

AQHA

eBooks

Fit to Ride



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Part 1: Why Does It Pay to Be Fit to Ride?

By Barbra Schulte

Jill has shown in different amateur disciplines for more than 15 years. But this year, she committed to hauling her reining horse heavily within her area, in addition to some distant travel. She's excited about this season because last year she learned the valuable connection between performance and physical fitness. After three months of exercise, her showing soared to new heights.

Jill has always been a talented rider who owned quality, well-trained horses. On the inside, she felt frustrated, as if she would never reach her full potential. Her performances were inconsistent, and she became easily frustrated under pressure. When her performance was less than sterling, she alternated between losing her temper and withdrawing into silent isolation. Despite her talent and resources, she was not having much fun or performing at her highest level.

Last spring, at age 41, Jill was 25 pounds overweight. But because she still rode well, had energy and no health challenges, she never felt the urgency to become fit. She also had an aversion to exercise.

Last summer, Ron, a friend of Jill's husband, came to an event where she rode poorly. Her horse was perfectly prepared. It was Jill who made the errors that cost her the championship. Ron, an athletic coach at a local university, tactfully discussed with her the relationship between physical fitness and mental and emotional performance, including confidence and the ability to maintain poise under pressure.

Ron explained that physical fitness is a measure of one's ability to take mental, emotional or physical hits

and keep going. Becoming physically stronger leads to a deeper belief in yourself.

Ron believed that if Jill embarked on a physical training regimen, she would most likely experience a psychological breakthrough. After 15 years of spotty success, Jill was game.

Ron urged Jill to commit to an exercise program for 60 days. She signed up for a two-month membership at a local health club and a fitness program with a physical trainer, Beth. Beth's first recommendation was to start slowly to build lung capacity and strength.

Beth prescribed a series of short doses of intense aerobic activity followed by complete aerobic recovery. Jill began by walking fast for 60 seconds or less to get her heart pumping and then slowed down until she perceived her heart rate approaching normal. She repeated the same up-and-down sequence for 20 minutes. Within 10 days, she was jogging to get her heart rate elevated. Jill was delighted. She found she actually enjoyed the push/retreat pattern. It was better than her previous idea of jogging for 25 minutes – most of which was pure torture. Then came the big surprise bonus.

Ron explained that the value of the aerobic interval training was not just for its physical benefits, but also for its practical application to showing. Jill was actually training herself to tolerate increasing amounts of stress, and she was teaching her body, mind and emotions to recover and relax on demand.

This could be applied to her reining patterns. For exam-

ple, loping circles would represent a stress interval, while pausing for a moment after a sliding stop was the recovery phase. When Jill consciously breathed after a stop, she could lower her heart rate. This momentary relaxation response would allow her to proceed to the next “stress” phase of her pattern with clear, focused thinking. As she increased her heart rate during physical exercise, she actually visualized going for it when her reining pattern required speed. As she lowered her heart rate, she saw herself relaxing/recovering within a two- to-four second window of time after a stop. Jill’s riding dramatically improved. Her physical fitness training gave her powerful mental and emotional tools to use under pressure.

Ron also designed a strength-training program for Jill that included free weights, weight machines and flexible tubing. He built up her ability to do 200 modified sit-ups per day, explaining that abdominal and oblique muscles represent the core of all strength. Strength training translates into mental and emotional control, while stronger abdominals mean better balance in the saddle.

Now, a year later, she can’t imagine her life without the vitality and discipline physical training gave her. The results in the arena speak for themselves.





Part 2: Seven Keys to a Successful Workout Regimen

Your sights are set on success in the saddle. You're dedicating all your time to making sure your horse is in perfect condition and top form.

But what about your condition? It's just as important for you to look and feel your best when you're out for a ride.

Certified personal trainer and accomplished rider Emily J. Harrington knows a thing or two about what it takes to be fit to ride.

The Aubrey, Texas, fitness expert shares seven keys to building a successful workout regimen.

I. Evaluate your fitness level.

When choosing your aerobic activities, evaluate your fitness level. If you haven't been running in 10 years, you might want to start with a brisk walk or swimming.

The Rating of Perceived Exertion chart, based on a 10-point scale, will help you find your ideal level to per-

form aerobic activity. Work up to a sustained level between 5 and 6. If you aren't working hard enough, or if you're pushing too hard, you will not get the benefits of the exercise.

