

FIT TO RIDE

Collected Equestrian Fitness Tips and Articles Volume 1

Heather Sansom

MA, Equestrian Fitness Specialist



ISBN: 978-0-09813391-3-9

EquiFITT.com

Balanced Training for Better Riding

FIT TO RIDE

Collected Equestrian Fitness Tips and Articles Volume I

Copyright © Heather R Sansom, 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without prior written permission.

ISBN 978-0-9813391-3-9

Acknowledgements:

Author/Photographer: Heather Sansom

Photo Models: Heather Sansom, Birgit Barca, Elaine Alexander, Kelsey Dickson, Gina Smith, other Equifitt clients and friends.

Cover Design: Karen Henderson

"We owe it to our horses to make sure we are as fit and flexible as we expect them to be." Gina Smith, 3x Olympian

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"

**Get more fitness tips free by signing up for the
Equifitt Fitness Tips Newsletter
on the Equifitt.com website
and by 'liking' Equifitt on Facebook.**



Introduction

Welcome to this collection of fitness tips originally published for the Equitips newsletter. Equitips are read worldwide by thousands of readers. Once in a while, someone emails back to tell me how the tips have inspired them, or improved their riding. As a passionate horse-person, there is a tendency to find time when something relates to riding, and to run out of time when it does not. Among riders, there is a wide spectrum of interest in non-riding fitness topics. The bottom line for most of us is whether or not an investment of our times helps our riding or not.

At one end of the spectrum, are the keeners with lots of time to ride, and go to fitness classes at the gym. At the other end, are riders with schedules so busy that there barely seems to be time to breath, never mind fit in more activity. On one side, we see riders without enough time in the saddle. These riders may want to stay fit between rides so that they can make the most use of their mounted time.

On the other side, there are professional riders who spend so many hours in the saddle that they are at risk for serious repetitive strain injuries. These riders might use their fitness time to stretch their muscles, keep joints mobile and reduce risk of strain.

Whatever your goal, your fitness choices as a rider have to be practical. You have to be able to make it work you're your other obligations and the sheer amount of time it takes for riding and horse care. The good news is that riders often need to make small tweaks to their weekly routine, to see significant improvements in the way they can use their body in the saddle.

Your horse does not read your mind. He reads your body. His body speaks back to you through your physical contact points. The success of your conversation depends on lack of 'noise', miscommunication and trust. The better you can carry and control yourself, the more you are able to apply consist 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 tips in this collection were published in 2010, and are intended to inspire you and help you fit your fitness into your life. Your horse will thank you. Your body will thank you.



Shoulder Opener: This is a handy stretch you can do to open your chest area and unlock your shoulders before riding. You can do the exercise anywhere: barn, home, office, holding onto anything that works- a jacket, leadshank, dressage whip, dogleash, towel. Start by holding a lead shank or long whip overhead, taking a deep breath, pass it down behind your back. If you are tight in the shoulders you may need a very wide grip to start. Roll back up over your head bring your arms in front of you. Repeat 3-4 times. (*This stretch is one of the many stretches in the Handy Stretching Guide for Riders, downloadable at www.equifitt.com*)



Table of Contents

Inspiring Quotes	p. 4
January 2010: Dance With Your Horse	p. 7
Bonus Article: Have Peace with Yourself	p. 12
February 2010: Why Shoulders Get Tense	p. 17
March 2010: How to Ride Better	p. 20
April 2010: Listen to Your Body so You Can Speak to Your Horse	p. 27
May 2010: Why Riders Need Strength	p. 30
June 2010: Surviving Competition & 6 Ways to Fit Fitness In	p. 33
Bonus Article: Keep on Track with Fitness Goals	p. 37
July 2010: Those Old Bones	p. 40
August 2010: Get More Out of Your Workout	p. 44
September 2010: Fitness for HorseCare	p. 48
October 2010: Be Successful	p. 53
November 2010: Strategies Against Flu & Cold Season	p. 58
December 2010: Proprioception & Firing Patterns	p. 61

Inspiring Quotes from 2010 EquiTips

"Let us read and let us dance - two amusements that will never do any harm to the world." **Voltaire**

"A dance is a measured pace, as a verse is a measured speech." **Francis Bacon**

"He who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance; one cannot fly into flying." **Friedrich Nietzsche**

"Opportunity dances with those who are already on the dance floor." **H. Jackson Brown Jr.** author "Life's Little Instruction Book"

"Don't be afraid to give your best to what seemingly are small jobs. Every time you conquer one it makes you that much stronger. If you do the little jobs well, the big ones will tend to take care of themselves." **Dale Carnegie**

"There are only two emotions that belong in the saddle: one is a sense of humour, and the other is patience." **John Lyons**

"It's SO important for riders to learn more about how to become more fit so that they can ride better. When a rider spends time training their own body, they'll get more appreciation for what they demand of their horses. They will also learn more about patience, persistence, dedication and how to train bigger movements by starting small and breaking down the components to simple steps." **Eddo Hoekstra, FEI dressage coach**

"Eighty percent of success is showing up." **Woody Allen**

"You will find the key to success under the alarm clock." **Benjamin Franklin**

"Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep balance you must keep moving" **Albert Einstein**

"There's no secret to balance. You just have to feel the waves."
Frank Herbert, sci-fi author

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

"Nothing is so strong as gentleness. Nothing is so gentle as real strength."
St. Francis of Assisi

"Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path. You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb." **Winston Churchill**

"To get back my youth, I would do anything except take exercise, get up early or be respectable." **Oscar Wilde, Irish novelist & poet (lived to 46yrs)**

"Youth has no age." **Pablo Picasso, innovative artist (lived to 91)**

"And in the end, it is not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years."
Abraham Lincoln (assassinated at 56yrs after abolishing slavery)

"Forty is the old age of youth, fifty is the youth of old age." **Hosea Ballou, 19th Century American thinker (lived to 81)**

*"You have to decide what your highest priorities are and have the courage- pleasantly, smilingly, nonapologetically to say 'no' to other things. The enemy of the **best**, is often the good."*

*"Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree. 'What are you doing?' you ask. 'Can't you see?' comes the impatient reply. 'I'm sawing down this tree.' 'You look exhausted!' you exclaim. 'How long have you been at it?' 'Over five hours,' he returns, 'and I'm beat!' 'Well, why don't you take a break and sharpen that saw?' you inquire. 'I don't have time to sharpen the saw,' the man says. 'I'm too busy sawing!'" **Stephen Covey, author, motivational speaker and time management guru ("7 Habits of Highly Effective People")***

"If you lose hope, somehow you lose the vitality that keeps life moving- you lose that courage to be- that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all. And so today, I still have a dream." **Martin Luther King Jr.**

"If you love life, then do not squander time. It is the stuff life is made of." **Benjamin Franklin, 1706-1790, American 'founding father' and scientist**

"Our plans miscarry because they have no aim. When one does not know what harbour they are making for, no wind is right." **Seneca 3BC-65AD (Roman stoic philosopher, advisor to Nero)**

"Courage is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm." **Winston Churchill**

"Things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they be not altered for the better designedly'. **Francis Bacon (H Sansom translation from older English: you don't have to think about going downhill, you have to decide to go uphill on purpose.)**

"Success is not final. Failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts."
Winston Churchill

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." **Winston Churchill**

"Anyone who has never made a mistake is someone who has never tried anything new."
Albert Einstein

"The genius of communication is the ability to be both totally honest and totally kind at the same time." **John Powell, composer (screen tracks including Shrek and How to Train Your Dragon)**

"The difference between perseverance and obstinacy is that one comes from a strong will, and the other from a strong won't." **Henry Ward Beecher**

"To be an artist, you need to practice every day" **Sandra Bullock, accepting her Oscar for her role in The Blindside.**

"People often say that motivation doesn't last. Well, neither does bathing - that's why we recommend it daily." **Zig Ziglar**

"The time is always right to do what is right." **Martin Luther King Jr.**





January 2010: Dance with Your Horse

Happy New Year! I get so excited about the New Year. It's like the first day back at school used to be: new beginnings, new teachers, new classmates. You never know what a year can bring. You've heard the saying 'right place at the right time'. Maybe you are hoping for a lucky break of some kind, or a breakthrough in your riding or personal fitness level.

A couple of months ago, the Equestrian Fittip was all about 'staying in the position of influence'. To me, that's kind of like being 'in the right place at the right time' with your horse. For example, you are familiar with the idea that it's important to prepare for a transition so that the moment you ask coincides with the moment your horse's feet are in the optimal spot to begin the new gait.

There are aspects of 'right place right time' we can't control 100%. For example, you are teaching flying changes to your horse, but you have to spend months getting certain elements in place before you can put the pieces together. The day YOU think is THE day, might not correspond to where he is at, and you may be a ride or a week later. It's a continuation of the same approach you take backing a horse. You kind of know when he's ready for the saddle, and then for the next step because you've been working with him and watching his understanding and comfortability with various concepts evolve, and you're reading his body language. He tells you when the right time is.

I really enjoy backing horses because I love watching this crazy relationship establish itself. We say I AM THE BOSS, and then we get to use our undisputed authority to say things like '*may I invite you to consider trusting me enough to hold this piece of cold metal in your mouth at this moment?*' If he doesn't say no

outright, we just take charge and put the bit in, and then say *'thank you ever so kindly'*. All because a horse wants leadership, but also needs to trust and enjoy you and you want a horse that wants to work. When we are riding, we are engaged in a similar conversation.

Like those flying changes. You get the biodata from your seatbones about the softness of his back and position of his hind legs, biodata from your hands and eyeballs about the balance of his front end, and you know when the moment comes up to ask for a smooth change. You also know when it hasn't arrived yet—such as your seat isn't in the saddle because he's as stiff as a board, his ears are back, and he's decided an all out gallop to the other side of the arena is a better idea. You may be required to crack down on him, but you ultimately return to trying to get back to the harmonious conversation where you get to pick the right moment to say 'now'.

So, 'right timing' is partly within your control, but not completely. In life in general, you can create the possibility of opportunities, but that out of the blue phone call or connection is still something out of your complete control.

The part you can control, is being in the right place. My motto is, be in the right place all the time, and sooner or later the timing will also be right. As a rider, that means the *relaxed readiness* or *relaxed responsiveness* I've discussed in some of my pieces for Dressage Today. (You can read them by going to www.equisearch.com and searching Fitness Tip of the Month).

