain that an amateur does not have. With the increased loading on particular muscles, a professional rider like any high performance athlete has to train very hard and deliberately for balance in muscles not used as much during riding, in order to protect their joints and structure. They also have to train muscles used a lot, to have enough mass to easily handle the load placed on them, in order to avoid strain on ligaments.

The professional athlete also has to be extremely careful about not overtraining. While an amateur can easily build a day or so of rest into their schedule, a professional trainer can be tempted to work every day of the week. This is not practiced in professional sport, and high performance athletes in all sports build rest into their week, and light weeks into every 8-12 week cycle, and have a period of the year for active rest where they do not train in their sport at all. Professional riders often get strain injury that could have been avoided, if they had a

period in their week on a regular basis where they gave their body a chance to rebuild torn muscle fibre, and depleted energy stores.

On the other hand, an amateur who leads a busy life and rides one horse 3-5 times a week as their main source of exercise, is not doing adequate physical activity for their human needs for bone strength, structural balance and cardio-vascular health. This rider needs to make time for a well rounded exercise program, so that they carry a generally balanced body to their ride and have the cardio-vascular stamina needed for the ride. If your ride feels like your workout, you are not fit for the ride. You are making your horse compensate for your own lack of stamina and self-carriage, and fitness for the task. Since your horse can't speak, he can't tell you. Many horses are fortunate that their rider is barely 15% of their weight, and only on their back a few times a week.

Your choice of training might also relate to your body type. Muscular types (mesomorphs) are physically 'happier' when they have good muscle tone and can usually get quite strong. If a mesomorph does not do balanced strength training, their bodies often develop very strong imbalances which have a negative impact on their riding. A mesomorph should think of their body like a hedge: if you don't train it to grow where you want it to, it will get strong in random zones that may work against you. Usually, a mesomorph who is not training their body apart from riding, gets too strong in inner thighs, biceps and shoulder muscles, and has a tendency to 'muscle' their horse into obedience. When working with mesomorphs, I like to remind them that the purpose of building strength is so that they don't use it while riding. While they might want me to give them strengthening exercises to address issues, I spend time convincing them that taking the time for gentler exercises for stretching and body awareness is equally important.

Ectomorphs (naturally really slim/thin body types) can create strain injuries in themselves if they put too much load on their frame. In women, I see a lot of this strain in backs and shoulders. A person with insufficient muscle on their frame often ends up tense because their body tightens ligaments and other tissues to try and create stability where muscle is not doing the job. There is a lot of load moving through a 130lb female rider on a 1,000lb horse. Horses read this as general tension, or simply rigidity that blocks their motion. An ectomorph might gravitate more toward gentler forms of exercise that tone and build core strength, rather than limb strength, such as Pilates. When working with ectomorphs, I find I have to work hard to convince them to spend time on shoulder and back strength which would protect them from long-term strain and acute injury commonly seen.

An endomorph (generally rounder, softer person) would be miserable trying to train to get a physique like either of the other two. Endomorphs often enjoy activities like running less, because it hurts. Body type is a big determinant of your exercise goals and natural preferences. It is a good thing that riding has nothing to do with body type. If you do need to lose some weight to be fair to your horse, that's one thing to consider. Working with an endomorph, we often have to pay closer attention to diet and food portions to use fuel timing to bring metabolism up. Using short intensity intervals during training with my endomorph clients helps them pick up their metabolism and overall output, while keeping the workout changing, and encouragement with frequent recovery periods.

Most of the time, it's a question of developing better self-carriage and stamina. A larger rider who is a very aware athlete with good self-carriage and stamina, is nicer on their horse than

an unfit scrawny person who tenses up because they do not have sufficient muscle mass or control for self-carriage and effective aids.

Thinking about your personality and body type, weekly agenda and riding time will help you find the right activities for you, the right time for you to do them, and the right balance between your mounted and unmounted work. For most people, the real motivating factor is looking at you over the stall wall. Bring your best self to your training partner.



May 2011: Don't Give Up

Quotes of the Month:

"Make the most of yourself for that is all there is of you." **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

"Doing the best at this moment, puts you in the best place for the next moment." **Oprah Winfrey**

"Anything worth doing, is worth doing slowly." **Mae West**

This week I had the privilege of doing a fundraiser workshop at a stable near me. I was allowed to select the charity, so I selected the [ALS Society of Ontario](#). My Dad has lived with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) for 15 years. It is a progressively degenerative disease that attacks neuromuscular connections as the person slowly loses ability to control movement. It is a very expensive disease because it usually progresses very rapidly, sending a family into a landslide of need for mobility equipment which is not covered by government funding routes that extend to other major illnesses or which would kick in if the individual were retirement age. Because I can see first hand what a difference the right mobility equipment makes in quality of life for an individual and an entire family, donations make a huge and immediate difference in people's lives. (If you wish to make a tax deductible donation, click the link above.)

All activity is tiring to someone with this disease. Overworking the body can result in further damage to the already fragile neuro-muscular network and connections. Depending on the stage of advancement, the person may have to discontinue riding: the muscle stimulation that is therapeutic to riders with other disabilities, can cross the line and be destructive to a rider with ALS. People deal with the inability to ride differently. My Dad used to ride motorcycles. He notices them everywhere. But he avoids events with nice bikes like the plague, because the sound, smell and sight overwhelm him with grief.

There was a big irony in doing this fundraiser workshop because most of the riders were people who had adopted riding recently, and later in life. The focus of the workshop was on finding or re-finding those neuromuscular connections that affect posture and self-carriage. We were learning how to move, on behalf of those who can't. My Dad is my main business support team member for anything that can be done from a wheelchair, like my accounting, or helping me get ebooks together. So, in a way, he was doing the fundraiser with me. He is also my inspiration. My interest in strength and conditioning started 25 years ago inspired by my Dad. We were not in contact in my teen years due to divorce, and I felt connected to him by going to the weight gym. It is hard to watch a former bodybuilder and martial arts blackbelt with a permanent 6-pack, melt into a chair and struggle to hold a pen.

It is even harder to be that person. He does not give up. Dad actually thanks 'Lou' for the blessings he has learned since becoming less independent. Like accepting love. Dad appreciates every day and hour of life, and exercises his freedom of movement to whatever capacity he can, every day. Where would we be if we all did that?

Every time I train, and every time I ride, I am grateful for limbs that work and the ability to use them. The thought really helps defeat the other thoughts that come so easily to a middle-aged rider that wants to do the best they can: thoughts about the windows of opportunity you missed, and the difference between what you wish your body would do, and what it actually does. Thoughts about your station in life as compared to where your youthful dreams would have put you.

I really enjoy working with riders like the participants of this workshop. You may not be where you want to be in your riding. If you are middle-aged, you are likely highly competent in other areas of your life, which can make achieving the excellence you are seeking in your riding frustrating. If you were not blessed to start riding at the same time as you learned to walk and keep it up all your life with access to the right horses and instruction, then you are in what is called a 'remedial athlete' position. You have missed physiological windows of best opportunity for coding muscle cell development, muscle memory and neuromuscular patterns.

The excellent news is that if you are patient and persistent, you can bridge a lot of the gaps. In sport, the term 'physical vocabulary' refers to the millions of movement patterns your human body has available to it. The younger you are, the easier it is to access these patterns and naturalize them. The older you get, the more your body 'forgets' the patterns it does not use, or does not use regularly. When you think about it, this is not so different from the way a young horse is so teachable as compared to an older one that might have missed being backed and trained well earlier in life.

Since both the body and the brain are very plastic, you can re-acquire muscle memory with patient training. Sometimes we are too impatient, forgetting that it took thousands of tries before you stood up, and thousands more before your walking looked like human walking. It's no different when you are trying later in life to acquiring muscle movement patterns that help you in the saddle. If you have ever learned a language when you were young, and then forgotten most of it through disuse, you have a very good idea of how this works.

The term for creating a muscle memory is 'grooving'. Like putting a recording on a vinyl record. You can re-groove, or train new grooves. If your body has built a neuromuscular 16 lane highway to certain areas (your tight shoulder/neck muscles for example), you will have some work ahead of you to cut off the almost instant tendency for your body to respond automatically with less effective movement patterns (gripping/shrugging up tension into your shoulders and upper back and gripping with your arms). At the same time, laying down new patterns (for example, engaging your core for nice half halts without tension in your shoulders) will also take time and patience. If you do not have a neuro-degenerative disease like my father, then you can actually 'bushwhack' those overgrown and forgotten pathways (to your lower abdominals for example).

You can tread the paths repeatedly until there is a much clearer route (your body knows the lower abdominals are there, and uses them instantly when you tell it to). The more you consciously choose this new, but still relatively narrow path instead of the old highway, the more your body will adapt to the new groove. This is a stage of muscle memory building that takes you from a cognitive stage (thinking about it consciously doing groundwork exercises like abdominal work for lower abs) through a conscious functional stage (also engaging them when you're in the saddle- still a little consciously). Eventually with enough repetition, you

have a new muscle memory when your body engages your core correctly, and all you did was think about half-halt, not about what muscles were doing which part of it.

Every time your body gets lazy and tries to jump on the old highway, you have to stop and repeat correctly. You also need to recognize neural fatigue in the early stages and cut your ride short and get off when you have used the correct pattern successfully several times. Riding past the mental fatigue point would result in instant re-establishment of the old, less constructive muscle memory you don't want any more. When you think about it, re-grooving muscle memory is like training a young horse, or training a new movement on your horse. A few minutes is effective. Overdoing it kills the movement and dulls your horse's pleasure in learning. We work the same way, but our adult brains often over-ride the sensible approach we would take with a horse or a child.

If you are a rider who has come back to riding after a hiatus, or has started riding later in life, or has missed golden windows of opportunity for athletic development, do not give up. Like a good mutual fund, it takes all of you to ride well. What isn't coming for 'free' physically any more, can be compensated for by your increasing mental assets: your mature brain that can understand more, and afford to be patient.



June 2011: Easy Ways to Improve Awareness

Quotes of the Month:

“Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.”

Thomas A. Edison

“Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough; we must do .”

Leonardo da Vinci

“Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity .”

Seneca, Roman philosopher

This time of year is a busy one. Riders who are competing are not usually adding new elements to either the horse's or their own training program. They are maintaining what they have spent all season achieving, with the focus of energy on the competition cycle. Even non-competitive riders have more options for events, activities and longer rides during the summer. All the preparation and trailering takes a physical toll on both rider and horse.

Most sports have a more intense training period in the off season, and shift to maintenance mode in peak season. A typical athlete training plan takes ALL the physical demands of the week or day into account. When there is higher demand due to circumstances like trailering, the stress of being in new locations or dehydration with summer heat, it's time to let other demands drop. It is not the time to feel guilty about what you can't accomplish from your fitness plan.

Knowing that the physical training load will drop in certain periods is why athletes train to a capacity much higher than needed for competition in the first place. It is also why the horse is typically trained to a higher level than the one he actually competes at. If you didn't do that this year, don't push too much in the summer to make up for it. There is no cram-for-the-exam in physical sport for you or the horse that won't result in an injury or strain eventually. If you did not start your training early enough or train hard enough through the off season, make a maintenance plan for the busy season, and a note to self to do a better job with your off season plan next time.

It is really important not to see the off season as a time to knock off completely and just let your body go to seed. It's equally important not to view the busy season as a time to slack off all of your other fitness and cross-conditioning activities either. A break of two weeks can take 2-4 weeks to train back to the level of fitness achieved prior to the rest. This is why maintenance activities are so important.

For riders, you have trained all year to be able to engage in the opportunities available during the summer. It makes no sense to just let your ability to do your best at a moment you've worked hard to reach, fall by the wayside. It's like quitting 10 metres before the finish line. When you get too busy to maintain your own energy, you drop your peak performance ability. If you've invested heavily in a competitive season, it makes no sense to reduce your performance ability in a way that would cost you nothing but a little time to maintain. Put

another way, for a very small investment of time, you can make a significant impact on your performance when you keep up some maintenance activities.

The great news for riders busy with summer season activities is that there are some very easy things you can do to maintain yourself in peak energy and readiness levels.

1. Nutrition and Sleep

Being tired or dehydrated will short-circuit your neuromuscular connections and reduce your reaction times and accuracy. Regardless of competition performance, your ability to react and apply accurate aids has a direct impact on your risk for injury and enjoyment of your ride. Getting enough sleep and making sure you are staying well hydrated are two very easy fixes. Remember to have a water bottle near your training area, and to stop a couple of times during your ride when you are giving your horse a break, to drink some water. If you are hitting a tough patch in the training session, or feeling frustrated, it is a really good time to stop and drink some water to help your brain process more efficiently. If you will be on trail, think of getting a waist pack type of water bottle that runners' use, or even a camel-back water system often used by cyclists and hikers.

A competition day provides many distractions as far as healthy eating and staying hydrated are concerned. Being prepared with appropriately easily accessed healthy foods and fluids will help you avoid dehydration, low blood sugar or sluggish response-times when you need to be most alert.

2. Keep Connections Sharp

On a day-to-day basis, riders in the middle of a busy period can go a long way to maintaining off season fitness gains by keeping body awareness sharp through easily portable and adaptable exercises.

Proprioception is like your mind's accuracy in terms of awareness of where you are in space, and how it needs to organize itself to move from one position to the next. Keeping this sense sharp is what helps your brain process the constant data received from you sitting a moving horse, and send out the signals needed for you to maintain your posture and apply accurate aids in constantly changing equations. The more your brain is educated to use muscles you need, and leave the other ones 'off', the more supple and soft you can be as a rider because there is no excess tension produced.

Nearly all cross-conditioning or other activities that use movement other than the movement you use riding, help improve proprioception. An analogy could be driving a car to work: when you drive the same route all the time, you lose sensitivity to it. When you take different routes, you are more aware of where you are. Getting your body to move in different ways through the week helps keep proprioception high. In a peak busy season, the activities you choose do not need to take a long time- just a few minutes a day can help you maintain your proprioceptive abilities, even when the exercise load is not quite enough to maintain actual muscle tone, or endurance.

You can take advantage of a few moments here and there to do activities such as:

- a) Balance exercises (such as simply standing on one foot, knee slightly bent)

- b) Practicing 'spine neutral' by lining up your spine against a wall (in a semi-squat position, to keep your brain's sense of a straight and aligned spine accurate)
- c) Walking on uneven surfaces (like hiking, or just walking around and stepping over curbs and onto any variation of terrain such as a slope or difference in texture)
- d) Gentle awareness exercises (like tai chi type motion, or some yoga poses)
- e) Fun summer activity (like dancing, or swimming in a lake)
- f) Visualization: Studies do show that visualizing movement is almost as effective as actually doing a movement for training muscle memory. Although the ideal visualization environment would be free from distraction, you can still use the technique while driving, standing in line, or waiting somewhere.

Finding creative ways to sneak awareness moments into your day will go a long way to keeping the neuromuscular connections strong, even when you have seemingly no time for your own physical conditioning.

3. Stay Supple

Do all you can to stretch all the time. Through the day, dynamic or moving stretches are best. The goal is to never allow tension in muscles long enough for knots to develop. Tension has a tendency to cumulate, and also to refer to other areas when your body recruits muscles not best suited to the task, because the primary ones are getting tired. Tension blocks good neuromuscular connections and movement patterns. When you have no time for other activities, keeping yourself supple will go a long way to controlling mental tension (show nerves/schedule stress). In addition to suppling your muscles and keeping your joints soft, stretching exercises also promote good awareness by helping you focus.