RPE Levels Explained

1. Sitting on the couch.
2. Warm-up.
4. Medium effort. Conversation is easy to maintain.
6. Optimum effort. Conversation is difficult, but possible.
8. High effort. Conversation is extremely labored.
10. Extreme exertion. Conversation is impossible.

Aerobic activity should be performed at levels 5 to 6 on the RPE scale. As you become more fit, it will become more difficult to reach this level. So you will need to adjust the intensity of the activity.



Keep in mind, you should always avoid two days in a row of strength training.

2. Take notes.

After completing an exercise, take notes and keep an exercise diary. Write down what you did, how long you spent and how you felt. You'll track your improvement and gain a huge sense of accomplishment!

3. Find an exercise partner.

Having a partner can help you stay motivated and dedicated to doing the exercises regularly and correctly. Can't find a buddy? Hire a personal trainer to get you started.

4. Stretch first.

Stretching is an important aspect of fitness often over-

looked by athletes. Maintaining flexibility is a large part of keeping your body balanced and fit. "Riding has a tendency to leave our musculature tight," Emily says. "A tight muscle is a weak muscle, so stretch!" Remember to breathe and hold each stretch for 8-10 seconds. And always stretch before you ride.

5. Maintain correct form.

Especially during strength-training exercises, it is important to have correct form. Always maintain good posture with abdominal muscles contracted to support your back. Maintain balanced breathing, exhaling during the exertion portion of each exercise. Establish a rhythm of movement to help you balance. For example, in a push-up, take the same amount of time to push up as you take to come down. (Two seconds is a good guideline.)

- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Practice navel-to-spine breathing.
- Maintain your best posture – neutral spine alignment. Make sure you don't over-arch your back.
- Imprint – Contract your deepest core muscles (abdominals) to rotate the pelvis and create a round low back.
- Extend – Contract your deepest core muscles (abdominals) to rotate the pelvis and create an arched back with control.

Unless otherwise directed, maintain neutral spine alignment in the exercises. You'll soon notice how much core strength the exercises require, and the benefits will translate into your riding.

6. Incorporate Pilates.

Pilates exercises are a lot like strength training with more emphasis on breathing and core strength. The core includes the abdominal, chest and back muscles. Focus on form. Do not simply go through the motions. Concentrate on fluidity of movement and making each breath count. While inhaling, it should feel like your ribs expand as your lungs fill completely with air. As you exhale, contract your abdominal muscles and close your rib cage, feeling the support to your spine increase. This is called navel-to-spine breathing.

7. Mix up your cardio.

Try one of these cardiovascular exercises:

- Aerobics
- Basketball
- Brisk walk
- Cross-country ski machine*
- Easy run
- Elliptical trainer*
- Cycling indoor or outdoor
- Recumbent bike
- Rollerblading*
- Rowing machine*
- Spinning*
- Squash/racquetball
- Stair climbing machine
- Swimming*
- Tennis
- Volleyball
- Water aerobics*

* = Low-impact activities

Part 3: Three Easy Exercises to Try In and Out of the Saddle

**By AQHA Professional
Horsewoman Julie Goodnight**



Riding isn't just about having fun or gaining new skills; riding is a great form of exercise. For beginning and intermediate riders, the sport offers both aerobic and strength-building opportunities.

As you gain more skill, the exercise value goes down because you don't have to use muscle strength to stay in balance with the horse, and you learn to let your horse move your body, using a lot less effort. But even for the expert equestrian, riding will help your fitness, and it's a lot more fun than being a hamster on a treadmill.

1. Spending some time riding without your feet in the stirrups will help improve your balance on the horse while working your abs and thighs. Start slowly and build up to 10- 15 minutes of riding at the trot and canter without your stirrups. As you build strength, alternate between a sitting and posting trot. Make sure you have enough balance and skill to take this added challenge. It may help to have a neck strap to hold on to.



2. Before mounting up, I like to make the most of my riding time by adding a little extra workout. When I groom my horse, I use two hands at a time (identical brushes in each hand) and brush as vigorously as my horse will tolerate. That way, I get a good upper body and aerobic workout and improve my bilateral coordination (an important riding skill), and my horse gets twice the shine as we both warm up our muscles.
3. During the winter, or when you have less riding time, you can stay in shape with the help of a 55- to 75-cm exercise ball. There are lots of exercises you can do with the ball to improve your riding skills. I like to use it as a desk chair, to help me work on my posture and spinal alignment as I sit in front of the computer.