The relaxed readiness applies to both you and your horse. A beautiful ride feels like a conversation that goes something like this:

You: *May I suggest an extended trot in about 6 strides?*

Horse: *What's that you say? I was eyeballing the corner—there's a fire-breathing...*

You: *Yup actually it's 1 stride now (various adjustments and persuasions)*

Horse: *Best extended trot coming right up! look at meeeeeee spring, spring, spring*

You: *Lovely! Bravo (various adjustments to let him out)*

Horse: *Happy to oblige- hey check this (wuffles nostrils, fills ribs, reaches further)*

You: *I'd like to think about collecting in a few strides*

Horse: *This would have been tiring for much longer anyway, thank you, c-o-l-l-e-c-t-ing swing, swing, swing. Wuffle and chew.*

You: *(down transition to walk on long rein) that was marvelous thank you ever so much- what good work today—you're a champ.*

Horse: *I'm special I'm good, we're happy (tail side to side, more wuffling, reaching)- uh, does this involve a treat? I get a treat right? You got those treats? (I knew you'd like that collection and I'd get to stop and you'd have treats. Pretty slick on my part dontcha think? Got ya in my pocket. Pocket. Treats in the pocket?)*

(If you think I'm going through the looking glass here, bear with me- this gets concrete.) You can apply the same idea to a conversation about fences, passing things on a trail or any other work you do with your horse. These moments do happen- you've had them. They're like the famous sweet spot in a golf swing. *Getting in the zone.* They keep you paying the board and all the other stuff that makes you keep at it. You want more of those moments at home, because odds on getting in the zone corresponding with the 5 minutes you have under judging at a horse show on Friday in July months from now are much higher if you have more of those moments at home to start with. Of course, there are a lot more factors involved to riding a moment with feel and harmony than just your fitness, especially in competition.

However, because your conversation with your horse is entirely physical, or kinetic, the state of your body, and sophistication of your physical vocabulary is

www.equifitt.com

© The contents of this article are the intellectual property of Heather Sansom, EquiFITT.com
Equifitt services include: Clinics, Personal programs, 'online' coaching, Centered Riding®

really important. You need to be free from obstruction both to listen, and to provide clear direction- and stay out of your horse's way so his body can work the way it is designed to.

When you have insufficient independence of movement in your muscles, joints and limbs, and insufficient tone or structural or neuro-muscular imbalance, it's the equivalent of introducing CONSTANT SHOUTING, **!interrupting**,

NAGGING NAGGING NAGGING, or *shuurring* to your

language with your horse: annoying, unproductive, not nice. Or, to use another great metaphor, dance, the equivalent would be you shoving, blocking, stepping on his feet, or standing there with an imprecise gestures to which he would have no choice but to take guesses or fumble some imprecise response. Not exactly 'dancing with the stars'.

Another great metaphor is dance. Just today I had a conversation with a cowboy who phoned me from two time zones away, who is in the saddle riding a herd of cattle (rides the horse, manages the cattle) 12 hours a day for about 5 months of the year. He wanted to know some stretches to keep his hips limber, and some exercises for self-carriage because he was concerned that so many hours in the saddle could wear on his horse if he didn't take responsibility for his own carriage and ability to go with his horse's movement. He wanted some exercises he could do without being anywhere near civilization. He said to me 'You know, I tell people riding a horse is like dancing- they think I'm a little crazy- but it is.' Two days before, I was interviewing an FEI dressage coach and clinician for an article, and he had said basically the same thing. He said:

"To influence your horse to follow your lead, you have to have a very good control over your own body. Supple, strong and balanced and a great ability to not only initiate changes but also to follow immediately what you initiate.

You cannot lock up or try too hard as this would hinder your horse and you would get a different response than what you want. Your horse can't read your mind but it does 'read' where you are in the saddle and how you use your body."

Of course, knowing the correct technique for your riding discipline is important. Carrying a physique which is supple and balanced enough that you can both sustain effort the whole ride, AND be relaxed about it and able to find body parts and employ them as required to your riding experience or riding lesson, is what your fitness routine is for. My 2009 personal goal was to learn ballroom dancing. In dance, you can know the steps, but performing steps to correct sequence, even side by side or connected to someone else, is not dance. Dance itself has an inherent conversationality about it. It has a mutual responsiveness and spontaneity to it, within a standard vocabulary.

Whether you've made your New Years' resolutions yet this year or not, I'd like to invite you to take the challenge to work on your own symmetry, suppleness and self-carriage and see what happens.

Here's what to do: pick a handful of stretches you know you should be doing, and promise yourself you'll do them every day for a week. Then the following week, add in a new element to your routine. Think about your goal- is it suppleness? Is it balancing a muscle area to offset too much tightness in another area? Is it increasing your stamina? Write down a clear and concrete, objective way your goal can be measured so that in a month, you can see your progress based on where you are at now.

Warning: you could get addicted to getting results, and your lifestyle, happy hormone levels and current riding performance could be seriously altered.

Bonus Article: **Have Peace with Yourself & Remember You Enjoy Being Fit**

We're heading around the corner to the season of the year that celebrates love, joy and peace. These three are often quoted, but the rest of the ancient writings continue on to also mention: patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control.

They're linked. At least in fitness they sure are. Recently two thoughts crossed in my mind inspiring this month's fittip. One of my clients lamented 'you should tell people how to stay motivated in your next fittip', and one of my all-time favourite been-to-hell-and-back powerhouse motivational speakers said 'you are responsible for your own joy', followed by a thundering silent pause.

The two ideas ignited a spark under the thought I had already been simmering in the back of my mind for this month's tip which was related to the problem of how to undo the negative effects on your body of sitting too much.

Bear with me. It's all related like spaghetti on your plate. Here's the problem at this time of year: the days are shorter, you work longer hours, traffic is worse and you spend more time in traffic, work is more pressured because it's end of year, and you are heading into holiday preparations and purchases stress. It all combines to drop your energy when you need more of it, signal weight retention when you want to lose some, and lower your immune system so that you find yourself crawling into bed or on a couch instead of springing across your workout space floor.

Then, while shopping for others you see sales and try things yourself- and your tired, slightly heavier, somewhat pasty from being indoors too much and grey from fatigue body stares at you in the change-room mirror- and you think you have a moment of truth. You might as well give up. So you try a week of whipping yourself harder to make the workout thing work, and the diet thing stay

www.equifitt.com

© The contents of this article are the intellectual property of Heather Sansom, EquiFITT.com
Equifitt services include: Clinics, Personal programs, 'online' coaching, Centered Riding®

in line, and at the end you feel, well--- whipped. Good thing holiday wear comes with elastic waistbands and distracting sparkly stuff all over it. You're somewhere near the vortex of an accelerating downward spiral of discouragement and demotivation where you're about to conclude: there is always the New Years' Resolution. Why not just wait until then. Guys, if you read until this point, trust me, we will get to a part that makes sense to you too.

The new year is two months away. You cannot afford to be robbed of the love, joy and peace in your life for two whole months. You definitely cannot afford to watch your body backslide for two months, which will cost you four to bring yourself back up to your fitness in the new year. You have before you more opportunity than ever to share meaningful time with people who are important to you, and you're in the backstretch of the time left to finish your professional year with an impressive sprint. Often the root of demotivation has to do with your perception of what you are supposed to be motivated to do. Whipping yourself is not the answer, neither is throwing in the towel. You need a *STRATEGY*.

It's the spiritual fruits I started this fittip with: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control. Here it is: to have PEACE with yourself, you have to remember you enJOY being full of energy. LOVE yourself enough to remember that you are worth it. Acknowledge you will need to be KIND to yourself, and doggedly PATIENT in the next 6-8 weeks as you negotiate the Ironman of social seasons and fiscal wrapup. You are about to throw away the slavery to spontaneity and the whip of guilt and punishment, grab SELF-DISCIPLINE with both hands and make a plan.

Here's the plan: I will engage in a deliberate act of health every day.

That's it. The plan is about taking the elephant you know you can't eat, and breaking it down to bite-sized pieces.

Let's flesh it out a bit so you can apply it right now:

Peace: You are who you are and have what you have. You are only responsible for doing the most you can with what you have. This season will be busy, so the 'most' might mean a reduced workout plan of 3x 30 min a week plus walk the dog. Reduce calories a bit accordingly. Accept you might gain 5lbs, but darn it, do not get on the scale, and do not accept that anything outside your own self is going to hinder you from a daily deliberate act of health. Make the extra 5lbs veneer: you don't have to lose your core muscle tone, or basic cardio fitness. Stimulating a muscle, or elevating your heart rate just a couple of times a week can keep you in maintenance mode. That's really not so imposing when you think of it that way. When you keep those bases in place, the extra 5 comes off almost by itself within weeks of the holiday eating stopping. You can do this.

Love: Whatever makes you busy this time of year, you are engaged in it because you are alive. This makes you part of the stream of love from others to you, and you to them. The busier you are, the more it shows that you love what you do. That's why you're going to take yourself seriously enough to draw a line in the sand and have a moment to move your body. Even if it's only 10-15 minutes. Stretch, do core work, do a handful of pushups, go for a brisk walk. Do whatever feeds the energy you most need right now.

Joy: Be like an athlete: in your chosen moment of deliberate acts of health, focus on the moment. Eat the incredibly delicious food enjoying every bite like a committed foodie. Stop when you said you would. Sprint, or flow, or kick, or otherwise move your limbs or torso in whatever direction you've told it to go, at whatever speed or activity you've chosen, and rejoice in having those body parts to move and in feeling them do what they were designed to do: move and

circulate your blood. No negative thoughts are allowed in this moment. This is a moment dedicated to enjoying being alive.

Patience: You'll stumble, and you might find yourself making it to 11pm before you can grab your daily deliberate act of healthy living. You still do it. You score BIG and drop into bed. Eat my dust, bodyfat and cold virus. One day at a time, you can pace yourself through this in a way that works for you. Some days, you will not be up for the workout or walk you might have done a month ago. Forget it. 100% effort means TODAY'S 100%, not yesterday's.

Kindness: Did I already say 100% effort means TODAY's 100%, not yesterday's? So if you're really tired, stretch, or take 5 to do some abdominal work. Even in a world class athlete's training schedule, there are seasons for 6 days a week of peak time effort, and seasons of near total downtime. It's called recovery. It's an official part of any serious athletic training plan.

Gentleness: You know what I'm going to say, so say it with me: 100% means TODAY'S 100%. Push yourself a little- enough to feel out of breath for a moment, or to feel a muscle burn. That's the finish line. You crossed it. So you can stop and do the other things you need to do. Don't accept less than a good finish line, but don't make yourself do the full marathon when today is all about light jogging and remembering to smile. Gentleness only makes sense within discipline- otherwise it's indulgence and demotivation. But you can stay on track and be gentle about it. The side effect of being kind or gentle to yourself, is it tends to ooze out towards others. I'm willing to bet they're in a seasonal vortex too, and could use some paid forward gentleness and kindness.