Heather doing some intensive facilitated stretch therapy with competitors at a horse show. Invest in your flexibility and suppleness before it is a problem!



July 2011: Fitting the Fitness Into Your Life

Quotes of the Month:

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." **Lao Tzu, founder of Taoism**

"Mighty things from small beginnings grow." **John Dryden, British poet**

"Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have excellence, but rather we have it because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do." **Aristotle, Greek philosopher**

Last month we looked at key elements that have a significant impact on your riding performance, which are also easily maintained through a busy season with relatively little effort: good nutrition, adequate sleep, any movement or exercise that keeps your proprioception (body awareness) and balance sharp, and stretching to maintain relaxation and suppleness.

A key question that seems common is how to move from those good general ideas to some practical steps.

You have to have the will to bring the best you possible to your training with your horse. It is so easy to reach a particular level of fitness and conditioning, and then to take it for granted. For most people riding a horse or two several times a week does not provide adequate exercise for your human body- especially if you are riding and training well. The activities that push YOUR cardio-vascular stamina and maintain YOUR structure, are different from the relatively minimal demands on your body during your horse's training. The better you are at riding and training, the less your riding should feel demanding to you.

Professionals riding multiple horses a day have a slightly different challenge with their conditioning. They are much more prone to repetitive strain and muscle imbalances from the riding itself, at some point in their career.

Whether you are still en route to the level of conditioning you need to help you ride your best, or have reached a happy state you would like to maintain, or whether you are seeking basic fitness to bring to your ride, or activities to minimize strain and overload from riding so much- committing to your goal is the hard part. Once you have decided that it is worth it to you to give your horse your best riding, getting there is actually not that difficult.

Most people seem to get overweight, in debt or develop inefficient riding habits quite gradually through the cumulative effect of thousands of minor decisions and changes: two servings instead of one, one-hundred calories too many in a day, a lazy week, an out of budget splurge or a sloppy training day. Of course, one occurrence won't wreck things or take you off track. It's when one occurrence gets repeated, and gradually becomes a habit that you eventually find yourself 10 pounds overweight, running a credit card balance or frustrated in your ride because the muscle memory you've programmed isn't getting the results your coach wants and horse needs.

The path to the good results works in exactly the same way: thousands of tiny little acts and decisions that cumulate over a week, month or several months to create a fitness lifestyle that seems to run on it's own or a muscle memory that seems to put you in your riding 'sweet spot' most of the time. The irony about those people who seem able to stay fit without effort is that they have earned that apparent ease: they once put in a lot of effort in making daily and deliberate decisions until they reached the point where they no longer actually think about most of the choices that keep them in the zone. A similar analogy could be a horse that appears to be naturally excellent at an intermediate or higher performance task. The naturalness comes from diligence, step by step, day by day with thoughtful progressions in his training. I always take it as the biggest training complement when someone watches my horse going, and complements me on his 'natural talent' without recognizing my role in his training.

The people that appear to never have to think about what they eat or how to stay fit, achieve that zone because they have actually put a great deal of thought and effort into the habits they created for themselves.

Once you convince yourself that you can get better results in simple baby-steps, just get started. Ignore results for a while, and commit to going 'one extra inch' with everything that you do. Here are some practical suggestions:

1. Add 5-10 minutes of walking to your day.
2. Add a few lunges or other leg movements to your walk.
3. Hop back and forth over a curb you encounter to increase your heart-rate for a couple of seconds and improve your balance and body awareness before continuing on your walk.
4. Do a few step-ups on a bench you find.
5. Do a few mini chin-ups (feet on floor, knees bent) on playground equipment.
6. Do a plank with your feet on a swing
7. Stand on one leg on different textured surfaces, or a curb.
8. Do 30 reps of a single core exercise when you get home from the barn and are already sweaty.
9. Do a few seconds of hip or shoulder opening stretches while you're tacking up and waiting a minute to tighten your horse's girth.
10. Eat half your sandwich at lunch and save the other half until you are hungry again (or your body signals low blood sugar in some other way such as lack of concentration). Eating less at once and spreading your food out keeps your blood sugar constant, mood better, core tone and trains you to not eat too much at one sitting.
11. Stretch while you're waiting for something to heat in the microwave.
12. Do some core work in commercials (or better yet, go TV free for one week and see what else you accomplish instead).
13. Try working your horse in hand as part of his warm-up. He'll be getting the same value out of it as if you were sitting on him walking, but you'll be warming up too and adding steps to your day.
14. Add little jogs to your walk—start with little bursts of 10 seconds and work your way up. Unless you are training to run, you don't need to be a jogger. You can use tiny little jog intervals to significantly increase the intensity of your walking, get faster cardio-vascular improvement with very little investment of time.
15. Swap out one sedentary relaxation activity, for something a little more active once a week.

16. Try stretching every time you stop for a 'bio break' of some kind through the day.

Once you start to ask 'how can I add the extra inch', you will find countless creative ways to fit fitness into your life, and bring a more balanced and responsive body to your ride.

*Working on posture and alignment
in a spare moment at the barn.*



Fitness for Equestrian Kids

This article was originally published in the Canadian Horse Journal.

There's something about kids and ponies that just go together. Whether your child is involved in competitive sport, just has fun on your backyard horse, or goes on occasional rides, you want to know they are safe.

Riding can be a fantastic growth opportunity for children. Like any other sport, riding provides ample opportunity for children to learn all those great life skills like good sportsmanship, responsibility, commitment and active lifestyle habits. The aspect of being in a relationship with another living creature to accomplish tasks together adds those good habits you hope your child picks up in pet ownership and relationships.

While your child is out there having fun, staying active and learning negotiate and be responsible for another living being, you want them to be safe. An accident can spoil the fun very quickly. Also, you may have wondered how to encourage them in developing the physical skills they need, when they can't be at the barn. If your child is involved in other sports at school, they may very well be getting some good cross-training from those activities. Other sport coaches may have them doing some dryland training as well. All of these activities will help your child develop physical strength and stamina, good posture, good cardio-vascular ability and good active habits for later in life.

It is very important for children to be as active as possible, and to try out as wide a variety of activities as possible. If your child is just horse-crazy and wants nothing to do with other activities, they are at risk of under-developing the skills that will help them with their riding well into their riding life.

Under-development in things like muscle tone and kinetic awareness (a sense of where your body is in space, and how it should move), will end up affecting their riding ability. A young rider who is not competitive should still develop as well as they can, so that they do not create ingrained unproductive riding and postural habits. Such habits will eventually cause strain, or cause them to lose balance while riding and place them at greater risk for injury.

With the sedentary lifestyle we have created, children who are only interested in activity when they are actually in the saddle will miss out on important windows of opportunity in their growth phase to lay a foundation for later in life.

You do not need to sign your child up for three nights a week of other sports in addition to their riding. However, you can help their general health and well-being by using the riding as an avenue for improving transferrable physical skills. Building as wide a physical vocabulary as possible creates a wide range of 'motion possibilities' in the body. Just think of how difficult it is for a middle aged adult to catch on to a new sport activity.

Part of that difficulty is related to things like muscle tone and skill, and part of it is related to diminished neuro-muscular connections. Since riding a horse moves the body on several planes, better riders have a wide movement vocabulary. They can operate in a wide range of unbalancing situations, and have an accurate reaction because they have a good sense of where the parts of their body are both within themselves, and in relationship to external objects like obstacles, trees, or the horse.

Variety is a key word. Transferrable skills that directly help your child have better balance and control in the saddle include:

- Flexibility
- Balance in general
- Ability to do multiple things at once
- Strength for carrying their own bodyweight
- Core engagement and strength
- Cardio-vascular ability

You can help your child fit up for riding by putting together a well-rounded weekly plan that incorporates activities which touch on each of these areas. While the main idea is to get your child to learn motions different from riding, you can also use some exercises to help work on riding-specific problems and issues when they can't actually be on a horse. I frequently use a fitness ball as a 'horse' when working on learning how to hold and use the body more effectively while in riding position, without actually having to be on a real horse.

Children can build strength and stamina safely with bodyweight exercises, or exercises using resistance tubing. Resistance tubing or bands are frequently used in cross-training programs in dance and skating for children. Bodyweight exercises are a basis for gymnastics, skate and other sports like dryland hockey training.

Exercises for kids should be kept fun, and fairly light. Keeping active and getting healthy habits on a daily basis is more important for younger children than the actual workout. The earlier in life they can be encouraged to try new things, the better. When training children, it's important to encourage the process of exploration, discovery and to celebrate achievement. Many of the kids I have worked with are very serious little athletes that sometimes need to be reminded to have fun and give something another try without worrying about being perfect.

Unlike training for adults, children should work to a point where they are stiff and sore the next day. Children should not do a lot of repetitions of exercises at one time. A good idea might be to set up a little circuit in your basement or other open area. Use pictures of your child doing an exercise as visual cues for what exercise happens at each point in the circuit. It's even better if you can also do the exercises with them. If you are not a rider, you can have fun letting them correct your riding position if you are using a riding-specific exercise.

Good habits like light stretching before and after riding will really help your child focus, and prepare their body to follow the motion of the horse. Improving balance on the ground will improve balance in the saddle. A little rider with good cardio-vascular conditioning will have more stamina and be able to control their body better, because they will be getting more oxygen to their muscles. Cardio for kids can be anything, as long as it's fun and not repetitive: playing soccer in the yard with you, going biking, or swimming or any activity that's fun and gets the heart rate up for a few minutes a day.

In the photos here, Allison (age 10yrs) demonstrates some exercises in her program. She rides hunt seat. After coming off over a jump, she has been working on getting better balance and more control of her seat and legs so that she can apply clearer aids and control both the pony and her own body. The exercises that she is doing would be suitable for any

age, in any discipline. However, they are selected specifically to help her with balance, coordination and strength.

Rowing with Tubing: Standing on a balance object makes this exercise a little bit harder, and she is challenged to keep her weight even in both feet while double-tasking. Balancing with her lower body while building back strength and maintaining good riding posture with her upper body challenges neuro-muscular pathways, and helps prepare her to maintain posture while focusing on a jump course.



Straddling the Ball: Allison is practicing turning the 'horse' with her knees and torso, rather than simply pulling with a rein. As she turns her belly-button and shoulders in the direction she wishes the horse to go, she maintains solid posture in her mid-section, engaging her abdominals. She is able to maintain control of the ball because she maintains control of her pelvis. Straddling the ball is a good way to practice turning and even posting or jumping while building up inner thigh and core strength.

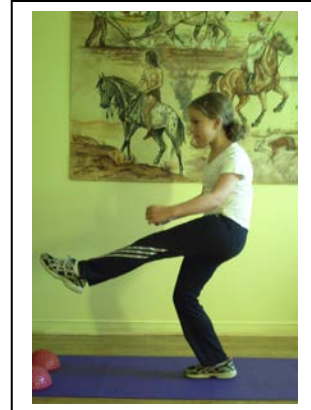


Pushups with Feet on the Ball: Practicing holding the pushup position ('plank'), or actually doing pushups with feet on the ball is a great way to build shoulder and core strength, while working on balance and hip control. The fitness ball is the right size for your child if she can sit on it with close to a 90 degree bend in her knees.



Balance Objects: (balance on pods photo) Balancing exercises are good anytime, anywhere. You can use pods, cushions, more expensive balance tools, or make a game out of finding ways to practice balance on simple items like tennis balls and pool noodles.

Standing Leg Extension: Another great way to work on balance is to do different movements with limbs and torso, while standing on one leg. In this movement, Allison is working on quadriceps strength while challenging herself to maintain balance on one leg. She is also working on the torso strength needed for good riding posture by leaning slightly forward and resisting the body's natural tendency to lean back while lifting a leg forward.



Heather giving an Equifitt workshop on fitness for kids at the Ontario Equestrian Federation Annual Convention



August 2011: Staying Hydrated

Quote of the Month:

"Never be afraid to try something new. Remember, amateurs built the ark. Professionals built the Titanic." **Unknown**

What a busy time of year for most riders. Even if you are not competing, you are likely busy maximizing daylight and holiday hours before Labour Day weekend.

August weather in 4-season zones is fickle: it can feel like a heat-wave from the hottest week all summer one day, and like autumn the next day with blustering winds and a little chill in the air. The wind and sun that you are exposed to while working with your horse can be even more dehydrating than a simply hot day, because you do not tend to feel as dehydrated as you would in the baking heat. You can get much more dehydrated than you realize.

Most riders know that drinking water is important, but many riders that I work with have a dilemma: they know they need to stay hydrated, but they do not want to have to interrupt their ride to run to the washroom all the time. A solution can be as simple as making sure you maintain your electrolyte levels. This month's tip was actually contributed by a regular Equitips subscriber. It is shared below with permission. Equifitt does not endorse any specific nutritional products. I believe that health and wellness should be achievable in any income bracket, and at any age, so I use and recommend sound sports nutrition principles that anyone can implement without committing to purchase of specific products. When you read nutritional information from various sources, look for the underlying ideas that you can implement within what is available to you.

Staying Hydrated, by Janet Spangler, www.ride4life.isagenix.com (used with permission)

Replacing electrolytes is vital to the body, especially on hot days, though the body uses electrolytes sitting at a desk as well. Let's talk about hydrating in general.

When the body doesn't get the water that it needs daily, it tends to hold onto all the water that it has inside already. As every "body" is different, how much water does your body need? It's simple to figure out. Take your present weight and divide it by 2: i.e. 126 lbs/2 = 63 oz water divided/8 (oz glasses) = 8 eight-oz glasses daily. If you weigh more, your body requires more water, etc. If you simply drink water all day, it does the "pass through" thing – in one end and out the other – while you spend lots of time going to the WC. You may feel like all you do is drink water, or are kind of water-logged. You may actually still be thirsty! Okay, so how do you remedy that?

Get some organic (colored) sea salt (either granulated or chunky), in fact, I recommend Pink Himalayan Sea Salt because it's the purest form and has been untouched by the pollution in the ocean. Before each 8-oz glass of water, put a "pinch" of sea salt on the end of your tongue. Then drink your 8-oz glass of water. The minerals in the sea salt (sodium chloride)) help to transport water INTO the cells to properly hydrate the whole body, every cell! Over time (and every "body" is different), you'll find you're going to the WC less and less as the

body gets better and better hydrated. For more info about this and why it works the way it does, go to: www.watercure2.org.

So, back to the original statement: “replacing electrolytes is vital to the body”. How does one do that? You want to find an all-natural electrolyte and add it to your water. Read the fine print to make sure there’s no hidden aspartame, etc. All aspartame (artificial sugar) does is fool the brain into thinking its getting the natural sugar it needs (which is 4 grams every 3 hours). Anything “artificial” is highly toxic to the body and does not give the body the vital nutrients it needs to function in the way it was designed. Also, anything pre-made (in liquid) form is out – there are preservatives in liquids. Read the labels and educate yourself toward better health and vitality! It’ll pay off in dividends when you’re training and competing. Better hydration leads to better focus.