While sitting on the ball, you can stretch and lengthen your Achilles tendon to help you get your heels down in the saddle. Astraddle the ball, you can squeeze inward with your knees in sets of 10 repetitions, to help strengthen the sartorius and gracilis muscles in your thighs, which you'll use for riding. You can also practice opening and closing your pelvis and practice the motion of the rising and sitting trot, learning to utilize the lift of your horse's back (or, in this case, the ball) in the motion. Like most middle-aged horse trainers, I have lots of issues with my back, so the ball helps me stretch my back in a variety of different positions and gyrations. Make sure you get a heavy-duty, rigid exercise ball – not the cheap, spongy kind – because they will not simulate a horse's back, and they are too soft to be useful in exercising. The high-quality, rigid balls can be suitable as a desk chair.

Part 4: Using Yoga and Rhythmic Breathing to Become a Better Rider

J Breathing. It's our first independent act. Without it, we soon perish.

Then why is something so natural so difficult at times?

We've all experienced how shallow, erratic breathing can tense our bodies and unfocus our minds.

But did you know your improper breathing affects your horse? It's the horse's nature to reflect what the rider brings to it. If you're stiff and distracted, more than likely your horse is as well.

Learning to breathe correctly and rhythmically not only improves your performance, it also enhances your horse's.

That's where yoga can help.

This ancient practice can deepen the connection with your horse through proper breathing.

"How you breathe mirrors how you ride and, thus, how your horse performs," says Linda Benedik, who co-wrote the book "Yoga for Equestrians" with Veronica Wirth. "Correct breathing creates relaxation in both body and mind, enabling you to focus and maintain your balance and rhythm while riding."

Breathing is an unconscious act, but Linda encourages her equestrian students to control it with their conscious minds.

"Yoga teachings consider the breath to be a bridge between all our aspects," she says. "For equestrians, the breath can also bridge the gap between horse and rider.

When Linda began incorporating "conscious" breathing into her riding, she found it enabled her to regulate the rhythm of her movement in the saddle; consequently, the rhythm of her horse became more cadenced and consistent.

"It improved the overall performance," she says. "I just found from a personal perspective as a rider that it was so influential."

Conscious breathing while in the saddle increases your endurance and communicates such qualities as regularity, relaxation and focus, which in turn encourage these same traits in your horse.

"When a rider starts to release and let go of physical and mental tension in the body using the breath as a tool, I see the horse start responding favorably to the rider," Linda says. "When you have tension in your body, especially in the leg, back and seat muscles, it pushes you away from the horse. This actually causes you to disconnect from your horse as lower body tension pushes you higher in your seat, and your position becomes more unstable. But when you start breathing consciously into your lower abdomen, your center of gravity will drop, and you can then soften your seat and reconnect to your horse. When this happens, you can just see the horse going 'Ahhhh.'"



Once you release tension, Linda says, your horse visibly relaxes.

“The tension leaves his back and rib cage,” she says. “You can see his hindquarters start to swing, his tail loosen up and his head and neck start stretching down.”

The reason is because horses are extremely sensitive, Linda says.

“We are sitting on his spinal cord with all of his nerve endings,” she says. “When he has to bear this tense, rigid body that is top-heavy and unbalanced, he is not going to move freely and respond well.”

But this sensitive animal also feels each breath you take.

“Riders should examine their breathing and how it correlates with their typical ride,” Linda says. “Shallow breathing can cause a shallow connection to your horse, while rapid breathing can make your horse nervous, and breathing that lacks vitality can result in dulled response and lazy movement.”

Conscious breathing doesn’t come naturally, though. That’s why Linda encourages riders to develop it as a habit before they enter the show ring or any tense situation.

“The best way to get better performance out of a horse is to improve the person sitting on him,” she says. “But to make any improvement, you have to work on it consciously at a slower pace where you can really make it a skill that you own.”

Linda says riders benefit from working on breathing in a slower, non-pressure setting.

“You can’t be getting ready to go into the show ring and have your trainer say, ‘Relax!’ You can’t relax on demand,” Linda says. “But it does



become a skill you can access at will if you learn it beforehand. But to learn it, we need to slow it down and take the time and really dedicate some attention to it.”

Proper Breathing

When asked to take a deep breath, Linda says most students fill their chest with air.

“I would notice a lot of lifted shoulders and filling up the upper portions of their lungs. This upper chest type of breathing isn’t really helpful for riders,” she says.