Self-discipline: We already talked about this part: commit to a deliberate act of healthy living daily. One day it's exercise. Another day it's not eating the canapés because you don't want sneaky calories you can't burn off that day.

Obey a 'no' you told yourself, at least once a day. That's so that you can grab a hold of the rest of your life with both hands and enjoy it guilt free. Applying self-control puts you back in the driver's seat. That's where the peace comes in all by itself.



February 2010: Why Shoulders Get Tense

You've experienced tense shoulders. You've seen other riders with tense shoulders. You've even heard that if you have tension in parts of your body, your horse will too. In fitness and conditioning outside the equestrian world, we talk a lot about tension in the shoulders: it's everywhere, not just a riding specific problem. If you talk to a massage therapist or chiropractor, ask them what percentage of their clients come in with shoulder tension. Mine says about 80%.

Strong contributing factors to the problem include the lifestyle we have created: sitting in cars gripping steering wheels through hours of traffic, hunching over computer keyboards typing for hours (ouch, this one hits home), inattention to correct mechanics when lifting heavy objects (I see twinges among those of you who do barn/farm chores!), and the basic anatomical fact that most of our tasks are performed in front of us, so we are always reaching forward and down. As a result, our bodies develop a strength imbalance in the upper front part which we refer to as 'upper cross syndrome'. Essentially, the musculature in your chest develops more than your back, and also tightens up. Combined with a postural tendency forward, the shoulder area rounds forward and the body has to fight to maintain uprightness. This fight results either in thickening of the muscles holding shoulders up and back, tension in that area, or both. If you have experienced a lot of tension in the area between your neck and shoulders, you know what I'm talking about.

This happens because your shoulder girdle is not actually mechanically secure and stable in the same way your pelvis or legs are. It sort of floats in a web of muscles connecting arm, scapula and collar bone to your torso, and controlling movement. Interestingly, this is very similar to the way your horse's shoulders 'float' in a muscle 'sling' on his body.

Have you ever noticed the astonishing number of areas your body can find around your shoulders and neck to develop knots or pressure points? The way your shoulders sit on your torso like a yoke is one of the reasons it is so easy to injure the area, such as the ubiquitous rotator cuff injuries I see. One horse spooking on the end of a lead rope, or one hay bale tossed the wrong way is all it takes to lay you up for months.

The vulnerability of the shoulder area is one reason why female athletes in many sports do strength and conditioning for the upper body, approximately 25% MORE than their male counterparts in order to avoid injury. Watching the Olympics these days, we can all appreciate the sheer volume of hours that go into athlete's cross-training regimes. It's staggering to think what a small percentage of that training time links directly to peak performance (ie: fast take-off time), and what a huge percentage is related directly to the avoidance of injury (ie: so the athlete can survive training un-injured, and show up to compete).

Even in sports where leg power dominates (ski, skate) your shoulders come along for the ride (excuse the pun) and can make or break the performance. Think of the precision of planting a ski pole, the endurance in upper arm strength for ice-dance, and the difference impulsion in your horse between when you are sitting correctly on your horse versus slouching your shoulders.

As a rider, you are going into the situation (riding) with a modern human predisposition to tension in your shoulders. This is one reason why strengthening and stretching the shoulder area is so important from the get go. On top of the factors shared with the rest of the population, you are also holding the reins on 1000lbs of livestock on the hoof moving under you, bouncing your seatbones in all 4 planes of movement.

If you are not correctly balanced in your seat, your body will have a tendency to create stability through the two key compensating patterns of tightening your thighs, and bracing your shoulders. When you tense your shoulders riding, you block the freedom of your horse's shoulders as well. Often I will see a rider trying so hard to push the 'go' buttons on their horse (and getting even tenser all through their own body), when in fact their own shoulders and knees are hammering the biomechanic 'stop' buttons at the same time.

If shoulder tension is a biggie for you, you can make dramatic changes in the space of a few days or weeks by doing the following:

1. Stretch your shoulders and neck every day, all the time, in the car, at work, on your horse, and before you ride
2. Strengthen your core (5 min a day will help) and teach your body to be able to engage your core, without also tightening your neck muscles
3. Use fascial release techniques such as pinching the tight muscle areas or laying on tennis balls to release accumulated tension in the fascial tissue and muscle complexes
4. Go get massage or other release therapy to the area, then maintain it with good stretching habits.
5. Build up strength in your back and shoulders so that you are not riding 'at your limit' and your body can relax.
6. Use relaxation techniques or stretching before you ride, or if you are an A type person, do an intense workout before you ride to get the aggressive chemical-levels down in your muscles and pacify the neuro-muscular connections so you can be relaxed in your ride.



March 2010: How to Ride Better

This past weekend my dressage coach said 'do you think there's an easy button?'. One of her students had gone to a local big box office supplies store and bought her a big button that says 'easy' on it. You press it and the tinny voice whines 'now that was easy!'. Fortunately, there is no such button on the wall of your arena, horse's stall, or sticking out of your horse.

I say fortunately because I've noticed that most competition is at the lower levels. The higher you go, the fewer people you are competing against. It gets to a point where you no longer even refer to them as competitors, but colleagues because you realize that if they didn't show up as well, there would be no competition, and that would be it for the sport. Whether you compete or not, competition pushes advances in performance, which pushes availability of good training, which helps everyone even if you just ride your horse on trails for pleasure.

If there were an easy button, there wouldn't be a challenge, and you wouldn't have to fight upstream against your age, physical limitations, experience, financial situation or whatever obstacles you face to being as good a rider as you wish you could be.

If you are competitive, the lack of easy buttons is a good thing because it weeds out your competition the higher you go. One year, I decided to go for regional champion at my level (Level 2 dressage at that time). I figured out that most of my competitors did not ride when it was 'too cold', 'too hot', 'too wet' or when there was a weather storm, they were too busy, too tired or felt sick. Since I live in a climate with four seasons that dips to minus 35 degrees Celcius with white-outs in the winter, and climbs to 35 degrees Celcius with heat waves and high humidity in the summer, I started to calculate just how many weeks a year of training I would get if I approached my training in that same mindset.

It wasn't very many: nearly all of January is frigid, all of April is soaking and muddy, most of December is gone to Christmas, and you have to ride very early in the morning in July to avoid heat-stroke. That's four months out of 12. Then, if you ride an average of 3-4 times a week, you are cutting out the other half of the week, so you are really riding a total of 4 months out of 12. Assuming you don't pare down to 2 days a week for a bit because you have a cold, go on vacation or are just plain tired. Even if you do not live in a four-season climate, you can do a similar calculation with the variables that affect you.

When I did the math, I realized that if I trained 5-6 days a week no matter how I felt, and as long as it wasn't under or over 30 degrees Celcius (minus or plus), I would be training 200x more than my competitors in the same season, I would have a competitive advantage just by showing up more often to ride. This was a necessary competitive advantage for me because I did not have an expensive horse, or even a usual dressage breed, or the resources to pay for lessons more than once a week. When I did the math, I realized that the extra \$100/month an indoor arena would cost me through the year, more than paid for itself in the additional riding time available to me. I had a full time day job in management, so riding only when the weather suited was a total non-option: it was dark, cold and I was tired every week. Three months' worth of riding a year is very expensive when you break down the annual cost of keeping your horse to a per ride cost. Showing up at a show unprepared is also very expensive when you break down the costs involved.

I also figured out that if I did all that riding, but had to compete in over 30 degree Celcius in the middle of a hot July show day and either me or my horse fatigued, that it would be a very expensive mistake. You aren't in charge of who else shows up and might be better than you are. You aren't in charge of the judges

opinions. But you are in complete control of your own preparedness, precision and technical correctness.

So, we built galloping on hills and trails, and training over fences into our schedule to rule out muscle endurance on the horse's part; and jogging and weight training a couple times a week for me so I could carry my end of the deal. We actually competed in both L1 & 2, placed in the top 5 provincially in L1, and were provincial champion in L2. My \$2300, 15.2hh Arabian sport horse who I backed myself was provincial L2 champion against warmbloods dozens of times his value. Trust me, it wasn't because I'm a brilliant rider or dressage judges just like Arabs. I'm lucky to have an adaptable, athletic horse with a great work ethic. This example is really small potatoes compared to the achievements of the Olympic and elite athletes I have had the opportunity to work with. However, the experience proved to me that your innate abilities (you or the horse) can always be improved, and that preparation, discipline and precision are possibly more important than the raw material.

Regardless of raw talent (genetics), and resources, your limit to your riding ability is mostly in your mind. I'm not talking about your pie-in-the-sky mental daydream time. I'm talking about what you actually believe in your mind. Actions reflect what your basic assumptions and priorities are. So, by extension, you are limited only by your daily habits and practice. In fact, even if you don't think you have much of a chance, but you train like it's possible...you will get a lot further than you realize. You may even come around to believing yourself if you maintain the right habits long enough.

In a well-known study on talent and performance, researcher Anders Ericsson studied musicians over a period of a decade and drew the conclusion that the common factor in success was not raw talent, but something motivational speaker Malcolm Gladwell has made famous as the '10,000 hour rule'.

Essentially, if you spent 3hrs a day perfecting or learning something, over a period of about 10 years, you would have achieved world-class expertise in that area—and spent about 10,000 hours doing it.

When you look at young athletes such as we watched in the Olympics this year, they have an average 10-15 years of focused experience in their sport. If you dedicated the next decade to doing something every day that would be MORE than what you already do now for your riding, you will be surprised at where you get to. I emphasize more, because if you do exactly what you do today, or have been doing for the past decades, you will be in exactly the same spot a decade from now. In my former career, I once had a boss point out that 10 years of doing the same thing does not equal 10 years of experience. It equals one year repeated ten times. I don't know about you, but I am not into spinning on the spot when you can move forward instead.

Even though many of us cannot actually sit in a saddle three hours a day, every day for ten years, we have all kinds of other components of our development as a rider which we can integrate into the process. For example, due to the demands of writing and running a business, I can no longer ride 5-6 days a week. I aim at 5, and average 4. And, I only have time for one horse. That's not three hours of riding. However, we are on track (for an amateur trainer) towards our goal of Prix-St-Georges because I make the best use of my out of saddle time. I spend time watching riders and trainers who are better than me, reading, and working on my own athletic cross-training plan so that I bring strength, balance, co-ordination and so on to my riding time. In fact, my riding has improved more with a blended balance of riding time and dryland conditioning, than it did when I was mostly riding. With age, this blend becomes even more important so that I bring a conditioned body to my end of the partnership. Sometimes I am tempted to think of ways to get myself on a 'better' horse, but it always comes back to the simple realization that I can still improve with what I have.