Keep a stash of all-natural electrolytes with you. Personally, I travel with a small glass vial of pink Himalayan sea salt in my purse/briefcase, so that I’m sure to stay well hydrated. It also is handy to have at restaurants to bring out the flavor of a particularly yummy summer salad and grilled wild salmon!

Here’s to your good health and well-hydrated body!

by Janet Spangler, www.ride4life.isagenix.com

Equifitt client getting some liquids at a horse show.



September 2011: Cross Co-ordination

Quote of the Month:

"When we are not able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."
**Victor Frankl, award winning author (*Man's Search for Meaning*)
neurologist, psychiatrist and holocaust survivor.**

In last month's tip, I recommended improving your neuro-muscular responses for riding by 'brain gym' activities that challenge your body to use movements you don't normally use. Challenging yourself in this way helps your brain and muscle-memory 'remember' the range of motion that is possible.

Specifically, activities that promote cross-coordination (movement from one side to the other of your body) are really helpful to riders.

Riding can be a challenging sport (for the human- most of us do not make our horses work to their capacity), though not for the reasons that first come to mind. If you are out of breath riding, or sore, then you do need to do something about your own base level of fitness so that you do not make your horse compensate for your lack of self-carriage. Your ride should not feel like a workout. If it does (mentally or physically), your experience is helping you identify areas you may need to be working on yourself. Our horses very patiently mirror back to us what we ask of them, and try their best to do what we are asking regardless of the handicaps we give them for performing the task. An example is a horse that is going forward with some kicking, out of obedience although the rider is telling him loudly to stop with her hands because she is balancing on her reins.

Riding presents a unique challenge to the human because the horse operates on four legs and primarily in a different plane. The older you are, the less your brain is able to process physical stimulus that is unfamiliar to it (such as the four beats of a horse's hoofs, and the various motions of his back on the horizontal plane). The horse's movement is like a different language to the sensors that feed input to the parts of your brain that have to decide what to do next. The human is an upright biped (only two beats in their gait) with opposable thumbs (grabby hands). That's why so many riders develop compensating patterns that are effectively, vertical solutions to horizontal issues.

For example, a rider's legs may creep forward or shoulders tense (tension up and down their body) because they are having difficulty following the motions of their horse (forward, and separate motion stimulus from each side of his back laterally).

Some simple ways to condition your body and brain to read and respond more effectively on both sides of your horse and in all planes experienced while riding, include any activity that promotes crossing from one side to the other. Here is a short list:

- core and strength exercises that cross your body (eg: bicycle crunches)
- stretching exercises that cross your body (eg: opposite toe touch)
- sports that include rotations (martial arts, tennis)

- sports and activities that involve separate but co-ordinated movement from side to side with all four limbs (cross country skiing, swimming, dance, yoga)
- Twister (seriously...include the family in your fun!)

Taking just a couple of minutes a day for cross-coordinating activities can make a difference, especially when your busy schedule does not allow for large amounts of time for your own training and conditioning.

Some Cross Co-ordination Exercises



October 2011: Improving Stamina

Quotes of the Month:

"More than half, maybe as much as two-thirds of my life as a writer is rewriting. I wouldn't say I have a talent that's special. It strikes me that I have an unusual kind of stamina."

John Irving, American modern classic author (*A Prayer for Owen Meany* etc...)

"Flaming enthusiasm, backed up by horse sense and persistence, is the quality that most frequently makes for success." **Dale Carnegie, American public speaking guru (and an inspiring personal rags-to-riches story).**

The definition of the training required to have 'enough' stamina for your riding is really dependent on several factors: how long you are in the saddle each day/week, the total daily/weekly demand on your body (sum of all the other activities your body has to go through each day/week in addition to riding), and your riding discipline.

The definition of enough stamina is a little easier. You have enough stamina when you can carry your own body and respond consistently and effectively in your ride, without collapsing on your horse or making him compensate for you. Generally speaking, a rider with sufficient stamina:

1. Is not out of breath riding, or recovers their breath very quickly after brief moments of elevated heart-rate.
2. Has accurate and timely physical responses to the ride because there is sufficient oxygen supply to muscle and brain cells, and the muscle fibres have sufficient energy stores for the effort and length of time required.
3. Is not collapsing onto their horse, forcing him to work harder to achieve the desired results.
4. Is not experiencing cardiac strain. This can be subtle since demand on the heart during riding is not always noticeable (does not always cause a rider to breathe more heavily). Riders can be quite out of shape and putting their heart under considerable strain with negative long term effects, without realizing it- in the same way an unfit horse can be pushed too hard.

Riders who use raised positions (cross country, racing, jumping, polo, other similar body postures) need more stamina in larger leg muscle groups than riders in seated positions. However, nearly all riders fatigue in basic postural muscles and neural-muscular connection/response before experiencing large muscle fatigue. This means that most riders can improve and maintain stamina with slight improvements to cardio-vascular ability and core strength.

It is really important to shift from thinking of cardio-vascular stamina only in terms of how hard your lungs seem to be working. Most of the time, the horse's lungs are working much harder than yours. Where the some cardio-vascular stamina becomes really important for riders, is more at the cellular level: where the muscle fibres exchange oxygen and carbon-dioxide, and where they store sufficient glycogen to metabolize with the oxygen in the moment of effort. Muscle fibre capacity and oxygen exchange cannot be trained overnight

for a human athlete, any more than they can for a horse. Once trained to the level required, maintenance is relatively easy.

When you aren't able to full carry yourself, you add load to your horse and force him load his joints and muscles more than they need to. There are many soundness issues that occur, which would never have occurred if the rider stayed off their horse's back. Unfortunately, you can't send your horse into the ring by himself.

Most riders I work with could significantly improve their cardio-vascular stamina by including a couple of 15-30 minute heart rate-elevating, muscle demanding activities per week into their schedule. As a rider, it doesn't really matter what you do as long as the gluteals, hamstrings and preferably also core muscles get incorporated because these are large components in posture for riders. Bike, run, skate, walk fast, walk up a hill, swim, do kickboxing, play tennis, go cross-country skiing...and put everything you've got into it for as long as possible using intervals of maximal effort for a total 15-30 minutes, a couple of times a week. If 15-30 minutes sounds long, start with a 5 minute commitment. I know para-athletes that use arm-peddalling equipment to accomplish cardio training. You probably have more capacity than that.

The nice thing about cardio-vascular stamina training for a rider is that you don't have to pick one activity, since you aren't training for those other sports. As long as your heart-rate is elevated and you are moving at enough effort to make talking difficult and to sweat, then you can change up the activity every single time depending on what suits your mood or what is available.

Core training is a little different. To build enough stamina in your postural supporting muscles, you do need to be consistent about core training, and do enough to feel it for a couple of days. Once you reach a nice base level of core strength and stamina, maintenance is really easy. When you reach the maintenance level, you will find you are incorporating your core in more activity naturally, and only need to engage in deliberate core training exercises a few minutes at a time. An exception might be a rider training through an Eventing competitive season, who really needs to train core to far exceed the average riding demand, because of the moments of extreme load inherent in reactions on the cross course.

Bicycle Crunches: cross co-ordination as well as upper and lower abdominals together.



November 2011: Make the Most of Your Time

Quote of the Month:

"Happiness is not a matter of intensity, but of balance, order, rhythm and harmony."
Thomas Merton, American philosopher & Trappist monk.

It's that busy festive time of year again when many riders find themselves torn: you really want to be at the barn, but there is that office party/social event/crammed holiday schedule and they just have not perfected cloning.

It can be a time of year when fitting in 'extra's like your own fitness plan really fall by the wayside.

Relax. The beauty of a yearly training plan is that it's understood there are times of the year when optimal training cannot occur. In fact, there are times when it shouldn't- your body needs to recover. I usually view the month of December as a maintenance only/alternative period of time. There is no point in fighting it- you need to have the balance of being able to connect with friends and family, and enjoy the general hum and extravagant well-wishing of the major holiday season.

Before you get ready to put on the fuzzy slippers and pour yourself something that warms you, you really do need to know that recovery period does not mean it's time to slack off completely. The purpose of a recovery period in your usual training regimen is to help you loosen up a little; to let muscles recover from long periods of use in order to avoid strain, and to let your brain unwind so that you can bring creativity and freshness back to the ways you are thinking about your sport. Letting yourself sink into a comfortable chair for the season, or run around with elevated blood pressure from shopping and socializing with no time for yourself, do not count as legitimate recovery.

Keep the end goal in mind: going into the New Year, picking up where you left off, having thought about your goals for the new year and ready to give it your best shot.

Total slacking or stressing for a month will not set you up to walk into this picture. Recovery periods in an athlete training schedule are often referred to as 'active recovery'. When you think about the concept applied to your horse, it makes sense. For example, in the off season (if you compete) you may take him out hacking, or play with gymnastics (if you are a dressage rider) or work on your dressage (if you are a hunter/jumper). You will generally give your horse some work that is light to him, and a little different from his usual routine. You'll bring the fun back in. If he is injured, you don't leave him standing in a stall. You keep him moving. In some areas, riders just turn their horse out for the winter where he can stay exercised going through snow and up and down hills, but otherwise get a mental break and just be a horse to get re-energized.

You both need a period where your horse's training is lighter. This is a good season to do it, and there is a hybrid solution that can help normally busy riders, go through the busy holiday

season and still be physically and mentally recovered and ready to pick up where you left off when your normal training seasons begins again.

You do not need to feel torn about not maintaining your training schedule, if you have planned to ride less, or make your rides shorter. You do need to plan in short segments of activity for yourself to replace the lost riding time. Luckily, it does not take nearly as long to go for a 20-minute walk as it does to head to the barn and back in an evening: you can fit in the walk AND the holiday party in on the same day.

Short bursts of intentional and fun physical activity will help keep you riding fit when you can't ride as much or as long. They will also help reduce stress, build proprioception and neuromuscular vocabulary (increase your ability to move and follow your horse), and even help you avoid potential strain issues that could be caused by your riding and are typically prevalent in middle-aged and older riders.

It doesn't really matter what activities you choose in your recovery period as a rider. However, they should be selected to meet specific goals that help your riding, such as:

1. Maintain **bone density** and improve ligament strength (impact activities).
Examples: walking, jogging, kickboxing, aerobics, skiing, snowshoeing, training with weights or bodyweight/resistance tubing
2. Maintain **hip mobility** (for following the horse's motion).
Examples: walking (probably the best one), cross country skiing, snowshoeing, skating, yoga
3. Build **core strength**.
Examples: core exercises, martial arts, swimming, dance (jazz, hip hop etc..) pilates, integrated training with exercise tubing
4. Improve **rhythm and connection**.
Examples: dance- especially social dancing with a partner, aerobics or other music-driven group classes, 'mirror' motion games with a partner
5. Maintain or build **cardio-vascular stamina**.
Examples: many of the activities above, as long as your heart rate is elevated for 15-20 minutes. If you are an Eventer, your cardio training should be twice as long. Using intervals of more intense activity are the most efficient way to train. For example, walking on hills or walking the dog with intervals of faster or slower walking; or swimming lengths with fast/slow combinations that you can keep up.

To get the most out of your exercise time as a mental break and for proprioception, it is best NOT to multi-task. Proprioception, or the finetuned control you need as an athlete and a rider, needs to be constantly honed. Stay focused on what you are doing so that you can give it 100% even if it's only for 5-10 minutes.

If you have a busy family holiday season in addition to your riding and other commitments, 5 minutes may be all you have at a time.

December 2011: Easy Start to a Training Plan

Quote of the Month:

"A good plan today is better than a perfect plan tomorrow" **Anonymous proverb**

"Let our advance worrying become our advance thinking and planning." **Winston Churchill**

In the previous tip I gave you your official personal trainer's permission to ease up on yourself over the holidays by planning your slacking. More accurately, plan some activity through the season that will bring you back to your regular riding routine, fresh with less muscle tension, more mobile joints and a relaxed mind.

As you find moments through the holidays to reflect on your year and goals for 2012, you may find yourself peeking at show schedules, starting to develop some goals for the summer competitive season. It will be a perfect time to experiment with a planned approach to your own conditioning as a rider.

Conditioning yourself is not really something that very many people argue with. Everyone knows that a healthier, fitter self brings more energy to everything: work, play, relationships, riding. Most people start the New Year with a resolution of some kind in the area of health and wellness. Just notice the marketing of fitness items and programs at this time of the year.

In your partnership with your horse(s), you owe it to the horses to carry yourself. Since horses weigh almost ten times the rider's weight, they often compensate for rider lack of carriage/rider error in ways that aren't noticeable as directly linked to the extra work they are doing on your behalf. Bringing your best self to the ride is just plain courtesy to the horse for the working partnership you have.

Take advantage of the New Years resolution momentum around you, and commit to planning your own conditioning this year. Unless you overdo it, I can pretty much guarantee you that it won't slow your riding goals down in any way. Taking a planned approach to your own training CAN often be the little extra inch of effort that leverages all your other efforts exponentially. There's no replacement for your riding coach and saddle time, but if you can go to those activities with more stamina and suppleness, you'll reduce your risk of strain injury, reduce stress and find exercises in your riding easier to do. Tap into your full athletic potential, whatever your age or challenges.

To help you start on your way to a New Year for your body, start by thinking about where you'd like to be in June. Visualize it. Enjoy it: you and your horse are perfect. See yourself smiling, and the two of you doing your activity effortlessly.

You can work with your coach to work backwards from that moment to all the steps you need to put in place to make it happen as far as your technical execution and your horse's fitness are concerned.

For yourself, realize that there are also some simple building blocks that you can put in place one month at a time so that by the time you arrive at that moment in June, you will be ready.

The first priority is to unblock tension from your joints, and to re-set symmetry and fluidity. While you start on that, you slowly start to build cardio-vascular stamina. Cardio-vascular stamina is more than your heart/lung capacity. It includes the overall capacity of your body for oxygen transfer to your muscles and brain. You will really need to be efficient in this area in June, because it will be hot, the day will be long, you will be exhausted and running on adrenalin...right when you need to sink 6 months worth of expenses and efforts into 4 minutes in front of a judge. Don't think about it, go back to your happy visualization of harmony and achievement. But let the math involved sink in long enough to motivate you to see how small 5 minutes a day of effort really is.

Once you have started your long and slow buildup of cardio-vascular stamina and worked the tension out of your joints, you are ready to lay a base layer of core strength. Some riders do not move out of this phase. Your core strength, suppleness and agility has a tremendous effect on your aids because your torso controls your hip position, leg strength, leg aid accuracy, shoulder position and indirectly your arm and hand aids. The base of your core strength is your seat. That means exercising your hind end, which means working your legs. Indirectly, the side benefit is more stamina generally and more toned legs. The direct benefit to a rider is more control over leg position, and more stamina for your postural muscles, and muscles controlling your seat bone positioning.

