

## The Horse Does All the Work

by Sarah Cameron

I expect you might have heard that sentiment expressed more than once if you have been involved with horses for any length of time. If you have failed to elicit sympathy from friends or partners after expressing you are tired after a ride then you are not alone. But despite the fact that we riders have all felt the burn of trotting without stirrups, have been left out of breath after jumping a round of fences and have experienced that inner-thigh agony that is highly specific to having spent time in the saddle, many of us don't consider ourselves to be sports people or athletes. We seem to focus almost entirely on the conditioning of our equines and wouldn't consider making demands on them that are beyond of their fitness levels, but we don't necessarily apply the same philosophy to ourselves. We take scrupulous care in ensuring that our horses are fit to be ridden, but are we actually fit to ride them?



Rider fitness is a combination of suppleness, stamina, muscle strength and flexibility. A rider who is fit to ride can give direct, clear and consistent aids. Fitness allows the rider to move in balance with the horse; with free and flexible movements. This not only helps eliminate physical pain and injury, but also increases the rider's mental confidence which in turn increases safety and enjoyment. Yes, riding is a form of exercise in itself but it is vital that riders are taught correctly from the start and don't lapse into bad habits in order to develop the correct muscle memory and suppleness.

Top riders don't rely purely on riding to maintain their fitness levels but they also understand the importance of cross-training to build strength and stamina. They should certainly be viewed as 'athletes', as demonstrated by Olympic dressage rider Laura Bechtolsheimer who conclusively took third place in the BBC's Superstars 2012 programme. The competition featured eight different events and Laura placed highly in the 100m sprint, the kayaking, the swimming and the gym test. She managed 68 squat-thrusts in 2 minutes, showing great cardiovascular fitness and core strength. She did, however, do less well in the 800m run only to prompt presenter Denise Lewis to comment 'I think she needed a horse....'.

However it is not just the elites who can improve their performance through supplementing their riding with other forms of exercise. While some riding disciplines, such as polo and eventing may demand a higher fitness level than others, any rider who is fit is likely to gain more enjoyment from riding no matter what discipline they prefer. Poor posture and muscle imbalance can make riding more challenging and will affect the horse's way of going. Not being able to use certain muscles properly will make giving precise aids to the horse more difficult, not to mention the possibility of giving unintentional messages to the horse. Improving fitness really does make both the horse and riders' jobs easier.

**Appropriate fitness training for horse riding falls largely into three categories:**

**1. Cardiovascular Exercise**

This increases stamina and strengthens the heart muscle. Anything that raises the heart rate is beneficial, and this certainly includes trudging back and forth to the field through calf-deep mud and briskly mucking out, but running, cycling, swimming and Zumba will really get the heart pumping.

Just out of interest, these figures give the approximate number of calories burned per hour during different activities based on a rider who weighs 11 stone (70 kilos).

Tacking up 246	Grooming 246	Filling haynets 335
Mucking out 408	Horse riding, galloping 563	Horse riding, trotting 457
Cycling at 12mph 614	Walking at 3 mph 307	Dancing 418
Zumba 558	Martial Arts 707	Running at 10 mph 1,265
Horse riding, walking 183		

Data taken from [www.myfitnesspal.com](http://www.myfitnesspal.com)

**2. Strength and Core Training**

A balanced rider needs to be equally developed on both sides. Horse riding typically uses the following muscle groups: the deltoids (shoulder muscles), triceps/biceps, and abdominal muscles, back muscles, inner and outer thighs, calves. There are specific exercises that can target and work on these muscle groups.

Stacking hay bales, shifting feed sacks and carrying water buckets will help build strength but yard chores can sometimes fix muscle groups in rigid positions and can over-develop muscles on just one side. How many of us always use the same arm to pick out feet or fill haynets? Proper strength training helps build muscles evenly. This doesn't have to involve a gym but can be carried out at home using hand weights, a balance ball or even just the weight of the body itself in exercises such as crunches, press-ups and planks. Toning abdominals for dressage, or strengthening leg and ankle joints for cross country and show-jumping will really make a difference.

Yoga and Pilates help increase flexibility, balance and core strength, with a strong focus on building the strength of the back. There is a saying in yoga that 'You are as old as your spine'. Many of us suffer from lower back pain and a supple back is essential for staying with the motion of the horse so both these practices are extremely beneficial. Focus on exercises that work the core and the abdominals as well as postures that stretch and supple the muscles in the thighs and calves, that open the chest and hip, that increase the flexibility in the joints and help develop stamina.

I spoke to Satya Yoga instructor Zoe Levi who recommended the following poses for horse riders:

- **Gomukasana** (cow face) and **Garudasana** (eagle) to strengthen the adductors.
- **Baddhakonasa** (butterfly) and open legged splits to open into the inner thigh and groin.
- **Utkatasana** (chair) and **Malasana** (garland/squat) - simple yet effective for the calves.

Pictures and explanations of the poses can be found here:

[http://www.yogajournal.com/poses/finder/browse\\_categories](http://www.yogajournal.com/poses/finder/browse_categories)

There are also several free videos on YouTube offering yoga/pilates specifically designed for riders, such as this one:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZveGs7Udaw>

Tai Chi and the Martial Arts also deserve a mention in this category because they develop balance, strength, body awareness and agility, all of which are essential for riding to the best of our abilities.

### 3. Stretching

If any of us have considered a warm-up for our own bodies before mounting then it is likely to have been some kind of stretching. However, current research suggests that using stretches before exercise is not the best way to warm up our muscles and prevent strains, as outlined in 'Stretching -What the Research Shows' by Elizabeth Quinn, Guide to Sports Medicine. There is a good summary of the findings on this website:

<http://sportsmedicine.about.com/cs/flexibility/a/aa022102a.htm> In fact the term 'stretching' is a bit of a misnomer because it implies putting our muscles under undue stress; elongating would actually be a better description of what we are trying to achieve. It's true that cold muscles don't function properly, but appropriate preparation for riding could just be an extension of the usual routine - a brisk walk to catch the horse, some energetic grooming and working the horse in-hand or on the lunge.

Stretching (or elongating) after exercise is however extremely important and could be especially beneficial following a session in the saddle. There are plenty of exercises that release tight inner thighs and calves. Three of the best stretches for riders and further information on the muscles used in horse riding can be found here:

<http://injuryfix.com/archives/stretches-horse-riding.php>

There are also those exercises we can perform whilst still on the horse; these are often forgotten about when we become adults and no longer derive much enjoyment from doing a 'round the world' or a 'windmill'. However, the simple act of taking the feet out of the stirrups and circling the ankles increases mobility and circulation, which minimises that shooting pain that can jolt through the feet on dismounting.

Finally, it is also possible that we have innate imbalances that we might not even be aware of and that cannot be corrected by exercise alone. Following an On Balance video assessment of my riding, I received feedback from Trudi Dempsey that my right shoulder was higher than my left. I booked a session with a sports osteopath and it turned out that I was over-compensating with the right side of my body following a minor operation several years earlier. The osteopath corrected the blockage in one session and recommended a course of physiotherapy to prevent it from happening again. It has allowed me to become more balanced in the saddle and I would encourage anyone not to ignore any little niggles but to get them checked out because there might be a simple fix that can really make a difference.

If rider and horse are both fit then they will become a better team. Contrary to what most non-riders think, there are really two athletes in the sport of riding.

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