Even though I started riding 30 years ago, I consider myself an amateur rider. The pros I work with get more saddle time, but the risk of repeating the same experience, over and over can be higher, and so can the risk of repetitive strain injuries. So they take time out of the saddle to train because it's what keeps them at their best, longer when they are in the saddle.

When you think about it, the difference between a gold medal and the other medals, or even not getting a medal, is often in percentage points- not huge gaps. While you or I might never take a run at a medal, we can learn the lesson: the difference between adequate and excellent is often just one step: one extra training time, one extra repetition. Improvement comes not just from practice, but from the deliberate practice: analysis of what you are doing, breaking down your goal into achievable chunks, and diligent perfection of each part until you can bring it back together.

Eddo Hoekstra's quote above says essentially the same thing as best-selling author Daniel Coyle ([The Talent Code](#)). Getting 10,000 hours of repetition isn't enough. Coyle discusses something he calls 'deep practice' which means breaking down your goal or activity into chunks you can master, putting them together and repeating enough to master them, and to internalize it. Actually, if you just repeat old patterns without breaking and re-constructing them, you re-inforce the old unproductive habits more. That's why you can't simply repeat yourself to riding better- why repetition on it's own isn't enough. We understand that training a young horse is easier than re-training one that's been through several hands already, or has ingrained wrong habits.

Let's bring it back to your training. In training your own core to engage as you are riding, you can start on the ground with core work where you build core strength, and hardwire your body's muscle firing patterns so that your core

engages when you do anything else. Then when you get in the saddle, you will be more likely to find your core engaging, and it will certainly be easier to engage it on purpose. You can also apply your new awareness to make things happen on purpose as you ride, and to stop your old reflexes such as leaning your shoulders back instead. As you block the old habit and re-inforce the new one, you will find you are riding differently.

Eventually, you will have internalized the core engagement and will no longer be thinking about it consciously- and you will have the core strength to maintain your position for that extra inch your competitor may not. No, doing crunches will not teach you how to apply better shoulder-in aids. However, core training will help you sit with better balance, and be physically able to position your hips and shoulders where you want to, for as long as you need to without tension. So, you will be able to apply your coach's instructions more consistently whether they are with you or not.

I do some dryland coaching for a local college polo team on a voluntary basis- which means that getting the team to comply with training suggestions on their own has been difficult. They weren't doing their homework. Their polo coach is excellent, and they are strong riders. They recently went to a tournament at an Ivy League school and had their behinds soundly whipped, mostly because they didn't have the stamina for the tournament. The difference was the other teams are consistent about their gym time in addition to their riding. Outside riding time, my team was fluffing around. The other teams were training like athletes.

If riding around the same way you've always done isn't getting you significantly further ahead, ask yourself what the elements are in the equation that you can change. In business change management in my last career, we called these 'low hanging fruits'. Figure out what they are for you (things you can do within your

lifestyle and priorities), and get started on what's in front of you. Keep taking baby-steps in the right direction, and you will be riding better.



April 2010: Listen to Your Body so You Can Speak to Your Horse

This month I enjoyed auditing clinics by FEI coach Eddo Hoekstra and classical dressage trainer Hans Hollenbach. From the ground or from the saddle, whatever the horse's breed, age, ability or language, the same things worked. We all laugh when we see a horse 'speak' German, French, Russian or Spanish when he is spoken to by the trainer or clinician in that language- and you speak to him all the time in your language. Of course we know that horses don't spontaneously know all our human languages. We know he is reading your body and your tone. Or not. He may be 'deaf' because his focus is elsewhere momentarily.

We also know that it works (or doesn't) the other way around. Take a friend to the barn who knows nothing about horses, and you have to give them Equine Body Language 101 before you know they'll be safe standing around a barn aisle with horses moving in and out. An un-equestrian friend is at some risk, simply because they can't read or hear what the horses may be plainly saying to them before it happens. So we know that WE can be a little physically 'deaf' to our horses.

In the saddle, you are in a dynamic relationship of leading and following with your horse. Much like a pairs dance, you initiate a movement, see what he does and keep up so that you can make the next movement. There is constant adjustment and response by both of you. You are in a conversation. This efficiency and elegance of the conversation depends on your ability to 'hear' each other.

Even in moments of relative quiet, you need your conversation to be free of 'noise' so that you are ready at any time, to go into any gate, direction or movement. Whether you're reining, jumping a course, doing a dressage test, or

riding on trail, this state of quiet and active readiness is the ideal. Eddo called it 'functional relaxation' during his clinic. I liked that term. Particularly when he contrasted it with non-functional relaxation, like flopping on a couch. I would add, or you flopping in your saddle, or your horse just clumping along half asleep. Those examples are quiet, but not functional; quiet, but asleep: checked out, but not engaged in a conversation.

To speak effectively to your horse (apply clear direction with your body), you need to also be able to 'hear' him. Often we make the mistake of trying to do so with our eyes, looking down at parts of the horse. We're more effective when we 'hear' with feel because our language with the horse is body-language. To have good communication, it's important to eliminate noise and distraction. Noise and distraction in body language is the same as inability to move correctly, precisely and smoothly. You can create 'background noise' by nagging with constant pressure of your legs. You can create miscommunication with signals that cross each other unintentionally.

When your body is blocked because of stiffness or tension, or weakness (which becomes stiffness or rigidity in motion when the body braces to compensate for lack of muscular strength), you can't hear. If you can't feel your left seatbone moving forward, you can't feel your horse's left hind. How can you tell him precisely and elegantly when to change leads from the hind? How can you expect him to be obedient and soft if your hips tell him one thing, and your shoulders and hands another? If you make an attempt and don't have the right timing and clarity, you'll create frustration for both of you.

Listening to your own body is a very important part of listening to your horse. You might have tight hamstrings, which make the back of your legs and seat less mobile, reducing your feeling for his back, and 'pushing' on his back muscles with tightness. You may have back pain which causes you to brace unconsciously in

the saddle. Both these examples would mean your horse can't relax and move through the back. If you make him try and produce certain results anyway, you will place incorrect load somewhere in shouldn't be, like a hock. Your horse will try his best to do what you want, even if you are blocking him from doing the task in the way his body was designed to do it.

Listening to your body can be pretty simple and straightforward: if you know you have tight hamstrings, you don't need someone else to tell you to stretch them regularly. Stretching them, will help you have more feel for what a more supple hip feels like. You'll have better feel for where your seatbones are. Your seatbones will be able to 'read' your horse's back better, and so on. Even if you can't get into all the 'feel' stuff, just know that your hips will move better and let your horse's back move better.

Many riders ask me if various types of fitness are good training for riders. Without the space here to go into details, you probably have a gut feeling or a good idea what your most immediate need is as far as making your body more balanced for your horse. It's probably something simple. Get started today.



May 2010: Why Riders Need Strength

Strength gives. Weakness blocks.

If I had to summarize why it's important for riders to build strength, those two sentences are about the smallest nutshell I could find. Recently I enjoyed working with some elite dressage and jumping riders: some were Olympic medalists and team members, some expecting to ride at WEG, and some hoping to list for the Pan-Am Games.

One fact that jumped right out at me was that most of these riders were women, and many were over 40. There are not many sports where both genders in nearly all age brackets can compete on even footing against one another.

We do not have many studies showing average ages for equestrian athletes, or male/female ratios. I've never run across any data that would be normally found in other sports on gender based or age based sport specific wear and tear. However, after observing and working with over a dozen elite riders, I've noticed some interesting trends.

When I work with amateurs, many of the riding issues are related to general fitness issues following common trends for their age groups. That's one reason why knowing about your age-specific requirements is important in helping you ride better. However, many riding weaknesses are also related to general level of talent or training.

Working with professional and elite riders is an interesting opportunity because issues cannot so easily be tagged to general gaps in athleticism, talent or training. While there are many elite riders that practice different forms of exercise for their conditioning programs, there are many who do not have

complete and regular unmounted training plans and schedules. So, while they were technically very good riders, many of the riders experienced similar strain and wear problems I see in more amateur riders in the same age group.

Essentially, those that did not have sufficient muscle mass, compensated with tightened fascial tissue and ligaments. They had joint, nerve and muscle strains and pains that did not need to be there, and which compromised their current performance, and threaten their competitive longevity.

Even in riders with an incredible ability to follow the movement of their horse, tightness resulting from weakness relative to the demand on their body made by their riding, caused their bodies to experience 'overload'. Load or demand which should have been managed by muscle fibre, became overload. On big, big moving FEI level horses, the demand was even more significant than it might be for other riders. Many were at risk for strain injury, or acute injury down the road.

Among the women, I was especially concerned about shoulder and neck area strain since the women did not naturally have as much strength there as the men, nor were they training to compensate. Instead of being able to maintain their frame with softness, they experienced increasing buildup of tension. I have seen elite riders routinely take pain killers because of ligament and muscle pain due to strain, which could have been prevented by appropriate pro-active strength training. If you have regular pains and knots, alleviating the symptoms will not mitigate your risk of a strain injury.

I noticed that while they were able to ride at the FEI level effectively, the route there was wearing them down. When you have so much invested in your riding, it makes no sense to increase your risk of injury and downtime through inattention to your own physical preparation for the demands of your sport.

We know that the ideal is to be able to have feather-light communication with your horse, which would make muscular strength unnecessary. However, the reality of training to get to that point puts a lot of demand on your body. Your goal is to make it to that point before you have an injury you didn't plan for.

I often hear the misconception, based on body-builder stereotypes, that building strength is bad for a rider because we are not meant to 'muscle' our horses into submission. This is true, however, most sport trainers would agree (and you would agree on behalf of your horse) that lack of appropriate strength results in overload on ligaments, and that strength without suppleness ends up compromising strength. So when we talk about strength, especially for riders, it's a given that you will also work on suppleness and flexibility.

For athletes and for your horse, strength and suppleness go hand in hand. If your horse is not strong enough for a movement for example, he will tend to stiffen, bear on the forehand, lose his balance and rush. To be able to perform with suppleness and lightness, he needs enough strength to do more than will be asked of him in the competition arena. This is called strength reserves. Just think of the training that goes into a cross country or endurance horse, so that he can get to the finish line testing sound. Or think of a dressage horse learning tempi-changes, and doing many more of them in training than are required in the test.

There are really four main things that strength training can do for you as a rider:

1. Increase your stamina by giving you more storage space in your muscles fibers for energy (glycogen) and more contact points (cells/capillaries) for oxygen exchange
2. Allow you to ride more softly and more relaxed because you do not need to exert force when a movement is easy for you, due to muscle size.
3. Improve your structural balance, which will improve your balance on a moving horse.
4. Prevent strain injury, particularly in the hip, back and shoulder areas which seem most affected.