To make it really easy, here is the general plan in broad strokes:

January- get started: extensive stretching, start habit of cardio-vascular activity in your life, start core work

February- establish a base: increase intensity of cardio-vascular activity, and times per week, but not duration per session, steadily increase reps in core work, introduce leg work

March- your real workout begins: This is the month when you rely on the slow, steady and faithful base you put in place in January and February. Reduce frequency of cardio work, but increase time per session, maintenance stretching, more time on leg work, introduce full body strength work to build muscle tissue for stamina, while integrating core and continuously suppling

April- kick it up a notch: This is the month that really counts. You need to go for the gold here and get as much endurance in your muscle fibres, and increase in your body awareness and response times as you can- aim to exceed what you need for riding by several percentages, because you will need to later drop down your training as you increase your riding time. This month's training is your 'bank account' you draw on for May-Sept. If you are an Eventer, this period of the year should be really intense. Increase cardio time and intensity together, reduce amount of time strength training but increase intensity, re-introduce extended stretching

May- start to taper: Drop cardio work to maintenance, gradually bring strength work to maintenance levels, pick up intensity of core

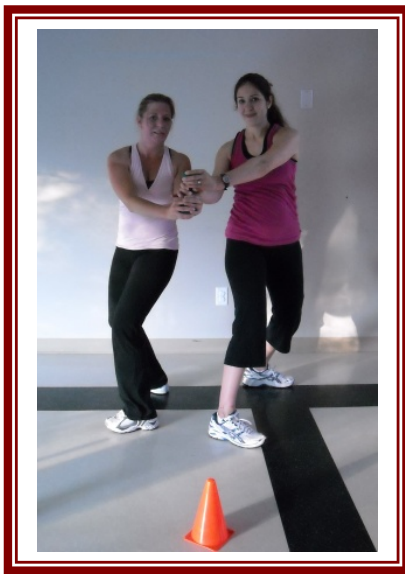
June- light maintenance: Drop to maintenance levels for the competitive season

Here is your plan for January (you can get started earlier if you like..just spend more time in each phase). Watch next months' tip for the February plan:

January- week 1& 2: daily extended stretching, walking or other loosening exercises 3 x per week, 20 min minimum

January- week 3& 4: daily maintenance stretching (short and dynamic), heart-rate elevating relatively light activity 30 minutes, 3x /week, core training 5-10 min / day, 5x/week

Bonus idea! Workout with a buddy. It's fun and can be a little more motivating.



January 2012: Getting Inspiration & Training Plan Step 2

Quotes of the Month:

"You cannot plow a field by turning it over in your mind." **Anonymous**

"The difference between try and triumph, is a little umph." **Anonymous**

"The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without the work." **Émile Zola, French literary great**

Last month I encouraged you to get your new year started right with a training plan, using some easy rules of thumb for planning your conditioning for the next six months. Getting going in the first week of January seems the easy part...keeping going by the end of the month or into the rest of the year is where the majority fail.

This month, we are kicking off the new year with bonus extra Fittip content. Get some great tips on staying motivated in Part 1 (article contributed by a client), and then build on your training plan in Part 2.

Part 1: Getting From Inspiration to Celebration via Perspiration

by Lori Albrough

There's really no shortage of inspiration to be found, is there? I remember watching my coach, a top dressage rider, riding so beautifully, influencing these big amazing horses to express themselves with power and grace. And I would get this huge feeling of potential welling up inside of me, "I want to ride like that. I want to be an ATHLETE like that!"

And there's really no shortage of information out there, either. Fitness articles, tips, videos, and books abound. I would gather all this information, clip all these articles, fill all these file folders. But, instead of energized, I just ended up overwhelmed. Where do I start? Am I even cut out for this? Who am I to think I could be an athlete? I don't have the long legs, the willowy build, the good genes, the you-name-it, I didn't have it.

So, how did I go from being inspired, to becoming an actual living breathing athlete? Here are 5 things I learned on the path from inspiration to realization.

1- Action cures Overwhelm.

Guess what, you don't have to "figure it all out" in advance. All you have to do is take action. Inspiration is good, intention is great, but without action, you stay stuck. Once you start to take action, you will find your intention suddenly grows legs.

2 - Decide. Then decide again.

Once I made the decision to contact a personal trainer who specialized in riders, things took off! She made me a program, and I started working it at home. I was feeling amazing!

And you know what happened after that, of course. Three days later (or was it four?) my quote real life came crashing down on me full force. The lack of time, the more pressing tasks, the excuses, the aches and pains, all reared up to say "See? You aren't cut out for this athlete business after all."

And that's the point that you have to decide again. Re-decide every day, if that's what it takes. Because it turns out ...

3 – There's a connection between discomfort and happiness.

And it might not be what you think it is! Even though I spent months being uncomfortable, both from sore muscles and from my brain over-heating as I tried to master new ways of using my body, I felt so happy and alive! I was proving to myself that I could silence all those inner voices that said "you cannot". Once it became clear to them that I was doing it anyhow, they shut up.

4 – Do it imperfectly.

This one is huge if you're like me and have any sort of perfectionist tendencies. My inner perfectionist, bless her soul, would keep me from doing anything and everything until I had studied it, analyzed it, mastered it, and conquered it. Telling myself I was going into the basement to do some "imperfect exercise" gave me permission to just begin, and then tweak as I went along.

5 – You don't need to go it alone.

Getting support and guidance for your journey is not a sign of weakness. It's smart! Learning from those who are further along the path that you want to follow saves you from a lot of wandering down blind alleys.

There are so many ways to surround yourself with support. They don't have to be expensive or time-consuming. I was intimidated by gyms and gym people, and have a pretty time-crunched life, so I found someone who could work with me in my home via phone, email, video, and Skype.

Having the accountability that a personal trainer provides was so helpful. She not only coached me on technique, she believed in me, cheered for me, and encouraged me. Many people live and socialize in toxic environments these days. The media is full of fear and doom, and even our own heads can be a source of negativity at times!

As you move from simply being inspired to actually realizing your vision for yourself, it pays to surround yourself with encouraging believers who want you to succeed.

About the Author: Lori Albrough is a Fjord breeder, trainer and dressage rider. Lori is interested in continuous self-improvement: in riding, training, healthy living, fitness, and positive mindsets. More of Lori's articles can be found on her website at: <http://www.bluebirdlane.com>.

Part 2: Designing Your Training Plan, Step 2

Recall the first two months' main goals of your rider fitness training plan:

January- get started: extensive stretching, start habit of cardio-vascular activity in your life, start core work

February- establish a base: increase intensity of cardio-vascular activity, and times per week, but not duration per session, steadily increase reps in core work, introduce leg work

If you were not able to be as consistent as you wanted to in January, don't worry. You can still jump on board with plenty of time. With a base of core strength and the beginning habit of more movement of various types in your week, you are now ready to start to ramp up your endurance by increasing the intensity of your workout. It is not necessary to work out for an hour a day, 5 days a week. However, a basic training plan should contain at least two fairly intense training sessions that combine cardio-vascular interval training, and some strength work for your legs. The strength work for your legs will help power your cardio-vascular training, which will increase your endurance both in energy in muscle stores, and in your capacity for oxygen exchange- two very important factors in building the kind of endurance you need.

Here is your plan for February. The exercises are organized in inverse pyramid (higher frequency at top of list, which corresponds to the Rider Fitness Training Scale- see article link the resources and recommendations section above). If you cannot maintain all the number of workouts suggested, don't get tied in knots about it. When it comes to improving your performance as a rider and your health as a human being, some exercise or cross training is always better than nothing. I have seen clients take a full year to integrate cross-training fully into their lives with many starts. You just have to get back up one more time than you fall off.

Watch next months' tip for the March plan:

February- Week 1: Stretching: 5-10 minutes daily

1. Core training 15 minutes, 4 days
2. Cardio activity (any will do) 30 minutes, 3x / week using intervals with increased intensity. (10x3 min cycles) One minute 'on', 2 minutes catching your breath (lighter).

Week 2: Stretching daily

1. Core training 20 minutes, 3 x
2. Cardio training 30 minutes, 3x with intervals at 2 minutes more intense, 3 minutes medium pace (6 x 5 min cycles)
3. Leg strength exercises 2x : two exercises, one set each

Week 3: Stretching daily

1. Core training 2x, but double the number of sets (ie: if you did 10 repetitions of 6 exercises last week, now cycle through that routine 2x, but only on two occasions)
2. Cardio training 30 minutes, 3x: with intervals still on 5 min cycle, but the 2 intense minutes should be made up of 1 minute more intense, and 1 minute very intense.
3. Leg strength exercises 2x: 4 exercises, 2 sets

Week 4: Stretching should be a habit by now with commitment 1x in the week to an extended stretch or flexibility time (minimum 20minutes)

1. Core training 2x, but add two more exercises to your routine
2. Cardio training 30 minutes, 3x: intervals in 5 min cycles but 3 intense, 2 recovery
3. Leg strength exercises 2x: 4 exercises, 3 sets. You can effectively combine Legwork days with core days- alternating core and leg sets is a nice way to give one muscle group a brief break, while you are working the other one and saves time overall in your week.

Sample Easy Activity Tracker: *You can use a tracker like the one below, make a spreadsheet, or really simplify things with stickers on a calendar page to help you track your consistency. Use a system that suits you and which makes sense to you. Your goal is to be able to track what you do to keep yourself motivated, as well as to have clear information you can share with a personal trainer, physiotherapist or your riding coach so that they can support you appropriately.*

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 1							
Stretches							
Core							
Other							
Week 2							
Stretches							
Core							
Other							
Week 3							
Stretches							
Core							
Other							
Week 4							
Stretches							
Core							
Other							
Week 5							
Stretches							
Core							
Other							
Week 6							
Stretches							
Core							
Other							

February 2012: Get a Solid Base- Training Plan Step 3

Quote of the Month:

"Persistence is the twin sister of excellence. One is a matter of quality; the other, a matter of time." **Anonymous**

The days are lengthening (Northern Hemisphere), horses are thinking about shedding, and you might be thinking about getting a little more serious about your own training and fitness. In December I explained some basic objectives for each month of training, and started giving you a training plan for the subsequent month. If you missed getting on the bandwagon at the beginning of the year, the next best thing to do is just get started. You wouldn't put off your horse's training until the month before you really needed him to do his job. In this month's tip, I review the objectives of your first quarter, and sketch a basic training plan for March.

The first three months of the year are about laying down a foundation that the rest of your training will build on. The foundation is the most important phase, so if it takes you longer, or you do not do as much as anticipated- don't worry. Some riders I work with spend their entire year maintaining a good foundation.

Summary of the first three months' goals:

January- get started: extensive stretching, start habit of cardio-vascular activity in your life, start core work

February- establish a base: increase intensity of cardio-vascular activity, and times per week, but not duration per session, steadily increase reps in core work, introduce leg work

March- your real workout begins: This is the month when you rely on the slow, steady and faithful base you put in place in January and February. Reduce frequency of cardio work, but increase time per session, maintenance stretching, more time on leg work, introduce full body strength work to build muscle tissue for stamina, while integrating core and continuously suppling.

Sample March Training Schedule

March , Week 1- Intense
7-8/10 for effort

1. Reduce Cardio Training to 2x/week, 20-30 minutes with the goal of increasing intensity of these two short workouts.
2. Use the extra time to increase core training to 3x per week with a goal of 200 or more total repetitions (about 20-30 minutes)
3. Add Strength Training 3x a week for about 15 minutes. Target shoulders and legs. Combined exercises save a lot of time. The goal is not to become bulky, so spread your stretching through the workout very gently. The goal is to build strength in thighs, shoulders and back. Muscle

	cells store energy. Stamina requires sustained energy over time, so if you simply do not have adequate muscle for your body size and weight, you will become fatigued too early in your riding day.
March, Week 2- Lighter Workouts, 5-6/10 for effort	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cardio Training 3x / week, 15 intense minutes, followed by 15 minutes of Core 2. Core training 5 days per week, 15 minutes 3. Strength exercises 2x 4. 3x extended stretching time <p>Sample combined workout: Warmup 5 min Jog 15 minutes with intervals (fast/slow) Bodyweight leg exercises 5 minutes Dynamic stretching 1-2 min Shoulder strength exercises 5 minutes Stretching 1-2 min Core exercises 10 min Extended stretching 10 min</p>
March, Week 3- Add Intensity, 9/10-push the endurance limit	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. cardio training 2x/week, lower intensity 45 min 2. Core training 3 x /week, double the number of repetitions (ie: if were doing 2 sets of 10, do 4 sets of 10, or 2 sets of 20 for each exercise) 3. 3 back and shoulder exercises, for 2 reps each, 2x / week <p>Legwork 2xper week (stepping up stairs, walking lunges, squats), but 3 sets to exhaustion each time.</p>
March, Week 4- Ease Up	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Light cardio (ie: medium walk) for 2x 1hr or more (to loosen hips) 2. Intense cardio 2x / week, 20 minutes with intervals 3. Introduce single leg strength exercises

One quick note: using of weight machines is not necessary at all. You are better to use whatever is available to you, or the type of equipment you are likely to enjoy and keep up. However, generally, a rider can build more ability to integrate core into posture and movement by training on your feet using cables, freeweights or bodyweight using core and good posture to achieve stabilization. Many exercises with machines are not efficient at integrating core because the machines that do the stabilizing work for you.

If you feel like March is a little ambitious, don't worry. Just get in there, and just get started. Keep the goal in mind of slowly starting to increase endurance by the end of the month. Frequency of exercise in the week and consistency of form is more important than the total length of time you train. This is the month where you need to build some stamina.

Equestrian workouts are not usually that extreme or intense because equestrians do not need the explosive power, or degree of endurance, or speed of movement of other sports. What a rider really does need is the ability to respond appropriately to the ride while maintaining a balanced posture in spite of constant changes in the base under them. Some disciplines do require more overall athletic capacity (such as Eventing in the cross-country

phase), so your training plan should be modified to be reasonable for the demands of your discipline.

Wherever you are in your progress, you can always benefit from some core work. Doing core training does not take weeks to see results- you feel the benefits within days. It also is easy to start, regardless of your schedule or fitness level, and your horse notices your improved body control and clearer aids immediately. So, whatever point you are at in your training program, add in a couple of exercises that target your core: your back, abs, sides and essentially all the muscles encircling your torso and controlling your posture and ability to have clear weight and other aids.

A super core and balance exercise: ball pike.
Until you build strength for the full pike, start out with knees bent.



March 2012: Nutrition & Training Plan Step 4

Quotes of the Month:

"Don't dig your grave with your own knife and fork." **English Proverb**

"A man too busy to take care of his health is like a mechanic too busy to take care of his tools." **Spanish Proverb**

Around here, it's a time of year when spring is in the air: shedding blades come out of tack lockers, rubber boots are a fashion statement, and nearly everyone I work with or run into is inspired to pull up their shoelaces, get into their training for the season, and even shed a few pounds.

Now is a great time to think a little bit about your nutrition as well. I ran across a newsletter recently that was geared to nutritional needs for athletes in another sport which I thought applied very nicely for riders. The sport was curling (I do live in Canada. No, I have never curled. Yes, every town I have ever lived in or near had a curling rink near the hockey rink.)

You may be wondering what is similar about curling and riding. Mainly, the energy output patterns. Riders sustain long periods of posture maintenance with constant micro-adjustments on an unstable surface, punctuated by short bursts of change or higher energy output. In other words, riding requires a lot of endurance with relatively short segments of high energy output. Think about a typical ride for a hunter/jumper, dressage rider, or any other discipline. There are long periods of slower exercise, warmup, cooldown, waiting. Then there are bursts of energy: a few minutes for a jump course, a few seconds for a reining manoeuvre or dressage movement.