Linda explained that riders who use upper chest breathing have sucked in their abdomen and blocked off the lower portion of the lungs, inhibiting air from filling up more space.

“We need to get our center of gravity deep, and to do that, we need to practice abdominal breathing.”

Abdominal breathing, which is taught to singers and musicians, brings the air deeper into your lungs.

“But a lot of people find it difficult to create that expansion because for years and years every time they have been asked to take a deep breath they have pulled their stomach in.”

The reason upper chest breathing is detrimental is it blocks the natural movement of the diaphragm, which in turn prevents your ability to lower your center of gravity and fill your lungs to capacity.

“As you fill your lungs more, you’re going to feel your ribs start to expand, and you are going to feel your sternum start to lift up,” Linda says. “So, essentially you are aligning your skeleton as your upper body becomes more vertically balanced over your lower body.”

Linda introduces abdominal breathing to her students when they are sitting balanced, either in a chair or on horseback. She says it also can be done while lying down with the knees bent, feet flat on the floor.

“As we inhale through the nose, we are going to allow that breath to come down into the lower abdomen.”

Linda asks a student to place her dominant hand, palm down, on her lower abdomen, below the navel, while doing this exercise. This helps her build awareness to the physical place in the body where she is being asked to bring air.

“I tell her to imagine her hand possessing a magnetic pull that helps her direct her breath deeper into her abdomen.”

With a long, gradual inhalation, the student draws the breath down into the abdomen and feels it expand beneath her hand. She is asked to experience the fullness and presence of the breath before she exhales.

On the exhale, the dominant hand, along with help from the abdominal muscles, pushes the abdomen inward. The student is again asked to pause and experience the absence of air before inhaling again.

“Breathing this deeply may feel unnatural at first, but if you stay with it until you begin to feel the entire breathing process becoming rhythmic and fluid, it is going to make riding that much easier.”

Rhythmic Breathing

“People think the horse has his own rhythm,” Linda says. “Yes, he does, until we interfere with it.”

But controlling the rhythm of your breathing can improve the consistency and cadence of your riding performance.

“A lot of people say they don’t have rhythm, and I remind them they do. They have a breath: an inhale and an exhale. You can control that just as you control the rhythm of your walk. It’s natural.”

Riding is like a dance, Linda says.

“Rhythm is fundamental. Moving in rhythm with the horse can become simple and natural once you become capable of orchestrating rhythm through the use of your breath.”

After she teaches rhythmic breathing in an unmounted setting or at the halt, Linda then gets the rider thinking about how the body is moving to the horse.

“Sometimes it isn’t,” she says. “A lot of people sit on the horse, and they simply don’t move. So that, of course, could take the whole lesson in just introducing movement in the pelvis.”

Once the student is loose and has an awareness of her hips moving and following the horse’s movement, Linda then introduces a simple counting method.

“As the rider moves out at a walk, we actually start counting her hip movements: left, right, left, right. Or, one, two, three, four,” she says.

She then asks the rider to inhale to the count of four and exhale for four.

“That right there usually gets them laughing. They think, ‘Oh, I have got to breathe and walk at the same time. It’s like patting the head and rubbing the tummy.’”

But once they have mastered the breathing exercise at a walk, Linda moves them to the trot.

“The rider’s body movement is very similar at the trot because she still only has the right hip and left hip to mark the beats, her pelvic movement essentially increases in tempo.”

When the rider is ready to move to the canter, Linda tells her to count the swing of her pelvis in a measure of four. “Each swing gets a beat, and I usually give the canter stride a beat of one, so we are basically counting our strides.

“We just continue to count repeated measures of four. That becomes a very important focus for the rider, and she

can count her strides with her seat and keep the regularity of the canter. As she builds sensitivity, she will know how to feel the horse if it either gets ahead of her or behind her. She will then know how to appropriately bring him back to the rhythm she is setting as opposed to following the horse's irregularities or allowing the gait to become inconsistent."

Linda pointed out all riders start out as passengers. They progress into following the horse and eventually leading the horse in movement at all the gaits.

"But when a rider counts her canter strides, she gets

a very definitive beat going, and she will be very conscious of it, and if she speaks it by counting out loud, the rhythm will be in her voice. It becomes the focus, and then she can adjust the horse as necessary."

Exploring Further

Breathing properly is just one aspect of yoga. Linda encourages her students to further explore the ancient discipline and discover how it can improve flexibility, balance, posture and control.