June 2010: Surviving Competition & Six Easy Ways to Fit your Rider Fitness Into Your Life

Easy ways to help your riding when you don't have much time on your hands....
Balance your horse's back (you)

Many Equifitt clients are busy competing and working hard to get ready for Young Rider championships and the World Equestrian Games- and more are taking on the first adult amateur class they've done in years. (*Your dedication inspires me-- you can do it!*)

Remember to encourage the competitors you know, including yourself. Everyone's milestone is important to them and represents countless hours of dedicated hard work. After all, competition isn't about how high you go- it's about how you get there because the thousands of hours that get you are, make you. It's also about building the sport. Competition sets standards for riding, which makes coaching and training better, which should make riding better—which ultimately comes down to making horses happier, and everyone safer. The ribbons and trophies get dust on them. Even a podium medal. But you come home to your horse's eye that says 'yes I'm ready to work', and to yourself- who you've become and what you've learned by preparing for and taking on a new challenge.

When you think of competition as part of a process that makes you a better rider, it can help with decisions about which shows to go to, at what level. One of my coaches always said 'better a year late than a year early', because when you 'overfence' yourself and your horse, you open a door to tension (not good for your ride) and possibly injury (strain he wasn't ready for, or more serious injury if you are doing fences).

Prepare seriously, compete with a smile. You're not in control of who else shows up who may be better than you, but you can influence the teamwork that gets you there. Remember that all a moment in competition does, is show what you've been doing (or not doing) for months at home. As part of a process, the challenge of competition isn't so much about who places over who, as it is a personal challenge: can you be dedicated and disciplined enough to forego some things, so you can do the work you need to do before and during competitive season? Can you juggle all your other responsibilities such as family, job, personal crisis etc... and battle fatigue, inconvenience, lost social opportunities and so on, to bring your best self to your partnership with your horse? To help your horse be ready?

At such a busy time of year, here are six easy ways to squeeze the fitness elements that help you ride better into your life:

1. **Practice breathing.** Deep breathing relaxes your muscles and signals calm to your horse. Being able to use breath strategically at a competition will really help both of you. Especially at in-gates or at 'x'. If you are not practiced at using breath to centre and relax yourself and get tension out of your muscles at a moments' notice, you will not be able to magically develop this ability on the show grounds. So, practice breathing deeply into your abdomen and relaxing your shoulders in 'down' moments like when you are driving to work/barn, when you need a mini-break at work, or during your warmup and ride at home.
2. **Sit tall.** Slouching all day cannot be undone magically when you have thousands of other thoughts going through your mind at competition. If you are desk bound for most of your day, or sit down at any point during your day, practice sitting tall with a long neck, and seat bones directly under you. Engage your core, and hold the engagement for a

few seconds. Your spine will like the ease of pressure, and you will get in some core work at the same time. You will also be teaching your body to memorize straight, so that it comes more easily in the saddle.

3. **Stand on one leg.** Ever get stuck waiting in line, waiting for a kettle/microwave or just pausing between activities? Standing on one leg (do both for balance) will help strengthen your hip stabilizers, and improve your posture and balance. If you think you have great balance on the horse but it's not so great on the ground- don't be fooled. Balance you don't have on the ground, you don't have on the horse either. Feeling like you do comes from a false perception: your body will engage in all kinds of compensating patterns which effectively make your horse compensate for your lack of balance.
4. **Stretch.** All the time everywhere. If you have a desk job, getting up to stretch regularly will help prevent the muscle shortening that happens from sitting all the time, and which is counterproductive to your riding. Personally, I think spontaneous acts of stretching should be more prevalent than they are: I'd rather be knot and tension free, and not have to pay lots of money for massage or other therapy, than worry about what people think. Keeping your muscles and joints supple will be one of the biggest factors in keeping tension out of your ride, and helping keep your horse sound as you move freely with his motion. Joint mobility is one of the biggest factors in balance.
5. **Visualize.** Take micro-moments such as when you are driving, warming up, or just taking a sip of tea or water in the middle of your day to visualize you and your horse doing something perfectly. See it, feel it, remember it. You are actually helping your body develop muscle memory.
6. **Re-allocate non-riding days.** Don't just throw them overboard. If you have a day you just don't have enough time to get your ride in, then re-allocate some of that time so that it still contributes to your riding: set

aside twenty minutes for a long stretch to address issues, some core work to give you better posture, or a quick walk to mobilize your hips. Then go guilt free for the ride you missed, knowing you were still contributing to the process.



Bonus Article: Keeping On Track With Your Fitness Goals

This month I asked some of my group class participants what would be most helpful for a fittip at this time of year. The common response was just simply the question 'How do I make this part of my life?' Wouldn't it be nice to not have to *think* about your fitness, or what you're eating, or weight or anything and just naturally be toned and healthy all the time? We all know that person that seems to be athletic at everything they do, and never have to think about what they eat. We tend to get the idea that they are just put together that way: made of some DNA combination that's different from the rest of us.

During the Olympics of course, we heard a lot of talk about the Olympic spirit that we can all participate in. I'm not quite sure exactly what that is meant to be, at least as we hear it in the media. From a marketing standpoint, it seems to have to do with purchasing branded goods and making other purchase decisions from the warm fuzzies of somehow participating in each Olympian's efforts by doing so.

When we watch the Olympics, we see super athletes that seem set apart from the rest of us. Working with Olympic and elite athletes, it's clear that while there is usually a high level of natural ability in a high performance athlete, the real differentiating factor is the personal sacrifices behind the scenes that most of us are just not prepared to make.

It's an interesting question to ask: what makes you an athlete? According to Sport Canada, the vast majority of Olympians began their sport before they were 7 years old. That means that for approximately 15 years before they had any public recognition or represented their country, that athlete was in the making. Athletic spirit itself is very interesting. It has nothing to do with your shape or

age. For example, I have been really struck by the sheer size of the athletic spirit of the disabled athletes I have met.

Most of us may never make it to the Olympics, but there is no reason not to 'own' your own athletic spirit. In other words, there is no reason not to borrow some good athletic habits.

Have you ever noticed that the athletic people you know don't seem to really have to think about when they train or what they eat? It seems unfair at first glance. If you look deeper, you realize that the reason they don't really think about what they eat or when they train, is because it's built into their whole life. Personally, I hate having to remember when to stretch for example. So I just do it all the time. Then I don't have to take time out.

Athletic types don't spend any time thinking about weight, because it's a by-product of the rest of the decisions we make. There are of course lots of conscious decisions with regards to the actual training regimen and within a training session and so on. On closer inspection though, the unconscious athletic maintenance is possible because of many years of conscious decision. It can take time to change your habits so that they become unconscious, but if you persist (usually at least the recommended 21 days it takes to change a habit), you'll get there.

I recently read a great tip from a fitness guru I like to read. He was talking about adult learning stages, and applying them to how the rest of us can get to the point of not really having to think about exercise.

In a nutshell, the four stages are:

1. Unconscious Incompetence (when you don't even know how out of shape/out of line you are)

2. Conscious Incompetence: (when you start to realize you're out of line and need to do something, but not sure what, and you see yourself eating stuff you know you shouldn't)
3. Conscious Competence: (when you've booked your personal training assessment or started your class or diet...and it all feels like climbing uphill with 100lbs on your back. Yuck.)
4. Unconscious Competence: When you just tend to eat right and be active 'naturally'.

Because we come at this project with so many prior experiences and biases, sticking with it until you create conditions of unconscious competence can be difficult. But they are well worth if you hang in there.

Let me challenge you to think of one activity- like stretching your hamstrings for example- which you will commit to doing several times a day, every day for the next three weeks.



July 2010: Those Old Bones

Recently I've received emails from readers suggesting topics to write about. I really welcome these suggestions by the way. In addition to fittips, I publish in about 4 magazines a month and it's more motivating for me to write about what I know is interesting to you.

One topic that jumped out at me for the fittip this month came from questions about how to recover from an old injury, how to tackle your training program when you're over 50, and how to get flexibility when you just aren't that rubbery anymore. The questions got me thinking.

While I do work with young athletes, most of my clients tend to be either close to or over 50, so I actually have an opportunity to see the results of lifelong patterns, and help people in the over 50 age group on a regular basis. My oldest (non-riding) client is in her mid 80's. She has taught me the most about finding strength and flexibility when you are older. She says the folks that are worried about getting older (all under 65), are just not thinking about the next twenty years. From her vantage point, she is so right. I wish everyone under 65 could meet an active octogenarian because it would change your perspective from thinking of yourself as losing your youth, to one of gaining something every year you are still here. I recently read an article about a 90 year old marathon runner. He may have clocked a slower time, but the point is that he did it.

Ok, so you are probably not in those high age groups. You're somewhere well before that, feeling the twinges at the hinges and noticing that your body just doesn't co-operate the way you'd like it to for your riding. When you were twenty, you could throw yourself at anything, get through it, recover and keep going. *(If you ARE twenty or close to it, understand that you aren't getting away with things you think you are. You can create injuries that appear down the road by not using your body correctly, and treating it properly. If YOU have questions you'd like me to write about for your age group- send*

www.equifitt.com

© The contents of this article are the intellectual property of Heather Sansom, EquiFITT.com
Equifitt services include: Clinics, Personal programs, 'online' coaching, Centered Riding®

'em in. My youngest clients are 12 and I work with a number of teens and twenty-somethings. Plus, if you're smart, pay attention to the tips in this article for old people- they'll still work for you to help your riding.)

If you've been injured in the past, the injuries may be affecting you more noticeably now because your soft tissue is not what it once was. Ligaments and tendons are not as supple, and take longer to become flexible, and longer to train for strength. Muscle atrophies with age, so the combined effect of hardening ligament tissue and diminishing muscle tissue is that your joints do not get the support they need. If you've had an injury affecting a joint, it may have cause an imbalance which gets harder and harder for your body to negotiate. You may experience compensating patterns as you ride, because your body is trying to find a 'work around' to an area that just won't respond correctly.

***It's time for takin' it slow
Old bones don't move so fast
As they did once in the past
Now if I have to run, I simply don't go***
From "Old Bones", George Burns

Whatever you do, do not get discouraged. We have a WEG hopeful athlete who has had two hip replacements and is making a comeback after 20 years of absence from international competition. My oldest pleasure riding client is 76. There are people without limbs at all who can ride well. So don't give up. You can enjoy your horse, and ride in a way that he enjoys you.

Do understand that you need to allow yourself the time your body needs to warm up before riding, maintain flexibility and strength in between your rides, and undo tightness created during a ride by gentle stretching afterwards. As a rule of thumb seek to constantly increase the mobility of your joints, while simultaneously working on strengthening them. You do not want to just work on mobility, because you could risk becoming hypermobile: more movement in a joint than is desirable, due to lack of strength in the area. Hypermobility can

www.equifitt.com

© The contents of this article are the intellectual property of Heather Sansom, EquiFITT.com
Equifitt services include: Clinics, Personal programs, 'online' coaching, Centered Riding®

create more strain on the bones themselves, and this is not good. Think of muscle in an area as protecting your cartilage. You do not want early wear/usure on cartilage because you will hasten the possibility of arthritis.