Whether in training practice or competition, how you fuel yourself plays a vital role in your ability for stamina, appropriate reaction times (aid changes, timing, rhythm, correct and accurate aids), and judgment calls.

Your brain is a complex electrical circuit matrix which depends on sugars and consistent fluid levels to maintain the right ambient conditions for signals to process. Dehydration or drops in blood-sugar levels reduce your ability for accurate perception, reaction and judgment. They also reduce the reaction-times in your neuro-muscular connections (the signal from your brain to muscle groups for movement, or from your body in contact with the horse, to your brain to signal position, and back again to signal appropriate response).

For a rider, seconds make a difference in execution of aids, preparation and performance over obstacles, and constant response to the ever changing balances of the horse- not to mention sudden situation such as a spook or sudden motion.

To make it really simple, you cannot afford to get dehydrated, sustain an electrolyte imbalance or have wide fluctuations in blood-sugar levels when you are riding. You can also have a significantly positive impact on your own performance by making some simple and smart decisions about nutrient timing and type (food and liquid).

If you are serious about your approach to nutrition, an excellent book I refer to and recommend is Sport [Nutrition Guidebook, by Nancy Clarke](#). I have found it simple, inexpensive, and written in language that is accessible even to teen and youth clients I have worked with. Meantime, here are the 'skinny' notes and rules of thumb to follow:

1. **Liquids:** Maintain hydration by drinking fluids regularly. Drink a glass of water before riding, and every now and then when you have cooldown or rest breaks in the ride if it is hot. Avoid commercial electrolyte replacers. Keep the fluids as uncomplicated as possible. You can make a very simple electrolyte replacing drink at home using water with chopped fruits floating in it, or lime or lemon juice, a half a teaspoon of sugar per 16 oz of liquid (2 cups), and a dash or two of salt. My favourite is water with a good dose of lime juice, some brown sugar and a dash of salt all shaken in my water bottle. It tastes like a Margarita.

2. **Sugars:** Avoid simple sugars, and fuel yourself as a habit on complex carbohydrates. You can eat a simpler sugar right before training to give you immediate energy release until the complex carbohydrates you fueled on at your last meal start to kick in. For example, I frequently munch on the carrots brought for my horse and share them together while we are tacking up. Carrots are high in sugar which absorbs fairly quickly into the bloodstream. However, I make sure that I have also eaten a source of more complex carbohydrate within the three hours preceding a ride. For example, I often eat an apple in the car on the way home from my dayjob, or have a half a sandwich at home before turning around to go out the door to the barn. If I will not be able to ride until later in the evening due to client training times or other reasons, I squeeze supper in first. Food on the run is never a problem. Lack of planning on the run is, as is failing to fuel at appropriate intervals. In a pinch, a granola bar in the hour before you ride will give you a combination of simple sugars (sugars gluing it together) and complex carbs (oats and grains in the granola).

Riding in a state of physical depletion (hunger, whether you feel 'hungry' or not) is a really bad idea. It sets you up for pitiful decisions and inappropriate mood-response, slow reaction times, and completely unengaged core. You cannot maintain core stability on an empty stomach. Simple sugars put your brain on a rollercoaster, and you need consistency both in neural function (brain, and neuro-muscular firing) and mood.

Training Plan Part 4

If you have been following the monthly training plan, you should have a good base of core strength and exercise habit. (If you have not, just get started- it's never too late and NOW is always a good time.) The March workout was about building cardio-vascular capacity so that your muscle fibres would develop sufficiently for stamina. You can't train for stamina overnight or in a month because stamina training has to do with changing the actual physical capacity the muscle fibre filaments have for working together, and changing the metabolic capacity of your muscle cells. Please get started if you haven't already. You do not want to fatigue in a jump off, cross country course, or in your dressage test after a long hot day on a show grounds.

April is your month for kicking your workout up a notch. The deposits you make in your fitness in the next four weeks, will be the 'bank account' you draw on for the competitive /peak summer season. Ramp it up in April so that you can shift gear in May to maintenance modes.

Sample April Training Schedule

<p>April, Week 1- Intense 7-8/10 for effort</p>	<p>1. Cardio Activity: 3x/week, 45 minutes with interval or intensity training. Sweat is good, out of breath is good, tired the next day is your goal. 2. Strength: 3x/week (alternating days to your cardio) 20 minute core and leg strength routines (alternate a core exercise, then a leg exercise) 3. Stretch: daily. Create a routine that takes about 5-10 min and covers all body parts. Make sure you are stretching lightly before you ride.</p>
<p>April, Week 2- Endurance</p>	<p>5. Cardio Training: 4 x/week, one hour, moderate pace 6. Strength and Core: 2x/week, 4 sets of at least one exercise per muscle group area: at least two exercises for each section of Core (front, back, sides) 7. Stretch: before and after all workouts, and at least 1x in the week for at least 30 minutes</p>
<p>April, Week 3- Intensity</p>	<p>4. Cardio Training: 3x/week, 20-30 minutes very high intensity intervals (try and exhaust self in 20 minutes) 5. Strength: 2x/week, increase intensity (weight, resistance, challenge elements) 10 core exercises 2 sets each, 3 leg exercises one set each, 1 shoulder exercise 2 sets 6. Stretch: at least 15 min per day- the increased intensity of the cardio and strength training will tighten you up, and you need to keep your joints mobile for riding.</p>
<p>April, Week 4- Endurance</p>	<p>4. Cardio Training: 4x/week with successively longer times: 45min, 60 min, 75min, 90min 5. Strength: 10-15 min core work 2x to maintain 6. Stretch: daily, with at least 2 extended stretching periods of 20-30 minutes</p>

The '10 o'clock 2 o'clock" exercise helps strengthen muscles that control your hips and shoulders.

Shift your legs and hold, then slowly switch sides. Do not swing your legs. Keep your back pressing toward the floor to support your lower back. If you can only shift your legs a couple of inches to each side to start- great!



Bonus: Short and Practical Fitness Tips
(originally published in the Ecogold newsletter)

Relieving Back Pain: If you experience strain, pain, or just fatigue in your low back, you are definitely not alone. Since our bodies must move with the horse, all the joints in your spine between the 24 vertebrae need to move a little. When we block motion in the back and seat, the area of the back that is weakest often ends up taking extra motion which can't be absorbed elsewhere. For most people, this is the lower back.

A seated forward fold is a very simple stretch for your lower back area that you can do anywhere, anytime. Place your legs and knees wide apart and lean forward toward the ground. Breathe deeply and increasing the stretch with each breath until you feel a warm stretch in your lower back and hip area.



Improve Your Seat Symmetry: Regardless of your riding discipline, carrying your weight evenly in both seatbones is very important. So is the ability to balance your torso over a stable and deep seat. A very effective and simple exercise to help you achieve both vertical and lateral balance involves sitting on a large exercise ball. Sit on a ball that allows about a 90 degree bend in your knees. Roll the ball from side to side and forward and back, until you have found a balanced position where the weight in both your seatbones and both your feet is even. Check your spinal alignment in a mirror- you should be seated in a very nicely upright position without any tension in your body.

To test your balance and exercise your core muscles, lift one knee slightly higher than the other, and extend your foot. Use your core muscles and balance to maintain even pressure in both seatbones, and nice vertical balance in your spine. Your body will want to shift the side (the ball will inform you this is happening) or lean back. As you resist both, you will also be building your core strength for riding.



April 2012: Maintaining Your Fitness Program When You Are Busy & Training Plans Step 5

Quote of the Month:

"Make the most of yourself, for that is all there is of you." **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

For the past several newsletters, we have been building on a conditioning program (ground-based) for a rider who might expect a more intense riding season in the summer. The months of preparation since your January resolutions are intended to set you up physically to be able to perform your best in the saddle in spite of longer days, and the heavier demands you make on yourself during extended daylight hours. In other continents, you may have been in a reversed season to the North American season. You could still easily apply the training principles to any time of the year.

Here is a summary of the plan from January to June:

January- get started: extensive stretching, start habit of cardio-vascular activity in your life, start core work

February- establish a base: increase intensity of cardio-vascular activity, and introduce leg work. The large muscle that move you and support your hips are major contributors to hip and spine stability.

March- your real workout begins: This is the month when you rely on the slow, steady and faithful base you put in place in January and February. Add more full body workouts to the base of leg and back support, while integrating core and continuously suppling

April- kick it up a notch: This month's training is your 'bank account' you draw on for May-Sept. If you are in a reversed hemisphere, switch the names of the months. April represents your fourth month of training, with approximately one month to go before your season gets really busy.

May- start to taper: Dial down your ground training, both in time and intensity. Your other activities are starting to gear up, and it's time to adjust into a maintenance schedule you can keep up through the busy season.

June- light maintenance

Your next month of training is about re-adjusting the balance of your ground conditioning, with the demands on your time and body as you increase your riding activity or intensity. You can expect to decondition slightly. If you pushed it a little previously, that's fine. The goal of a training period before your peak sport season is to build up capacity well in excess of what you need for competition and performance in your sport. You will need a reserve margin for when your training time drops as you focus more time on the riding and other activities in support of the busy season.

As you go through your competitive season, your attention in your riding will be more on technical fine-tuning and maintaining your horse's readiness for peak performance at each opportunity. You will be working to maintain suppleness and undo the strains and tensions that can build up during a busy season.

I find that riders who have been diligent about their ground conditioning up to this point, are starting to need a mental break from the routines. So, both for physical and mental refocusing, it's a perfect time to lighten up and take a wider view of what your maintenance program looks like. Make sure you are incorporating activities that are fun, relaxing or de-stressing for you, and that help you unwind- especially if you are in a serious competitive phase. An example might be taking your dog walk as part of your maintenance program.

How you use an activity like walking would depend on you. Factors would include your general level of tension (is the walk for unwinding? For loosening hips?), other activities you do (do you need the cardio exercise...or the opportunity to stretch and loosen) and time available.

If you are using it to maintain your cardio-vascular ability, you should pick up the pace enough to keep your heart rate elevated. Medium effort (needing to breath fairly hard, but not out of breath) will help you to maintain your ability for stamina, but it might not be as intense a cardio-vascular activity as you had been doing in the past.

You may also wish to play another sport one night a week to keep you motivated by accountability and fun, while getting your heart-rate elevated as a side-benefit. I recently discovered what wonderful fun soccer can be. For amateur adults, it is frequently played on short fields, which means you are running less and have to stay on your toes more with more opportunity for technical manoeuvres and engagement with the ball. It is also a great little heart-pumping game to set up at low cost with your own staff, friends or family on any green space. Pick any activity that moves you. Cycling works for some, tennis for others. If you pick a sport like tennis, please don't do it more than a couple of times a week for about 30 minutes. It is not a bilateral sport, and will work against your riding symmetry if overdone. For all activities, practice them within reason. You have invested a lot in being ready for your competition season, so keep in mind that all your other activities are to support your riding. You cannot afford to put yourself at risk for injury right before a show. With an activity like soccer, you need to play conservatively and pay attention to minimizing a lot of joint torque.

Swimming is another great activity for riders because it is bilateral, has very low impact on joints or opportunity for strain, and also integrates your core. Summer training can be really fun when you consider that as a rider, you are not training for these other activities. You are using them to keep you in shape for riding. So, you can go ahead and do each of them only once a week if you want to, as long as you still meet the goal of 2-3 sessions a week for each of cardio-vascular, strength balancing and flexibility. They do not need to be long, and they do not need to be the same activity each time. Two or three different forms of cardio-vascular workout are equally valid for your purposes. Another example could be a weekly yoga class, balanced by some extended stretching on your own at another time of the week.

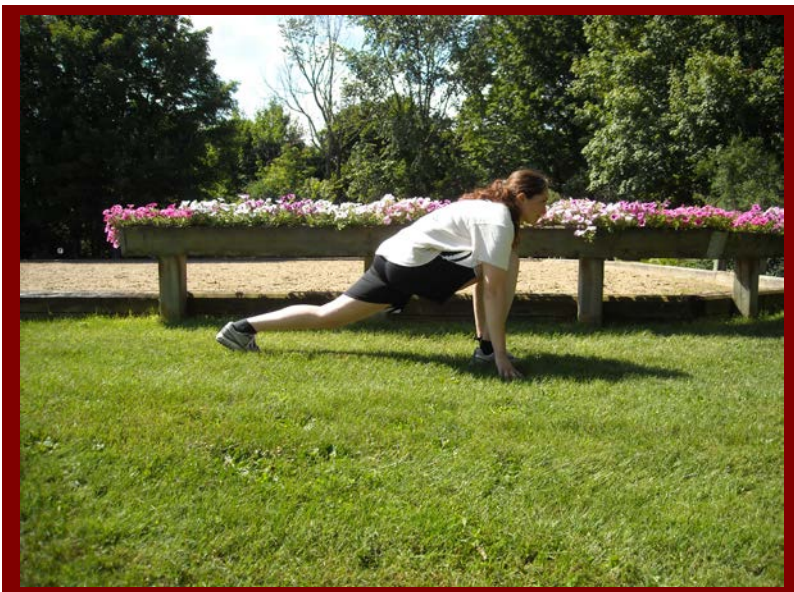
Fifteen to thirty minutes a couple of times of week would be enough to help you maintain the cardio-vascular ability you need, even if it is just a powerwalk. Letting it go completely with excuses about time would turn around to bite you. To be able to stay at your best on a hot afternoon show day, you need the efficient oxygen exchange happening in your muscle and

brain cells which comes only through cardio-vascular conditioning that elevates your heart-rate above levels you normally maintain while riding.

The key is to fit in the activities that fulfill the components of your overall training: maintaining mobility and suppleness of your joints, and maintaining your capacity for efficiency when fatigued. You will need elements of flexibility, core strengthening, cardio-vascular work, activities that are a total change from riding to keep you physically sharp, and activities that take your joints through a more full range than riding allows. You can often combine many of these elements in a single activity, or in small spurts that help keep you on track.

As you go through the competitive season, one of the big fitness elements you may lack is sleep. Caught between lack of sleep and working out, I opt for sleep. You can usually find a way to fit in the exercises you need to in peak form in 5-15 minute chunks if you are really busy, but you need your sleep for balance, co-ordination, quick response times and ability to keep your cool under pressure.

Not a fan of indoor exercise? Go for a 'creative walk' and see how many stretches or other movements you can fit in to help 'freshen up' your body response times, improve your balance or flexibility, or just make it fun again.



May 2012: Fitting Your Fitness In, and Improving Muscle Memory

Quote of the Month:

"Slow down you're doing fine. You can't be everything you want to be before your time." **Billy Joel**

If you've been following the 5-month fitness plan started in this newsletter in January, then you are heading right into your maintenance period. Even if you didn't follow the plan exactly, it is a busy time of year. Maintenance training really comes down to the fact that you still have to 'move it or lose it', but you only have time to do the minimum required.

It is not the time of year to launch a super aggressive fitness plan outside of your riding schedule (though, if you have time and you can time training and showing so you aren't sore on a show day, go ahead). The secret to keeping the gains you've worked on for the past few months is to break everything down to very small, very clear chunks and to prioritize.