Ironically, LACK of mobility has a similar effect. You have to maintain mobility because if you don't, motion has to be absorbed somewhere else in your body, and some other joint or surface takes the hit and gets worn down. Think of it like a car that needs a wheel alignment.

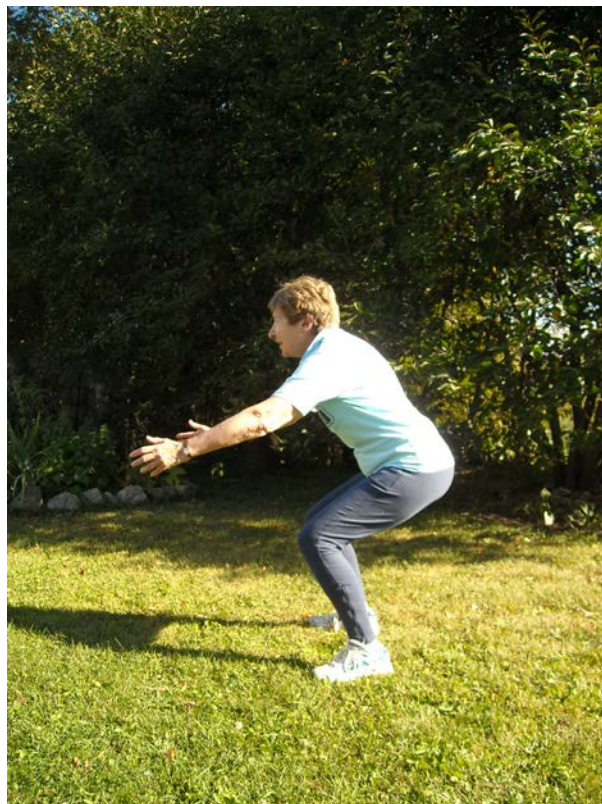
Working with an old injury area, and working with age are very similar in that you have to spend more time warming up and cooling down, be more aware when to back off for the day, and plan to take longer to ramp up to your goals.

Another similarity is that sometimes with an injury, the neuromuscular connection to a particular muscle, or firing sequence may be affected. Simply, the brain just doesn't 'go there'...so the right things don't happen in the order they're supposed to. With age, the effect can be similar. To re-awaken your brain-muscle connection, you may need to do work off your horse isolating a muscle or group of muscles with exercises that zone in on them, or create movement patterns that will re-teach your brain to sequence properly. If for example your lower abdominals seem out to lunch when you ride, you need to take some time to isolate them with exercises on the floor specifically for that area. You may even need to poke at them while doing the exercises to wake up your brain to the area, until you can feel the percentage of effort increase.

Sometimes I will see a rider doing an abdominal exercise not engaging the right muscles. Until you feel the right area 'turning on' with 100% effort, you cannot rely on your brain to engage that area like it should, when 20 other things are going on at the same time. Movement patterns are similar. Tai chi is a great example of how Eastern disciplines use slow movement to train muscle memory,

which can then be applied in faster circumstances, like martial arts. The rule of thumb is that if you can't do it on the ground with 100% accuracy, you won't in the saddle either. If you ride around with lack of correct engagement with those lower abdominals for example, you will just be re-inforcing your body's compensating patterns, not giving yourself the time to re-train your muscle memory and firing patterns.

So, let me invite you to take two minutes now and before your next ride to listen to your body and do what it needs so you can be the best partner your horse needs.



August 2010: Get More Out of Your Workout- Know When to Stop

Approaching the last stretches of the competitive season in North America, and leading up to the World Equestrian Games (WEG), there seems to be a lot going on. In the North where I am based, the old adage 'make hay while the sun shines' literally applies to all of life in the few short summer months that we have. Everyone is busy. Riders that are competing are especially busy. Just as the championships loom in view, horses and riders are starting to tire from the long season. You may have worked all season toward a goal, and now realize you have just a little time left to wrap it up. It's a time of year when the intensity of your purpose seems to turn up a few degrees.

When you're trying to fit it all in you are most at risk for injury: long days, not enough sleep perhaps, high pressure to accomplish a lot with your horse, or even just the balancing act between barn/work/family and other commitments.

A phase like this is not a good time to turn on the heat in your workout as well. The temptation to sprint at the finish is often strong, but it's more important to win on the road to your long term goals, than you sacrifice them to a short term win.

Many riders juggling multiple responsibilities all year long such as property to keep up, family, work, riding and other involvements can feel this 'phase' lasts all year.

With training yourself, just as with training your horse, steady long term micro-investments on a consistent basis will eventually get you where you want to go. There are no true short-cuts, because taking short-cuts is always costly. So how do you know when you're taking a short-cut, vs. adding that 'extra inch' or 'extra mile'? Stopping your workout is just as important as starting, but most of the time

(especially if you are a very responsible person with a hectic schedule), we feel guilty for not doing more.

In sport conditioning, we focus a lot on DECELERATION vs acceleration. This is the ability of your body to properly absorb motion and stop it. Most injuries occur when an athlete is in deceleration and has fatigued. We tend to think for example, of a horse or human's jumping motion as an upward movement. If you stand flat on the ground, or your horse is before a jump, you have to first bend the legs to 'load' the muscles. It's kind of like depressing a spring to create an energy which then shoots you up off the ground...or your horse up and over the obstacle. So a lot of the fancy footwork and crazy looking exercises you see in bootcamp drills and sport conditioning are geared around training the athlete's muscles and joints to decelerate properly, to add power to the acceleration.

Many riders might understand this when it comes to movement, but somehow we don't tend to absorb the concept as a principle of training. In other words, we know how to go- to the barn, forward on the horse, to the gym, to stuff. We know how to command our activities...to think a goal and go and do it; to speak out to our lives what we want in them. We aren't always so good at listening.

Riders often run themselves through some kind of marathon of inadequate sleep, focused riding and personal training, and never-ending back-to-back agenda-filled days. When you run yourself like that, you cannot really and truly hear what your body needs. When you can't hear your own body, it dulls your ability to hear other's needs as well...especially your horse. You layer of not listening sits between you and him so that you cannot fully respond to what he needs either.

So, most of the time I use the fittip to encourage riders to take your own self-carriage and conditioning seriously so that you can be the best training partner to your horse that you can be. However, this month, my clients' schedules and

needs made it clear to me that I needed to say: know when to stop. Know when to stop training in a week (take a day off) and in a workout- even within a single exercise. For one, you can't accelerate without decelerating. Secondly, it's not a time of year when you can afford to bring on a strain injury. Not only can you create a direct strain (related directly to over-repetition of a movement), but you can create indirect ones- strain that occurs, not from the exercise itself, but from the way your body (or your horse's) started to shift to compensating movement patterns due to fatigue.

Within your workout, your last two to three repetitions of an exercise should feel like you are fighting for them. Then stop. When you fatigue (or your horse does), you no longer use yourself correctly. You and your horse slip into compensating patterns because your brains will tell your bodies to get from A-Z like you directed, but not the way you want to. What happens next is that a muscle, joint or other area ends up taking load (the force of the movement) in a way or to a degree it wasn't meant to.

An example in your case might be the back pain that starts when you have done more abdominal exercises than you are fit for yet, or not done them correctly. Starting to lose your form is a big red flag that you are nearing or have crossed the stopping line. In your horse's case, the warning bell might be experienced as significantly less engagement, getting crooked or leaning, or chipping the tops of fences if you are jumping and he has been going clean to that point.

It's not important in a workout to do the exact same number of exercises you normally do, if your body is fatiguing for other reasons and just can't that day. As with your horse, you will have days in which you can really pour on the energy, and days when you need to pace yourself and be kind to yourself. It's not hard to keep your horse going and going. It's an art of good horsemanship to know when the right stopping moment is to optimize the experience, and keep him

fresh and wanting to come out and work with you tomorrow. The same applies to you. The difference between an amateur and a professional athlete can often be seen, not always in the content of the training itself, but in the way rest and recovery is built into the plan.

Learn to recognize the line which separates the strain and injury danger zone, from just the natural fatigue that comes with working hard. You wouldn't ride a horse you couldn't stop. Knowing when to respect your body's stop signals is as big a part of your success toward your goals, as persisting toward them.



September 2010: Fitness for HorseCare

Recently a reader took time to send me an email asking for a fittip topic (I love it when I get requests by the way). She had switched to using a Western saddle, and her question was simply, *how do I get some more strength in my arms so I can put the saddle on?*

She made me realize that it's been some time since I addressed the issues around how to be fit for the horsecare part of riding. When you think about it, a very, very small percentage of riders simply ride. Most of us brush and tack our own horses, and are involved in feeding, care and even farm maintenance. If that describes you, you probably don't even get all the riding time that you would like to have. Riding is something like 80% preparation, 20% riding- even if you board your horse, you are busy working at a job somewhere to enable the riding time you get.

For a rider who also finds themselves taxing their body with lifting, hauling, shoveling etc... (even if it's just a hay bale or Western saddle), it can be discouraging to think that you also need to find time somewhere in there to exercise. I often get asked if barn chores count as rider fitness activity.

Here's the summary on chores and tasks:

They do:

Burn calories/help you maintain weight
Help you keep good muscle tone

Develop the wrong muscles: typical horse care tasks work chest and biceps, which when stronger than your back, pull your chest forward and compromise your posture. By frequent stimulation of biceps, your body also develops the habit of relying on them, and this can result in automatic tendency to use reins when you should be using another aid, or to grip the reins.

They don't:

Exercise the muscles you need riding
Build smart muscle- they wear you down with repetitive motion
Improve your cardio-vascular stamina

www.equifitt.com

© The contents of this article are the intellectual property of Heather Sansom, EquiFITT.com
Equifitt services include: Clinics, Personal programs, 'online' coaching, Centered Riding®

Choring tasks CAN help you build and maintain good shoulder and back muscles- when done correctly, and not too repetitiously. When choring is part of an overall weekly routine that also includes elements of training for increasing muscle fibre and endurance and ligament strength, choring can be part of the overall picture. When it is not, it can have the opposite effect of breaking you down.

For women, getting shoulder and back strength is especially important as your DNA doesn't naturally layer muscle in those area. With age, muscles in the back and shoulders diminish, and it takes deliberate acts of stimulating them with load to increase them. It is a real pain to develop tendonitis in your rotator cuff due to tasks you aren't truly fit for, and find that it compromises your freedom in the saddle.