Where you focus will depend somewhat on your riding goals at this time. For example, some riders get really tense through the competitive season. Given limited time, a tense rider would gain more by prioritizing their flexibility part of their program, and using the slow exercises to integrate their mental skills such as visualization, or relaxation techniques. A rider in a more cardio-vascular discipline may still need to maintain minimum cardio training. If you have trained up your fitness, you can maintain through short bursts of 15-20 minute very intense interval training sessions.

Or, you may be a rider who finds the longer days and longer hours in the saddle wearing on your hips- and you already tend to have tight hips. I suggest making sure you are doing your dynamic stretching before and after riding, and also fitting in a couple of sessions of walking each week to keep your hips mobile.

Another interesting training area that I see more of at this time of year is related to muscle memory and movement patterns. You may not have time to build significant strength, cardio-vascular stamina at this time. However, you do want to maximize your capacity for automated responses in the saddle that keep you from injury. For example, I was recently observing a rider being coached for Intermediate levels in Eventing. She was tending to throw herself onto her horse's neck or start over the jump before her horse did. Part of the problem was that she would first hang back, and then she had a reflex to throw herself over.

The problem behind her leaning back in the first place had to do with her position and use of her hip joint. Instead of stacking her weight well over her own centre of gravity by bending at the hips, she was kind of locked up in the hip. The result was that her body was compensating by throwing her back backwards (leaning back) to try and set the horse up before the jump, and then forwards over it. The result of the compensation was that her half-halts were ineffective and she was putting an un-necessarily strong bit in the horse, and then she was unbalancing him over the obstacles.

Her coach worked with her on folding properly from the hip. However, given that she has competitions coming up in a few weeks, she could make even more significant gains in teaching her body to use her hips correctly, by practicing correct folding on the ground a little every day. Your muscle movement patterns are independent of where you use them.

Whether you are on the ground or on the horse, your body will start into 'auto-pilot' with a movement pattern when you initiate it. On the horse, you are limited to performing movements only so many times in a day session, or so many times in the week. However, you can put more mileage on yourself by using ground based exercises that incorporate the same movement. All the rider in my example needed to do was incorporate a couple of minutes of a simple squat motion, a few times a day. The squatting motion (done correctly) trains the hip hinging. When it is done incorrectly, it is fairly easy to identify where the problem is. It is a lot easier to identify as well when the rider is on the ground and can move slowly without worry for steering or training the horse as well.

Selecting a specific movement pattern to correct only takes a few minutes at a time, and does not involve strenuous training. In fact, it should be done deliberately and even slowly at first. As the correct movement becomes more establish, you can speed up. The goal is to turn the motion into an automatic response you do not have to think about when you are riding.

A Dressage rider could use the same principle to work in seatbone and leg placement muscle memory by walking their lateral movements on foot. As they do so, they place their shoulders and hips where they want their horse to do so, and train muscle memory for correct position into their own torso. These types of exercises are very easy to do in 'downtime' moments like when you are waiting for someone, hand-grazing your horse, or just relaxing at home at the end of the day.

Whatever your priority will be, all that is required is that you:

1. Identify it and write it down. Depending on whether you compete or not, and what your schedule of events is through the season, you may have slightly different goals in different weeks. You should be able to identify them in one or two words and write them down.
2. Next, identify one activity you will do daily for 5-10 minutes, and another you will do at least twice that week. The second activity should be related to your key goal for that week. The first should be related to the areas you know are chronic for your body, and which will help you most towards having solid but relaxed posture.
3. Anything else is a bonus.

If you find some exercise ideas a little above your starting level, modify them so that they are safer. As long as you are improving, you are under no pressure to match someone else's ability. It's YOUR workout, not someone else's.

June 2012: Sorting Your Options and Finding Balance

Quote of the Month:

"The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities."

Stephen R. Covey, business leadership and time management expert, and leading author and speaker

If you are reading this newsletter, you are already interested in rider fitness topics. You probably have activities that you do outside of your riding- or that you did. Or perhaps you have experienced an injury, setback or plateau in your training and you are aware that you need to do something about it. With limited time, you want your un-mounted activities to count for something that helps you as a rider.

Truthfully, there are times in life when the reason we do many things, is because we are motivated by the need to ride, and desire to ride better and not necessarily by the auxiliary activity itself. That's ok. I know a lot of riders who need an external motivator such as a key competition, weight loss goal, injury, or 'aha' moment about the need to get off of a plateau in their riding, before they can find the time in their schedule for un-mounted work.

Riders coming out of an injury are motivated to follow the physiotherapists program because they want to ride again. Often there is a gap between where the physiotherapist's work is finished, and full return to sport function. This is where a personal trainer can be an important ally in your training. Even for riders that do fit in training other than riding, the big question can be what is the best investment of your time and effort?

Sometimes it can be helpful to think of un-mounted training a little differently. Even when I work with non-riding clients who have common goals like weight loss, or getting in better shape after a heart attack or joint replacement, there is a tendency to be negatively motivated. The training is a necessary evil in their minds- an interruption to the business of living a fun life. For a rider, un-mounted training can sometimes seem like one more thing to fit on the schedule, or even a distraction from riding. Sometimes when I think of the words commonly used for fitness and conditioning, they ironically do not seem very motivating: WORK-out is a good example.

Yet, most riders will have cleaned stalls or done other chores related to riding. The chores themselves are not directly related to riding, but they support riding, so we are willing to do it.

Another factor in motivation for un-mounted training can be the social aspect. When we ride, we have interaction with another creature, so the activity is not really solo. We look forward to seeing our training partner, and all the little social interaction in preparation and at the end of the session. It's a lot like the same intangible relational benefits someone gets from a fitness or yoga class, or club experience with enjoyable social interaction that makes the activity fun. It's understandably more motivating for many people to go spend time with a horse, than to make yourself go out running, or down to your basement to use fitness equipment. This is where I like to encourage clients (and myself) to keep your horse in mind. By taking time for you, you are bringing a better you to your ride. You are making your horse's job easier.

I often think the logistics for many people around fitness don't set the right conditions for success. With so many responsibilities, work, horse, family, other community engagements, very few people want to take the precious time available to be anti-social and go do a training activity. Who wants to go do a WORK out after a day of work, and who wants to banish themselves to their basement area or go put themselves through disagreeable experience when all you want is some happiness in your day and a break from the pressures that kept you so busy? Changing the location of where you do your exercise can make all the difference. Do as many of your training segments in places that you feel happy to be in. Many riders I work with end up simplifying the exercises they do with equipment so those portions (like core work, or shoulder and leg strength) can fit into a better lit room such as a living area or bedroom where they can multi-task or still be part of the family.

It's a good thing there is such a variety of options out there for people to choose from. A starting point for figuring out what to do would be asking yourself what would balance your life better: more time with people?, a little time on your own away from technology to think or just be in the moment?, a way to 'dump' workday stress so it doesn't affect your ride?, a physical high effort output to balance out mental output in your day? outdoor time to compensate for working in a building all day? Your answer will guide you to the range of activities you are most likely to enjoy, get energy from, and realistically slip into your schedule. It's better to have a modest plan you follow, than a grand plan that is unrealistic or unmotivating.

When you make some time for an activity that pumps you up and balances your life, it creates more time in your life because you are more efficient, happier, more relaxed and better able to make decisions. Just think about the last time you rode, and you and the horse were relaxed and supple: you went through the perfect and efficient warmup, nailed all your objectives in 20-30 minutes, cooled down and found yourself done early. Contrast that picture with a time when you scurried to your ride with other stressors on your mind, and significant stiffness from the rest of your day or week, took longer to warm up as a result, got into a 'discussion' with your horse over your main goal for that ride, had to settle for finding a lesser good note to end on, about 15-20 minutes later than you had hoped to be wrapping things up. Sometimes taking time, saves time.

Answer the important big picture questions first, otherwise you will have difficulty adhering to your plan. I find it so counter-productive when I'm working with a client with a big goal (especially a negative one like losing weight or preventing a heart-attack), and they seem caught all the time between the negative motivation to exercise, and the negative guilt for not doing everything on their plan, or worse, for knowing deep down they don't like it, and feeling guilty. Things that enhance your life (like riding, and activities that support and help you ride more and better) should be a joy (or at least give you back enough to keep you reinvesting your time in those activities from a positive motivation).

The second most important question to ask is what your training choice is intended to do or help you with. There are training routines that I use frequently with all riders because all riders share common movement patterns, compensation patterns and tightness/tension patterns to some extent. However, there are differences depending on discipline requirements, and the plan always comes down to the individual person, and where you need to be focused, right now.

I prefer to think of any training not actually on the horse, as just that: training. The question is, training for what? Training to improve flexibility or hip mobility? Training to improve posture? Half-halt aids? Balance over fences? Stamina for long show days/ a cross-country course? Once you identify your key training purpose for the next 4-6 weeks, you can select from your list of activities that also meet your other whole-person needs for bringing the best you to your riding, and get started.

We train our horses without batting an eyelash, and spend hours doing it, sweat and dirt included. However, don't sweat the small stuff about your own personal training. Many of the more serious riders I work with have an 'all or nothing' mindset they apply to their own conditioning. Don't do that. Some is better than none. Anything you can do at all to improve your balance, movement patterns and muscle memory, stamina and strength for riding is going to help you in the saddle more than doing nothing at all will. Doing nothing other than riding will eventually work against you as you develop the muscle shortening patterns common in riding. Commit to doing something, but know that anything at all that you do is part of leveraging the time you commit to the saddle. Anything you do for your own conditioning IS the 10-20% that brings your riding effort up to 100%.

You are not training FOR the other activities you do, you are just using them to enhance your ability as a rider, or perhaps for slowly reaching other personal goals in a reasonable way, balanced with your riding goals. Your horse's training program changes regularly as you progress toward your goals. It may even change slightly on any given day, depending on other influencing factors affecting his energy, attention span, or need for rest and recovery. Why think of your own training any differently?

Bonus Tip: Ball Crunch with Weight (originally printed in an Ecogold newsletter)

Areas Targeted: middle and some upper & lower abdominals

Introducing weight adds intensity, and works triceps

How to:

- Use the same basic motion as the ball crunch, but also reach a weight or weights back behind your head. You will need to focus on engaging your stomach more so that your lower back does not arch.
- Bring the weights forward as you crunch.
- For a harder variation, add a slight push of the weight toward the ceiling, or a side to side twist.

Notes: If you feel your back arching, you probably have too much weight for your lower back/lower abdominals, even though the exercise may be relatively easy for your arms. The exercise also works the underside of your arms and shoulder stability, which can be very helpful area for a rider. If you can do one weight easily, progress to holding two weights.



August 2012: Plan Your Success

Quote of the Month:

"Doing your best in this moment, puts you in the best place for doing the best in the next."
Oprah Winfrey

I realize that there are subscribers to this newsletter around the globe. In the Northern Hemisphere where I live, we are in the middle of summer heat waves and drought. Training time is challenged by busy summer schedules, and the heat itself. Oh, and quite possibly, the Olympic broadcasting schedule could be responsible for large chunks of time now dedicated to viewing live or catching up. Regardless of climate or Hemisphere of residence, the world is watching the Olympics.

I recently had the privilege of attending a meeting with an Olympic coach in another sport and listening to them discuss a 'culture of excellence' in their sport. As nearly all the athletes' testify in their interviews, Olympic achievement is not a solo performance. It is a team effort: the result of years and years of preparation with the right conditions. Some of them stunning human stories, like the runner who discovered he was fast when he escaped child soldier slavery.

Occasionally, there are 'one kid wonders': athletes that rise above the average performance of their country to achieve medals. However, to have consistent international performance, the athletes or country represented are characterized by systems, structures and culture that fosters excellence. In North America, we are a little bitten by the intellectual disease of individualism, so it can sometimes be possible to lose perspective on your own personal performance in your sport. It is easy in an individualistic and highly entrepreneurial culture to practically deify individuals. On some levels it may be easier to accept your own performance in relation to the goals you have or had, if you can write yourself off in a way, claiming you just weren't born with the same stardust between your toes as your hero. The mystique of the hero very seldom includes a roadmap for how you too can follow in their footsteps.

As I was listening to our Olympic coach talk about culture of excellence in his sport, I was really struck by the several times that he spoke about the grassroots. His point was that the real purpose of the Olympics is to inspire the grassroots. In many sports, Olympic athletes are required to return home with ambassadorial duties to the grassroots of their sport, and to the culture. These are often tasks such as speaking to underprivileged kids, youth groups, youth sport, or other motivational speaking and coaching opportunities where their story and achievement become an inspiration for a sedentary population to be active, or aspiring athletes to be their best. At a very basic level, sport achievement isn't about sport. It's about human being, and inspiration we get from achievement and self-discipline, to be self-disciplined and to achieve- to be who you were created to be, and to enjoy the journey.

The culture of excellence is very much about building a team around you, and realizing your role in promoting excellence around you. In a culture of excellence, there is no room for competitive zero-sum thinking. Your competitors are first your peers in the pursuit and

celebration of excellence. There is an environment of knowledge sharing which assumes that we are all stronger and better, together.

When you think about your own growth as a rider, think about the environments where you grew the most. They were probably characterized by a team feeling of camaraderie and knowledge sharing, where your coach welcomed input from other support team players such as your doctor, physiotherapist or fitness and conditioning coach, or even visiting clinicians.

You will probably also notice that in a period when you grew the most, you had clear goals and a plan to get there. Excellence is not a random accident of DNA, alignment of the stars and lucking into the right contacts. There may be elements of those divine gifts in superstar world performance, but you don't have to wait to be long-listed to an international team to pursue and achieve excellence.

Two mental tools used commonly in both business and sport are the concepts of tackling 'low hanging fruits' and goal setting with concrete steps.

Most of us with agricultural experience can grasp the metaphor of the low hanging fruit quite easily. As a rider, your low hanging fruits are the handful of areas that you could start improving today without major investment. If you did so, they would have an immediate positive impact on your journey to your goals. A nice example would be a goal such as becoming more supple. Suppleness is easy to achieve, often forgotten, and makes all the difference in your riding performance and enjoyment. Yet many people are too busy. If you compete, let your competitors be too busy.

Now that you have identified your low hanging fruit of improving suppleness, set a goal. Often a client will say their goal is to 'be more supple'. This is a little hard to work with. It's just as hard to work with as the goal that you would like to jump better, or do more dressage. Of course you don't put those goals in such vague terms. You say 'I'd like to ride a level 3 dressage test/jump 1.10m by May so I can qualify for the regional championships in the fall.'

As soon as you have that goal, you and your coach get to work. If you don't address the potential handicapping factors, you may end up struggling a lot more than you need to. Let's say your handicapping factor is the tension you carry in your hips or shoulders. You know it's there, and your good horse keeps compensating for you when you should and could be addressing it. The problem is that having a goal like 'be more flexible' is like trying to find the end of the rainbow. It will keep moving on you. Plus, many riders don't stop to quantify the consequences of not doing anything. Average athletes say 'I got this far without doing anything about it, clearly I don't really need to/I can prioritize.' Superperformers say 'whatever I did to get this far, will have to change to so I can reach new levels- new level, new game plan.'

Be a star. You can work with a personal trainer, physiotherapist, your riding coach or other suitable professional to actually measure your lack of flexibility. You can then tell yourself that you will do 3 exercises for that trouble area, every day for one month. You can then set weekly benchmarks for how long or how far you will go with your stretching exercises. At the end of the month, you will have measurable flexibility improvements. It is really important to set concrete action goals that you will take, and not focus as much on the results which are merely the outcome of your diligent practice. The results come when you are ready.

As you improve your flexibility, you will notice that your rides are going better. You are more precise, and you have more energy and stamina because your energy is not depleted by a constant internal tug of war. Your muscles can align and work together to do what you and your riding coach are trying to achieve with your ride. You will notice a difference in your horse as well. We all know that our horses are much more attuned to our tension patterns than we are, and that it affects both their way of going, and their mindset.

As you start to plan your success, don't be the proverbial American Marlboro Man, an island unto himself. Be a promoter of a culture of excellence. Invite your peers and coaches at your barn to help you with your goals, and to try a similar journey. Encourage one another, learn from other's trials and errors, and share yours. If you want results you haven't had before, try things differently.

To get extra flexibility in really tight areas, 'hang out' in your stretch for several minutes, taking your time to breathe deeply as you slowly increase the stretch by little fractions. You should never feel pain or like you are pulling or forcing the stretch. Stretching more works. Stretching harder does not.



Bonus Article: Back Strength for Hunter/Jumper, Polo and Reining Originally published in *Horses Magazine*

It is always interesting to note the consistently specific demands each riding discipline places on the body. During the show season I volunteer some hours of stretch therapy for competitors. Recently at a large hunter/jumper show, riders were coming to me with very common issues in their shoulders and back.

Tightness issues on a show day do not usually arise as a direct result of one day's riding or competing. Actually, they reveal a lot about the rider's overall strength and balance, and the previous several months of training in preparation for the competition. While at the competition site, the first priority is to stretch out those tight areas.

However, it's much better to treat causes than symptoms, and taking your long term athletic development seriously should include a program for conditioning your back and shoulders, apart from the time you spend on your horse. Riders that do not take conditioning seriously, suffer from back pains, shoulder strain, repetitive strain, bursitis and other acute strains and imbalances which have a direct and negative impact on performance.

While all riders should have strong backs and shoulders, I've noticed that reiners, polo players and hunter/jumper riders take particular strain in the upper back due to the common requirement of holding arms up while bracing against the horse's movement.

For polo and hunter/jumper riders, this problem area extends to the middle and lower back due to the additional demand on the body created from a posture fairly high out of the saddle. The crest release, mallet hold (not the actual swing, but neutral, and swing preparation), and upward rein pull (reining) all use similar upper back and shoulder muscles.

A common mistake my stretching clients were making was to assume that since their back was hurting, they must have a strong back from riding which they had overstrained. Actually, they had relatively weak back muscles which were getting stretched and strained by the grueling show day schedule, and by tension in shoulders, biceps and chest muscles, as they held to a two point position over several courses of obstacles through the day.

Best practice in sport conditioning is to strengthen muscles you use 'in game', as well as those you don't use directly, in order to achieve an overall balance in body strength, and ability for self-carriage, stamina and effective response. It is also best practice in sport conditioning to train muscles you use in a relatively short range while riding, in a more complete and full range of motion in your strength training. In most sports, muscles are used within about 30% of their full range of motion for specific actions related to the sport. In riding, that range is even shorter as most of the time the rider's body is held in a constant contraction, with ongoing relatively small adjustments and flexions to produce aids.

Muscles that are strengthened in full range, have significantly more strength within the smaller range used in the sport. Also, muscles that are more fully developed store more glycogen, which provides energy to the entire body, increasing stamina.

I found riders neglecting back and shoulder strength, assuming that riding was adequate for conditioning. In fact, the riding was straining, but not strengthening the back. Also, many

riders are women, and the female body is not designed for natural upper body mass. Female athletes in many sports have to spend more time conditioning the upper body than male counterparts, for this reason. Riding should be no exception, particularly for women. However, regardless of gender riders are not only managing their own body, but heavy tack, hay bales and 1200lb animals.

For riding fences, a strong back and strong shoulders permit self-carriage without strain, and also provides for bracing against a hot horse, or negotiating a course without relying on arm strength. The two-point position required for jumping and polo inclines the body, reducing the effective use of hips and thighs for bracing the body. This places more demand on the upper and middle back.

A weak back and shoulder area leaves a rider relying on hands to 'hold' the horse, and unable to maintain self-carriage on landing, through tricky obstacles or other technical situations without gripping the horse's mouth. When the upper back is weak and the rider compensates with strong arms, hands become tight and the rider creates a harder-mouthed horse. For reiners, weak shoulders can result in repetitive strain injury to the shoulder area from repeated motion in your training.

Three exercises you can use to help strengthen your back and shoulders are the row, back extensions, and lateral raises or overhead presses for the deltoids. To see progress, you need to perform exercises for any muscle at least twice a week, using at least three sets per workout. Doing only one set burns calories. Two sets starts to work the muscle. Three to four sets is best for muscle growth and developing stamina if you are working out twice a week. The weight you use depends on the number of repetitions you are trying to achieve per set. You should always feel like you can barely squeeze out one more by the time you are finishing your set. Even if you are female, doing an endurance set with the maximum resistance you can manage to complete the set, will not result in bulking you up. Using too little weight however, will not be the best investment of your time as it will not be providing sufficient load to your muscles to increase your strength and stamina. After one set, rest the muscle by doing something else with another part of your body, then complete your next set.

Because endurance is a primary factor in competitive riding, use between 10-20 repetitions per set of each exercise. It would be common to do 3 sets of 15 repetitions for an endurance program. Adjust the resistance or weight load so that you reach your capacity at the end of the set. With an exercise for the core area such as crunches or back extensions, you may wish to complete 20-30 in a row as a full endurance set.

While abdominal work can be done almost daily, your other muscle groups need 48 hours between intense workouts to repair and re-build.

Back Extension: Lie over an exercise ball or hay bale, and raise and lower your head and shoulders. It is easier you're your hands at your ears like a situp, and adds difficulty if you reach your arms out in front of you. This exercise can be done without any help, but if you can hook your feet under something, or brace them on a wall, you will be able to increase your range of motion. Another variation which works your middle back is to perform the back extension with your arms out like an airplane



Row: This exercise can be performed in a bent over position with dumbbells, at a weight machine with a cable pull, or using an exercise band around a pole or post. Notice how the shoulder blades squeeze together. The goal is to work the rhomboids which are between the shoulder blades, not to pull the arms back using the biceps. A common mistake is to use the biceps. It can be helpful to imagine bringing your elbows past your back, and then pinching them together. The most common weakness I see is weak rhomboids. Strong rhomboids help maintain nice riding posture with light hands, whether your horse is a puller or not.



Lateral Raise: This exercise can be done with dumbbells, or an exercise band- or water pails or any object that will provide resistance. Additional benefit can be had by doing the exercise standing with your legs shoulder width apart, in a two-point position. A common mistake is to raise the hands high- just bring them level with your shoulders, pause for a moment, and slowly control their descent.



September 2012: You Are Worth It

Quote of the Month:

“Believe in yourself! Without a humble but reasonable confidence in your own powers you cannot be successful or happy.” **Norman Vincent Peale**

You really are. Worth it. You're worth making an appointment with yourself to do what you need to do to be your best. For today. Remember, that we are talking about doing the best you can, with who you (and your horse) are, today. It will change in a few months, and it is different from a year ago. Part of being the best you can be as a rider is bringing your own athletic ability and self-carriage to the dance you engage in with your horse. Recently I've been reading Heather Blitz's clinic article in *Dressage Today*, and I love the part where she talks about what the rider can do to improve their position or use of their body to achieve the riding goals discussed. She often talks about core strength, but sometimes addresses other areas as well. I love her articles because they always make a link between what the rider is trying to achieve in the training of the horse, and the physical responsibility the rider has for taking the lead in the way their biomechanics help or hinder the horse's abilities to follow through.

The question is, once you have read the article or had that coaching session in your ride that brings you to your light-bulb moment for your next important step, how do you make it happen?

First, make sure you understand that you are worth it. You have carved out time in your life for horses and riding because you believe that, but if you are like the majority of riders, you are a professional and family person with multiple responsibilities both public and domestic. You probably go through scheduling gymnastics to make the riding happen, but if you're going to do this, why not give it your very best? In my life, I work on the return-on-investment principle that it costs me less to spend a little more to get a much higher yield, than it does to spend less and throw it away. I'm sure you'd agree that buying several cheap shoes that wear out, is more expensive in the long run (especially if you get foot or back problems as a result) than buying one really good pair of shoes. In training as a rider, you make this decision too when you hire the best coach you can find and afford. Scheduling moments to work on your personal athletic ability and readiness magnifies your ability when you are in the saddle. If I could get 20% more out of my ride, with the same amount of riding time, I'd go for it.

Secondly, recognize that you are going to spend the time you want to in order to pursue your passion, anyway. You may just be spending it online, or in the tack shop, or taking your time cleaning your tack or talking about your ride with your friends, or pushing longer on an exercise with your horse when what you really needed to do was stop, and leave it to go back to it another day. One of the segments of my former corporate career included work in business process improvement. We had to analyse how much time tasks took, for every step in a process including the non-written tasks, document, and then streamline the process so that a bigger percentage of time spent when to activities that increased output. The exercise is a bit tedious if you try and do it in your personal life, but chances are you have

moments in the day when you could let your brain wander a bit and have fun ballparking some rough figures on where you spend your riding related time.

You may discover that you do not actually need more time for your overall training plan in order to fit in some personal conditioning work that will help you. You may just need to re-allocate a little.

After you and your coach agree on the areas you need to focus on, you may need to take an extra step so that you know what you need to do concretely. Many riding coaches are able to identify weak or tight areas, or problematic movement patterns in a rider. However, I do not meet many of them that are also trained in fitness and conditioning so they are unable to tell you exactly what to do (what, how intense, how often etc...) to fix the problem. If you are clear on a goal such as 'more core strength', but not sure how to accomplish it, you may need to do a little research, or go book a session with a physiotherapist, kinesiologist or fitness trainer to help you identify the activities that will best help you reach your goals.

Finally, you need to just make appointments with yourself to do it. With work pressures, I had slid off of my own training agenda and recently resolved to make a change. I discovered that deciding to stretch more, or get more core strength this week, did not help. I had to actually write something in my agenda like 'swim 30 lengths' right in the 12 noon Tuesday spot on the page. I have made a personal recent goal to increase my physical activities 30 minutes per day. I need to do so, partly because a lot of my work involves sitting at a computer these days and so it is more challenging just to stay fit generally so that I am supple and balanced when I do ride.

When I spent a much larger percentage of my time coaching, my personal training goals were different. I actually had to make appointments with myself to slow down physically so that I did not carry an overused and tightened up body into my riding. Many of the elite or professional riders I have worked with needed similar conditioning plans. Your objectives and activities will depend on your current situation and goals. The good news is, you can make a positive difference with just 15-30 minutes a day.

So, be good to yourself and book a 15-minute appointment with yourself today or tomorrow. Make your first appointment a stretching appointment. Most of us need more suppleness, and stretching is the easiest way to start. While you are at it, you will ease up some of the tension of your schedule, and give yourself the opportunity to stand back from your other activities in order to spot your new conditioning priorities.



October 2012: Get a Better Seat & Avoid Lower Back Strain

Quotes of the Month:

"I will study and get ready, and perhaps my chance will come." **Abraham Lincoln**

"Before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success." **Henry Ford**

When I visit my chiropractor, I can easily get the impression that the answer to many problems is in the spine. It is tempting to assume that of course the chiropractor sees things this way, because they specialize in spines. When you go to your dentist, you learn just how much of your health is connected to your mouth and gums, because that is the area your dentist specializes in. It is tempting to dismiss the concerns sometimes.

However, as a rider, your back really is a key to your ride. Far too many riders suffer from back pains and strains. While a strong and supple back is critical for all sport performance, riders tend to notice the results of lack of good back strength because the motion of the horse is introduced at the base of your spine. Most other athletes experience the initial thrust of motion much further away from their spine: the feet. By the time the motion reaches the torso, a lot of the force has already been managed through the legs and thighs. The rest of it often travels through the torso and out the upper body as the shoulders and arms move.

A rider sitting on a horse has a wave of motion introduced at their seat. It travels up the spine and down through the legs to the feet in the stirrups. The force is often blocked by tension in shoulders, arms or neck which blocks it's upward dissipation and causes more of the energy from the motion to stay in the torso. Imagine the upper body like an open canal lock when it is supple (water or energy flows on), or a closed one when there is tension (the water or energy builds up the area it is restricted to).

When the flow of the motion is blocked from the top, I often see overactive or floppy lower legs, or else a 'whipple waist'. This is where the rider appears to flex at the waist with each stride, or to have excessive motion in their pelvis in an attempt to follow the horse's motion. The same reaction can happen when instead of blocking the energy that is trying to flow through the upper body, the rider blocks the energy that needs to go down through the legs. They stiffen their ankles and don't allow the stirrup to rise up and down with the horse's motion, or they stiffen their legs and thighs.

The spine is supposed to be maintained in a neutral position, not folded and flexed rapidly and repeatedly for thousands of strides. The body does not like it, and will often react in a way that creates a famous vicious circle. The physical reaction of the rider can be even more tightening of the upper body, or else clamping in the upper thigh or locking in the hips in a reactive attempt to create quiet stability somewhere, in compensation for the excessive motion in the spine.

As you can imagine, all of these compensations and attempts to create conditions of stability for the spine cause the rider excessive wear in their back. They also have a direct and negative impact on the horse's way of going. A strong back with a neutral spine and ability to maintain spine neutrality in motion is important for any active person or athlete, and critical

for a rider. Since an extremely small percentage of people are born with the ability to just know how to maintain a neutral spine, nearly all riders that I have worked with benefit from taking a few minutes regularly to work on their lower back.

The type of strength a rider needs in their back has to be related to ability to maintain good posture, without rigidity or need for excessive corrective motion. It also has to factor in the deep layers of muscle that are responsible for spinal stability. These cannot be exercised with large movements, and there is no 'crash course' that you can do a few days or weeks before an event. A few minutes a day is all you need. In fact, a general rule of thumb I follow with core work for riders is to never do too much at one session. The reason is that fatiguing your important core stability muscles before you ride, will set you up for injury or strain, or at the very least, a poor ride. So, you are better to do exercises for your back for a few minutes a day, either with lots of time for recovery before you ride, or else when your riding is done for the day.

A simple exercise that helps build strength in the lower back for riders is a 'leg lower'. It is one of the exercises in my book, [The Complete Core Workout for Riders](#). I also use it in the spine stability course I teach to the general public (with back issues) out of a physiotherapy centre. The goal of this exercise is to slowly build up the deep postural stabilizing muscles in your lower abdomen and lower back.

Steps to do the exercise:

1. Lie on your back with your knees up and feet flat on the floor.
2. Place your hand under the small of your back to feel the space between you and the floor, then roll your pelvis so that your back squishes your hand. You will need to use your lower abdominal muscles. This is a typical spine neutral posture used in Pilates.
3. Tuck your knees up, removing your feet from the floor.
4. Raise your feet straight overhead.
5. Slowly lower your straight legs toward the floor. Only go about 6 inches for the first time, and hold your legs there for about 3-6 seconds, maintaining your spine neutral posture on the ground.
6. Do not lower your legs to the ground. To start over again bend your knees, drop your feet down, and remove the weight loading from your lower back. Tuck your knees in again to begin again.