As a rider, even if you never chored or lifted a heavy saddle, this physical trend would effect you because it would reduce your ability for self-carriage, and for maintaining your own frame in your ride.

In high load circumstances such as a jump course, or working a young horse that is resisting you or who suddenly bolts, you are at high risk for injury. You are also at high risk for injury if you *occasionally* engage in a chore or lift a heavy saddle, because you're body is not used the motion and doesn't work efficiently to protect your joints, and also doesn't have the right muscle and ligament conditioning.

For most women, choring DOESN'T condition the back and shoulders, but rather breaks the body down due to repetitive nature of tasks, and tasks which require you to lift an object at a distance from your body, or some other movement which puts load on the shoulder area at an angle you are not conditioned to bear load.

Riding I might add, definitely does not condition the back or shoulders in a way

www.equifitt.com

© The contents of this article are the intellectual property of Heather Sansom, EquiFITT.com
Equifitt services include: Clinics, Personal programs, 'online' coaching, Centered Riding®

which gives you the stability and endurance you need for riding with correctness and suppleness. Men often do not have to think about this because of muscle mass provided by nature, but lack of sufficient stimulation to the muscles in the area (sufficient load, through enough of the muscle's length and range of motion) creates a pre-injury or long term strain condition for female riders.

I have had the privilege of working with some very high level female riders- please believe me when I say that no matter how good a rider you are, you are an injury waiting to happen if you are female, and not doing something regularly to build strength in your shoulders and back. Unfortunately, in spite of the vast numbers of female riders, there is very little research addressing gender-based sport injury. If you rely on pain-killers, you have already crossed into the orange zone as far as your risk for strain injury is concerned. There is a problem you should be fixing, not masking.

Men are not exempt. The same thinking that produces the 'weekend warrior' syndrome in an 'old-timer' hockey player, also comes out in horsemen. We could even argue that it's worse among horsemen because of the sheer volume of time the horsecare tasks take, and the fact that people who like to get their active living outdoors with horses, generally did not make lifestyle choices around regular gym-visits. I do see fewer shoulder injuries in male riders because of genetics, but these incidents are replaced with back issues and increased risk of heart-strain due to lack of cardio-vascular conditioning.

Here are some rules of thumb I use when designing a fitness or injury recovery program for a rider who also has to lift and haul:

1. keep it short so you actually do it
2. do at least 2 workouts a week for the targeted area, for 15-30 minutes- you should feel you are pushing the envelope a little. For injury recovery, light exercise daily is a better way to start out. By the time

you are doing 2-3 workouts a week only, they should be intense enough that you need the recovery time in between. Even if the workouts are very short

3. Make sure you do as many of your chores and tasks equally from both sides. Asymmetry hard-wired into your body through repetitive tasks around your horse, will result in asymmetry ON your horse.
4. Lift smart. Please, please, please lift with your legs and not your back. Don't try and be a hero or carry everything in one trip. You want to stay in the saddle remember? Forget pride, age or whatever. It's about being a smart rider. Wherever possible, hold the weight close to your body. The further your arm is from the body, the more at risk you put yourself.

Now that we have so much information available on the Internet and Youtube, it is relatively easy to find illustrations for various exercises. Remember that as a rider, you need to be concerned with your spinal alignment and core engagement in every exercise you do. With that in mind, here are my top three suggestions for building better back and shoulders so that you can haul, heave, shove, shovel or lift that saddle/bale much more safely:

1. Lateral raises holding dumbbells (arms up to shoulder height), and rotational movements of all kinds holding dumbbells (light weights, and not more than 20 repetitions at a time to build rotator control)
2. Overhead presses holding more weight (keeping your back straight—if you have to lean back at all to do them, work on your shoulder range of motion first, and lower the weight)
3. Deadlifts that finish off with a rowing motion (keep a flat 'hunt seat' looking back, knees bent, weight in heels- if you slouch or round your back, don't do this exercise without someone to teach you how to do it properly). Water pails work very well.

If you don't have weights handy, you can hold some other object, or none at all. Just squeeze the muscles like you are holding weights, and you will still be stimulating them. One of my favourite do-it-anywhere exercises is shoulder rotations with your arms out like an airplane. You virtually can't overstrain
www.equifitt.com

yourself because your arms will fatigue long beforehand. Do small circles about 6-10 inches in diameter, alternating in both directions for as long as you can until your arms are too heavy to do any more. You can walk around at the same time to distract yourself. You can even do them in a vehicle (someone else is driving) if your elbows are folded (fists would be near your armpits).



October 2010: Be Successful

Last month we looked at the different demands of choring and horse care, and how you can manage these tasks so that they do not have a counter-productive effect on the way you need to use your body riding. When you have all kinds of demands on your time, it's not easy to know what and how much you should be doing to benefit your riding. There is the ideal world, and the one you live in where you have limited time and need to use it effectively.

To be successful with your cross-training, you need to pick activities that you like (and will therefore do), that work areas you need to be strong for riding, and ALSO work your body in areas you do not use much riding. A common misunderstanding people have about ground-work and fitness for riders is that rider fitness means 'rider-specific' exercises that mimic the way you use your body riding. As with dryland training for other sports, the goal of off-horse training is not to mimic your riding. It is to:

1. Take your muscles into further range than riding provides (both for stretch and strength) so that you can
 - a. Eliminate areas of potential strain by developing strength on the whole muscle length in the same way you seek long, supple muscles in your horse
 - b. Promote supple joints: loose enough to follow the horse, strong enough to maintain self-carriage and effective aids
2. Stimulate muscles and movements you DON'T use while riding in order to:
 - a. Maintain structural integrity across joints to reduce potential strain injury and keep your body free and unblocked and able to follow your horse's motion

- b. Keep your neuro-muscular vocabulary high- the more different ways you use your body, the more movement 'options' or vocabulary your brain and muscle memory maintain, keeping your body able to choose optimum movement and firing patterns as needed. Otherwise, you lose this vocabulary over time, and your body neglects some muscle groups while overusing others. Many middle-aged riders I work with have real difficulty with overstrain in areas of the body that take the most 'load' (force) while riding, because it's like there's a huge data-cable highway from their brain to those areas with an on-switch that won't turn off. They are at risk for serious strain injury. I have seen riders develop terrible joint strain to the point of needing joint replacement as a result.

Like many readers, you may have additional goals for your fitness activities. Besides having a direct impact on your riding, you may also want results that would benefit your riding indirectly, such as weight loss/management, an injury recovery strategy, or more general strength, mobility or flexibility. While those of us who are certified as trainers, kinesiologists or coaches might develop routines specific to riding needs, there is not one magic exercise solution all riders can apply, or that can be practiced in 15 minutes or less a few times a week. We draw on many exercise modalities to respond to a particular rider (who has riding and non-riding fitness goals), and a particular discipline. In the case of books, resources and more group work, exercise choices reflect trends among riders in particular disciplines.

There are many exercise modalities from slower modes that stretch the body and improve core strength and body awareness (such as yoga, tai chi, dance, pilates), to more intense modes that develop things a good rider needs such as muscular endurance, structural balance, cardio-vascular stamina and ligament

integrity. Running, trail running, fitness bootcamps, strength training, cycling, swimming, skiing and other such activities could be in this second list.

Sometimes, an activity that really complements and completes one rider's overall program, might not be the missing piece in another rider's weekly physical regimen. For example, pilates type of exercises are excellent for riders of any discipline. This is because they engage the core properly (teaching your brain how to engage your core in any activity, while also building core strength), and also balance muscles. It was a discipline born out of a need for physio-therapy for dancers- it had to be gentle and balancing. But there are other ways to accomplish these goals, and if slow low-weight bearing exercises are not your cup of tea, or if you have more pressing priorities for your particular needs (such as weight loss), you may be more successful investing your cross-training time in a different activity that meets your core strength AND your other goals....and is more fun for you.

Sometimes, a rider's favorite cross-training activity might actually produce counter-productive side-effects that need to be managed. For example, riders who run have to manage extra tightness in hip flexors, hamstrings and hips generally. Usually this means adding a lot of stretching to their week because while the running is good for leg muscle balance, stamina and cardio-vascular capacity, it creates tension across areas where a rider needs to be unblocked to follow the motion of the horse and have effective aids.

Think of your cross-training as similar to what you do for your horse: you 'play' with him on trail or using activities that aren't your key area, such as a little jumping if you normally work in dressage, or a little dressage if you normally work over fences. Trail riding or other light work can be a really important mental and physical break for your horse that also keeps him 'sharp' while exercising his

body differently from the usual workout. Your cross-training has similar effects on you.

The beauty of selecting your cross-training with your riding needs in mind, is that you can change it up every so often as long as you are training to your goals. You do not have to keep doing the same activities for the rest of your life. As with your riding, your needs change over time. I suggest designing a weekly plan and sticking to it for at least 3-6 weeks so that you have an opportunity to observe results. Keep what is helping you, change what isn't. Start with the most obvious need you have. If you have tight hips for example, start with a regular daily routine of stretches that get you more flexibility in that area. As you get rolling with faithfulness to your mini-workout stretch routine, you can add exercises that also strengthen your hips. Tightness is often your body's way of compensating for muscular weakness. (Your horse works the same way- if you ask for more extension than he is fit for, for example, he will tense up and rush instead.)

I write a fitness tip newsletter for non-equestrian readers and clients in addition to this one. In this month's non-equestrian tip, I shared three things you can do to be successful with your fitness goals. I've summarized the three points below, relating them specifically to your riding:

1. **Be transparent.** Write down your goals (riding and otherwise). Track what you are doing (riding and otherwise). If you don't see some results, you can analyse your program, tweak it, and then observe again. Transparency is the key to being able to experiment until you find the right equation for you of time available + activity chosen + intensity + specific outcomes desired.
2. **Fuel not Feed.** Think in terms of fueling your body for the next three hours of 100% effort. Eating small amounts, often, and foods with

good nutritional content will significantly amp up the effort you can put out in your ride and your cross-training activity. Without costing you a minute more of the time in your life, you can significantly improve your percentage of success. You would not expect your horse to go for hours without grazing, and be able to work well.

3. **Do what You Can-** and remember you like it. If you do every day what you can do, you will find that you amaze yourself on some days...and need to be kind to yourself on others. However, the sum total of consistent and diligent efforts in the right direction will outdo heroic spurts. If you had a choice between working your horse for 20 minutes, four days a week, or two hours once a week, the obvious choice would be more often even if not for long. For one, repetition would build his memory better than flogging the point well past his attention span. Secondly, he'd get the idea working with you wasn't all that bad. Your brain works the same way. Listen to your body. You are not a machine. Some days you will feel more energetic than others, or have more time than others. Do everything you can with what you have- that's all you're responsible for.