This exercise is NOT a 'leg raise'. The goal is not to raise your legs. It is to maintain spine neutrality with a slow increase in pressure, introduced by the weight of your legs getting progressively more in front of you. Raising your legs up and down without the spine neutrality will actually damage your lower back. It can also cause your body to use your hip flexors more than your lower abdominal and lower back muscles, and contribute to tight hip flexor issues that riders often experience.

I would suggest that you repeat the exercise about 6 times. When you can do so quite easily, it is time to either add to the number of counts you hold the posture for, or extend your legs a little more. Your legs should never be more than half way toward the ground. They would only be that far after months and months of extensive core training.

November 2012: Easy Tips for Getting More

Quote of the Month:

"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.." **Albert Einstein**

Just when we think the really busy time of year is over (summer competition and training season, fall championships, Thanksgiving), it gets busier. The Christmas season is not usually a time when I hear people saying 'yeah, my calendar is really clear for a few weeks so I'm going to make it count and get my workout back on track'.

Fortunately, the month or so following a full season of high physical demand and mental demand in your sport is the time when you need to be slacking off. Well, relatively speaking of course. Active rest after your busy season is critical to your ability to stay in the saddle, longer. You can ease up a bit with a clear conscience, but keep in mind that the active rest and recovery period in your training schedule is a deliberate appointment with yourself to regenerate, repair tissues, retrain muscle firing patterns, and give yourself what you need for a fresh start in the new year. You know how to do this for your horse, but many people forget this for themselves.

You can beat the January pressure, holiday eating guilt, and mood swings associated with the season's marathon of unhealthy eating, lack of sleep, emotional situations and general craziness. Determining to keep a training appointment with yourself and to keep yourself mostly on track nutritionally will really help you repair and get ready for new challenges. It will even help you keep your immune system intact in a season where people pass the cold and flu germs with the cookies.

There are a few simple guidelines to your training plan for the next 8 weeks.

1. Keep it short and simple.

5-30 minutes is all you need each day. Some days all you need to do is breathe quietly sitting in good posture. Other days stretch, and do your hip mobilizing, lunge opening walk on another day. Have a plan for something every day, and an overall plan for the week so that you have flexibility to adjust to the unforeseen in your day, and still stay mostly on track.

2. Pay attention to breathing and make sure you are using breath in your activities.

It reduces stress, opens the airways, oxygenates your mind and body and helps keep you healthier. Mentally, paying attention to your breathing patterns and deep breathing while you are doing your training routine will help you focus and resist stress and distraction. Physically, it will help your body relax tension zones and lose tension reflexes acquired through the season.

3. Do less.

Now is not the time for crazy cardio-vascular workouts unless you are sure you are a type of person who is relaxed by having this in your schedule. One of the biggest mistakes I see A-type people do, is load their training to the same high-octane level as the rest of their life when in fact, the best thing they could do is use their training time to slow down. Do less, but do it smarter and be more present with your breathing. It will be more satisfying and calming. Your body cannot rewire ineffective muscle firing patterns if you are full of that A-type go-big-or-go-home approach. You have to slow down. You may even need to break up your work into very small chunks at different times of the day so that you can use it to keep bringing you back down to a more event keel.

Doing less also means eating less. I know this is the season of big eating, but you are less physically active, so eat just slightly less most of the time, so that you can absorb the big meal or treat out without having training regrets in January.

4. Feed on good quality fuel as much as possible.

There can be a lot of sugar around at this time of year. Don't be tempted to get on the sugar high/low roller coaster. Make most of your eating as healthy as possible with a margin for treats so that your immune system stays up, and your body can effectively use the seasonal down-time to repair tissue. Have a weekly or daily limit on certain consumables (namely, sugars and alcohol).

A very sensible and healthy but smallish breakfast, with some healthy snacks and a healthy and smallish lunch will leave you lots of room for treats at supper. Be flexible. Change the plan around if lunch is the big event that day. Don't stress if you ate too much. Eat less the next day. Do eat sensible, small amounts often. Whether you feel hungry or not, low blood sugar levels will impair your judgement and reflexes in the saddle, and in a Christmas shopping or awkward family or client situation. Keep your blood sugar constant to keep your cool.

5. While you're doing less, do more.

What I mean is that for many people, exercises which can seem very light such as postural exercises may not be very exciting or satisfying physically because you don't feel your body working. Using big and powerful movements to get in a good workout might not fit now though, if your goal is recovery and repair to set you up for the start of the next season. One thing you can do to find that happy medium between a workout that feels satisfying, and your need to slow it down, is to take a simple exercise and add an isometric/resistive element that helps your brain not only memorize a good position, but also rewire firing patterns while engaging your muscles enough to build strength. This type of work cannot be done quickly, nor can you do too many minutes in a row. An example would be sitting on an exercise ball or chair edge in the kind of posture you wish you had in the saddle.

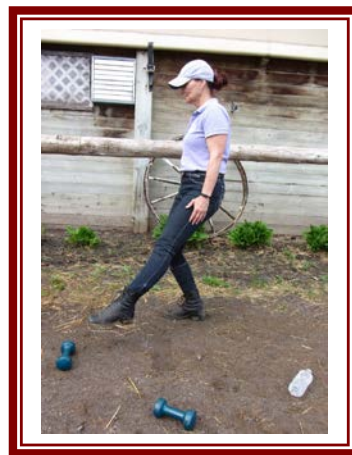
While you are sitting there with your hands as if you were holding reins, you could have someone try to gently push on you to make you lose your posture. They could push on your back, shoulders, forearms, hands, legs, and from different angles. Their goal is to try and destabilize you. As they push, you engage your core to maintain your position with a feeling

of lightness in your fingers and toes. When you feel you are becoming rigid in fingers or toes, or other compensating patterns like tightening shoulders, stop. Shake yourself out, breathe deeply and start over again. Your goal is to create postural stabilizing patterns that do not at the same time trigger the negative responses you'd like to lose in your riding.

If you do not have a handy person to help you, you can also do a lot of this type of work by incorporating a mirror, and either pushing on an exercise ball (ie: against a wall) or pulling on exercise tubing at different angles. The goal is just to introduce an element that forces you to really engage the muscles that are controlling your posture, without much movement.

Exercises like this can be done for just a few minutes at a time, almost anywhere and without breaking a sweat. They go a long way to activating muscles correctly, without overtraining or straining your body- or your agenda.

This 'around the clock' leg reach exercise (featured in the ebook "Gentle Workout for Mature Riders") helps promote balance, hip stabilizer strength and improve proprioception. Exercises like this can be done easily, almost anywhere, in almost no time at all.



December 2012: Join the Dance

Quote of the Month:

"If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?"
John Wooden, American basketball coach

At this time of year we naturally think a little about our accomplishments through 2012, and goals for 2013. It's also an excessively busy time of year- mostly for everything going on outside your riding. Both the busy-ness and the timing make it a great time in the year to think about retraining muscle patterns and other light work that will help your body re-set and start fresh.

Relax a little. Every serious training program builds some recovery time into the plan, and this is your time.

As you worked through your last summer/fall schedule, it would have been normal for tension patterns or imbalances to build cumulatively when you had more riding and more stress. Undoing these patterns is like finding a fresh slate to start from. Stretching, then doing strength or motion exercises which target your key areas will help build new patterns you can rely on to kick in as you are riding.

An example for a rider that jumps could be a rider who has been getting shoulder tension over the season. Working the tension out and doing exercise to correct muscle firing patterns that stabilize the back while maintaining relaxation in the shoulders will re-set your body's response to stress (requirements imposed on you as you ride). Instead of tensing the trapezius (muscle connecting shoulder and neck), this rider would stretch that muscle area, and do a few exercises to prompt more correct engagement of other core muscles instead. This kind of retraining does not require a lot of time for a big workout, or even breaking a sweat. Just a few repetitions frequently will help your body retrain muscle memory more effectively than putting all those repetitions into one big tiring workout.

Taking a little time to stretch, work out tension issues and retrain firing or engagement patterns will mean that when you are ready to get back at your training in earnest in the New Year, you will build strength and endurance in the right muscles, the right way. If you didn't take the time to reset, unmounted exercises would have a tendency to build more strength in the wrong areas as your body continued to trigger muscles which were not most efficient. For example, doing slow back raises to get the right sequence of engagement out of your seat and long back muscles will help you maintain posture over fences. But if you have been accruing tension in your upper back, you will have a tendency to hunch your shoulder and upper back muscles in these exercises, and reinforce the non-productive pattern. By taking the time to re-set, you will retrain your body to have engagement in the right areas, while keeping tension out of the wrong areas. One way to think about tension is engagement, but in the wrong areas or to the wrong degree.

For a dressage rider, a muscle pattern change example could be doing some loosening exercises, then walking your lateral movements on foot to re-teach your body a muscle

memory for degrees of angle in your shoulders and hips. Then when you get on the horse, they will be more automatic.

Use your holiday time to have fun with your activities. Even if your holidays do not include deliberate equestrian-specific exercise, but you just enjoy getting out and active with activities that are not part of your normal routine, the variety will bring a freshness to your body's athletic capacity. Think of this time as a little like when you have your horse in a recovery period, and just take him out on trails for fun, and change to the usual physical demands.

Finally, this is a great time of year to set up your training plan for the next 6 months. Many people wait until it is much closer to competition season before they decide to get serious about their own training. However, that is too late. Your best bet is to start early and slowly taper down your fitness training as you get closer to the busy season and your riding time increases or becomes more intense.

Cardio-vascular ability and muscular endurance are built over time- just as they are for horses. Here are some easy and quick guidelines to your next few months of training:

Jan-Feb: really tackle flexibility and any muscle imbalances you have. You can't train hard if you have tight muscles, or uneven patterns because hard training would result in worsening tensions, or even creating strain if compensating patterns are reinforced.

February: you want to see a noticeable increase in your endurance and overall cardio-vascular ability by the end of February.

March to Mid-April: This would be the period of most intense workouts with a goal of building maximum capacity and endurance. You need to train to exceed your riding needs in this period, so that as you taper off later, your ability does not drop below what would be optimal. Imagine the training like putting money in an account for a period of time when you can't make any more deposits (your actual show season, or just before it when your riding is increasing). You don't want to worry about dropping into a deficit of capacity to meet your needs.

Mid-April through May: taper to a maintenance routine which allows you to keep up the level of fitness you need for your competition season, with relatively minimal effort.

More About Rider Fitness

Daily stretching is a great START.

You wouldn't condition your sport horse by teaching him to plow, or expect him to perform on a haphazard diet of low grade nutrients and tight water rations. Yet, I see so many riders skipping meals or eating poorly, running through their day under-hydrated, and asking me whether doing barn chores keeps you fit to ride.

Choring does not respond to your strength and flexibility requirements for riding any more than plowing would build the right muscle for your horse's sport (unless you plow or pull!). However, all types of activity that contribute to a healthy and active lifestyle, keep you active and healthy. Training to help your riding specifically should be done as a deliberate- mindful- act, even if you take just 5 minutes to stretch.

Then, build on your routine with core strength so you can maintain the positions your stretching freed you for. Don't stop there.

A complete training program can include a wide variety of activities you enjoy, and can be built around your preferences and lifestyle. You can use a gym, or never set foot in a gym. You can incorporate all kinds of classes that you like as part of an over-arching plan without feeling you have to make time for them many times a week, as long as they *are* part of an overarching plan. Typically speaking, you need at least 15-20 minutes of activity in your cardio-vascular improvement zone per week, to develop or maintain cardio-vascular stamina suitable to riding. Strength and core training can be done 2-3 times a week at a minimum, and stretching is recommended daily. Bear in mind that you want to do cross-training activities which are symmetrical in nature, and minimize those which are not (golf and tennis are good examples) because repetitive asymmetry will create imbalance in your ride.

The biggest muscle is your habit muscle! Get more stubborn than your obstacles.

You train your horse with the long term in view. A famous ball coach said *perfect practice makes perfect*, and you know it's true as you train your horse's mind and muscle memory. You know enough to progressively develop your horse's ability, and to train at least 4-5 days a week if you want to see significant progression, and three for maintenance. It shouldn't come as a big surprise that the same rules of thumb apply to your own training program.

Many thanks to my clients and readers for modeling the exercise photos in this book. It's my hope that the illustrations of correct technique will be helpful, and that seeing ordinary people doing them will be encouraging and inspiring.

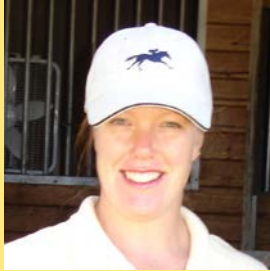
Equifitt Services: Rider fitness and biomechanics coaching, clinics, workshops, riding instruction and e-coaching (Don't let geography stop you! Heather coaches clients around the world via Skype. You can get rider fitness and biomechanics coaching and programming almost anywhere, or while you are on the road).

Ways to Get Free Rider Fitness Information:

1. Google the dozens of articles by Heather Sansom on the internet
2. Sign up for the free monthly rider fitness newsletter at: www.equifitt.com/resources.html
3. Like Equifitt.com on Facebook

About the Author

Heather Sansom, MA, Certified Personal Trainer & Centered Riding® Instructor



*In memory of
my training
partner,
Breeze.*

Heather is a rider biomechanics and conditioning specialist. She is a certified elite Personal Trainer, Centered Riding® Instructor and Equine Canada Competition Coach. A lifelong rider, she has trained in Dressage at Level 4 and is proud of having done at least one barrel race in her life, taken polo lessons, and hunted with hounds. Heather's personal cross-training program varies according to season to include activities for cardiovascular, strength, core and flexibility training. She hikes, and trains in martial arts and dance for overall conditioning and to improve rhythm and co-ordination.

In a project management role with the Canadian national equestrian federation, she was responsible for the development of the national equestrian coaching and riding curriculums and certifications. She is recognized for her innovation in remodeling the equestrian adaptation of the Long Term Athlete Development sport model.

Activities with EquiFITT include fitness (talks, workshops, small group and individual), biomechanic and performance analysis (mounted and unmounted) and riding instruction to improve biomechanics and performance. Equifitt 'virtual coaching' is also available: Heather works with clients around the globe through Skype and other tools. A comfortable speaker, she has presented nationally and internationally. In addition to several rider fitness ebooks, Heather has published over 100 articles on rider fitness and biomechanics in national and internationally read publications such as Horse Sport, Canadian Horse Journal, Dressage Today and some Australian publications. The monthly Equifitt Equestrian Fitness Tips newsletter is free, and has a few thousand subscribers worldwide.

The EquiFITT vision and mission are to contribute meaningfully to excellence in equestrian sport by helping riders improve the conditions for riding at their best- good fitness, a supple and athletic body, effective movement patterns and good biomechanics. Balanced training for better riding really means you and your horse have more fun reaching your goals and improving your performance.

Ebooks by Heather Sansom:

“The Complete Core Workout for Riders”

“Handy Stretching Guide for Riders”

“Gentle Workout for Mature Riders”

“Fit to Ride: Collected Equestrian Fitness Tips and Articles Volume I”

“Fit to Ride: Collected Equestrian Fitness Tips and Articles Volume II”