November 2010: Strategies Against Flu & Cold Season (Or anything else that takes you down/ reduces your riding time.)

Recent comments from readers and clients at this time of year seem to congregate around 'help, I'm sniffing/achy/tired/feverish/under the weather- what can I do?'. Whatever climate you live in, there are prime times of the year for colds and other illnesses to be passed around like, well, a cold virus. They're on your shopping carts, door handles, gas pumps, children, surfaces at work. When something catches up with you and slows you down, it can be a frustrating time. You're barely pushing yourself through your riding, never mind additional off-horse training.

It might be important to listen to your body and slow down. A rest during your ride for your horse, gives him more energy to continue on with the lesson. You're no different. There are times when your immune system needs you to slow down a little, so your body can do its repair work, and you can get back to your routine. When things come up that threaten to shorten your saddle time, a good strategy is to switch tracks. Go with the flow. Maximize what you CAN do. Besides good common sense moves like calling a sick day or sleeping when you need to, take advantage of what you can do.

When you use your own inertia to spend time on activities you normally don't have enough time for, you'll win. Instead of a weak AND tight body getting back to the saddle, you'll have a supple and rested one. Instead of thinking of the situation as robbing you of time, think of it as giving you time-for other, just as valuable factors in the equation of your riding. Use the newly found time to gain some ground with sleep you need, or some form of body work that targets your biggest needs.

Your body doesn't want to move much? Ride at walk only and work on your own awareness and position, and things like better responsiveness or lateral work from your horse. Or consider doing ground work with your horse on days you know you're not up to snuff- or perhaps not working him at all. If you're really down for the count, let your body spend some of its rest in stretch positions so you can make some serious progress on your flexibility instead of just tightening up into a little ball on your couch.

If you're not that badly off, you can maintain or amp up your core workout. A good core workout also massages your organs, and keeps circulation going which is all good for healing. In a really good core workout, you should be sweating. Sometimes isometric (holding the position using muscle strength) exercises are easier when you don't feel like moving much. Some great exercises are the plank (pushup position, and hold until you are sweating, shaking, or just can't any more), 'sitting' against a wall, or practicing holding your arms out at shoulder height engaging shoulder muscles, without engaging your trapezius (muscle that goes from neck to shoulder which commonly takes over and becomes tight in riders).

Other gentle activities you can do in a few minutes here or there are things that enhance your body awareness or rhythm such as doing flying lead changes down a hallway and listening to your own footfall/feeling your rhythm to make sure you are symmetrical. You can do a similar activity in any gait sitting on a fitness ball, or on your feet on a trampoline. Walk lateral movements across the living room and note whether your hips move the same way in both directions...or you do funny things with your body that aren't the same on both sides. This will clue you in to differences in your aids to your horse. You can pause and stretch what feels tight, then repeat your movement to see what changed.

If you know you don't have it in you to do justice to your ride today, but you are restless enough to be bothered by the idea of no activity at all, go for a brisk half hour walk. Particularly if you work in an office environment with recycled air, getting out and getting fresh air may be what you need most. Go for a half hour walk which gets oxygen in your lungs, circulation through lymph nodes, produces a little cleansing sweat, and works on hip mobility you need to follow the motion of the horse. When you're riding as much as you want to, you probably don't have adequate time to do all the walking that would be good for you. Now's your chance.

What I'm getting at is this: you're not a rider when you're riding only. Think of yourself as a rider all the time, and everything your body is doing is either contributing to your riding, or taking from it. Rest is an important part of the cycle. Getting sick, or running into slow times is human, and not catastrophic to your riding progression. It's what you do with the circumstance that makes the difference. Pushing yourself hard when you know you shouldn't is just as foolish as doing the same to your horse. If he was under the weather you might lunge him lightly, take him for a walk, give him a massage, or just let him rest up.



December 2010: Proprioception & Firing Patterns (When you know what to do but your body doesn't seem to.)

Do you ever find yourself wishing there was a more direct link between your brain and your body parts? You know what to do: you've studied it, you can see it in other riders, your coach has reminded you a hundred times. It's just that the road between what your brain knows, and what your body actually does must be under construction or washed out because your body does not seem to be getting it. Think of this month as your fitness fun month. Your job over the holidays, is to have fun getting your brain and body out of their familiar ruts, so you can come back to your riding with more efficient neuromuscular connections.

When there is a disconnect between what we think we are telling our horse, and what happens, we can be tempted to exteriorize the problem with statements about how the horse is not doing what he is told. Most of the time, close observation reveals that the horse is doing what he is told, it just isn't what we thought we were saying.

When we are born, the body embarks on several years of astounding growth and development when the neuromuscular web is formed. You have a vast capacity when you are young for physical and movement 'vocabulary'. As you age and favour certain patterns of movement over others, your body very efficiently 'hardwires' the patterns you use, and drops the potential connections that would have been formed with other movement. This is why it is so vital for young children to move in many different ways, and to be exposed to a variety of physical activities and sports.

It is also why adults who were athletic in childhood have an easier time picking up new activities later in life. Adults who were not particularly athletic or active in youth, or who had a very narrow experience with only one or two main sports, have a much harder time. If you took up riding as an adult, you know what I'm

www.equifitt.com

© The contents of this article are the intellectual property of Heather Sansom, EquiFITT.com
Equifitt services include: Clinics, Personal programs, 'online' coaching, Centered Riding®

talking about. As an adult, we have to consciously and deliberately train movements which seem to come naturally to a young rider. Lack of strong neuromuscular connection, and mental recognition of movement patterns can explain why your coach may give you a clear instruction (like sit straight), but your body doesn't seem able to recruit its parts in co-operation easily.

For movement to occur, your brain needs to send firing signals in appropriate strength to a whole group of muscles. Some of them work together, and some in sequence. When you have low awareness (proprioception) or weak signals/lack of developed movement pattern habits, you may find that you aren't getting the results you want.

An example could be a half halt which comes from the seat, and requires immediate engagement of deep core muscles as well as lower abdominals, followed by a slight squeeze of leg and hand to collect and contain the horse so that he can rebalance. The part of the leg that should engage includes the hamstring muscle at the back of your leg.

All of it happens in an instant, and you do not have time when you are riding to isolate particular muscles and tell your body what to do. Instead, your brain will say 'half halt' and your body will use what it knows to use to try and achieve the result. For example, we spend most of our life holding objects in front of us, and grasping them with our hands. As bipeds, we also experience a lot of our life through our feet. Due to a relatively sedentary first-world lifestyle, we sit so much that we usually have weak low back/low abdominal and pelvic floor muscles unless we do something about it. Without training, our bodies typically respond to situations with feet and hands, and forget about the core muscles.

It is quite common to see a rider use hand, or hand and knee to achieve a half halt without any seat/low core engagement whatsoever. Such a half halt shuts

the horse down from the front end, tipping his balance onto the forehand. If the same rider becomes aware they are not using their seat, it can be common to see many kinds of forced looking tucking and thrusting movements because the rider is not recruiting the correct muscles in the floor of the pelvis, back of legs and lower abdominals. This is especially the case if the rider has disengaged these areas by riding with a forward tipping pelvis (riding toward pubic bone with hollow back).

When you have an area that your brain seems to have difficulty 'finding', you can improve awareness and recruitment of the muscles in the area by finding exercises that target them, and using them regularly. You will greatly improve your chances of recruiting those muscles properly when you ask your body for a movement pattern which normally should use those muscles. In other words, training your body to use the correct muscles, and then in the correct sequence, as well as training strength in those areas will give you a much better chance at being able to engage the muscles as much as you need to and exactly as you need to, in the split seconds required in response to your ride. By training your body and mind to know what to do in advance, you can make your half-halt unconscious. You can stay focused on your horse and his movement, without having to think through correct half halt consciously.

You can retrain movement patterns by starting out very slowly. I have seen Balimo/Centered Riding clinics where riders were asked to do lateral work on their own feet on the ground as an example, because it taught them correct weight and position of their own pelvis. Typically, if the rider showed lack of symmetry in doing the movement in both directions on their own two feet on the ground, the same asymmetry showed up in the saddle.

Let's imagine you have difficulty recruiting your lower abdominals to keep an upright posture in your pelvis, and for half halt. If you had surgery or several

children, you may actually have nerve damage which makes communication between your brain and the 'on switch' to these muscles weak. A lifetime of not using them well will also weaken the signals. You can improve the communication and your strength in the area by doing the following:

1. Remind your brain the area exists. Lie on an exercise mat and poke the muscles. Firing patterns are signals from your brain to your muscles. Awareness is the signal from your body parts to your brain. If the signal is not moving from mind to muscle, get the path open from the other direction: muscle to mind. Poking or pinching an area creates a clear signal that helps your brain put the area back on its map of where your body is in space.
2. Do an exercise to isolate and strengthen them, such as leg lifts.
3. Do an integrated movement exercise that also engages the area. Standing on one leg with a neutral spine, keeping stomach nice and engaged (especially a feeling of pulling lower abdominals up) while moving the other leg out to the side is an example.
4. Make sure you can recruit the muscle next time you're in the saddle. Go through the process again. Poke them, sit straight in the saddle, and then at a walk see if you can steer your horse with your seat and thighs, engaging your lower abdominals as needed. See if you can half halt him effectively without your hands, making sure your lower abdominals engage. If you stiffen your upper back at the same time, you need to do some more work to teach your body to use one area, without also sending 'on' signals to others areas you do not need to recruit for the movement.

You can use many kinds of exercises to improve your body's physical vocabulary and ability to produce movement you need. It can be a lot of fun to try totally new fitness activities and sports. Remember it's not about being good at them. It's about reminding your brain where your muscles are, and that there are movement and recruitment possibilities that are different from the usual established patterns. The more awkward you feel, the more you know you are helping your body get out of its neuromuscular ruts and doing a good thing for your riding effectiveness. You can even try familiar activities, with the 'wrong' hand. It will help improve your symmetry for riding.

Riders who are accomplished, but do not do other activities also need to get out of their neuromuscular ruts. I see many such riders with serious strain issues. Their body appears unable to turn off the 'on' switch to particular riding muscles, because they use them so much and do not put their body in many situations where the body has to recruit OTHER muscles in OTHER patterns. These riders end up in physiotherapy with deep tightness issues which can be avoided by maintaining a wider physical vocabulary.

In a recent article in Dressage Today, Charles de Kunffy reminded readers that the horse cannot be expected to go better than the rider will allow. Have the courage to 'sit down and listen' to your body, and to try something new. Be kind to yourself, and expect to have fun.

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 for helping with photos and experiment with ideas.

About the Author

Heather Sansom, MA, Certified Personal Trainer & Riding Coach



*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. 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”