CENTERING BREATH EXERCISE

This exercise from "Yoga for Equestrians" is great for regaining a sense of calm in times of anxiety and to prepare you for yoga or riding. It can be done either sitting in a saddle or chair or standing with back straight, feet together and arms at your side.

Place your dominant hand on the front of your body one to two inches below your navel. Place your other palm against your lower back. Close your eyes and take several deep breaths.

Think of your hand as possessing a magnetic pull to draw your breath down into your abdomen. Breathe slowly and deeply,

inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. Feel this entire area become energized as it expands and contracts with each centering breath. As you inhale, allow your abdomen to expand under your dominant hand. As you exhale, use that hand to assist the abdominal muscles in pushing out all the air.

Continue breathing fully with an even, regular tempo as you reposition your hands lightly on your thighs.

Allow yourself to enjoy the combination of feeling relaxed and energized. Stay here for as long as you like. To finish, slowly open your eyes and breathe normally.

ARM RAISE WITH BREATH EXERCISE

This exercise from “Yoga for Equestrians” introduces the rider to the use of the breath to initiate movement. Learning to move in rhythm with the breath creates fluid and full movements, and enhances a rider’s self-awareness, which expands understanding of rhythm and cadence.

Stand with your feet together. Feel the soles of your feet in solid contact with the floor. Turn your attention inward as you allow your breath to become deep and fluid. Tune in to the natural rhythm of your breath. Close your eyes and listen until you can hear and feel your breath rising and falling rhythmically like ocean waves on the shore.

Maintaining awareness of your breathing pattern, on an inhalation, allow your arms to extend with your breath as they float out

to your sides and up over your head.

As you exhale, let your arms follow your breath as they float down again. Continue to move your arms in concert with your breath, reaching up with each inhalation and floating them down with each exhalation.

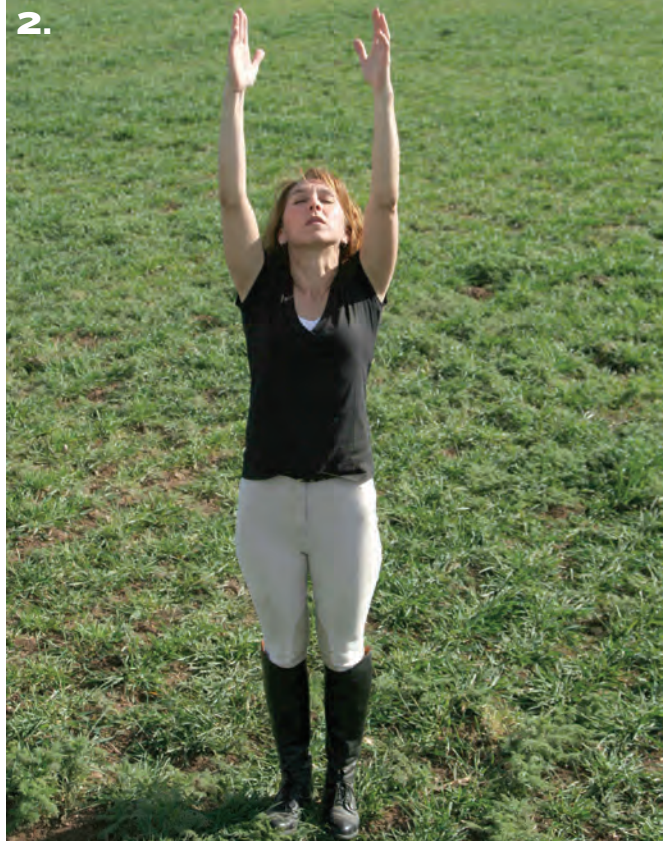
Continue this fluid progression for at least eight complete breaths. When you finish, return to your starting pose and breathe normally. If you find your arms begin to dictate the rhythm of your breath, shift your awareness and let your breath, once again, lead the movement. As you learn to fuel movement with your breath, you can increase the power of your breathing and bring more extension and energy to the motion of your arms.

This exercise can also be done while seated.

1.



2.



3.



4.



Part 5: Three Classic Exercises That Make You Stronger in the Saddle



Sit up straight. Pull your shoulders back. Steady your lower leg. Quiet your middle. Have you ever heard these commands shouted from the center of the arena, as your trainer assesses your equitation? You probably have, and probably repeatedly. They are tell-tale signs of a weak link in your physical fitness.

As an AQHA judge since 1993, Kenda Pipkin of Canyon, Texas, has seen her share of bad habits, from distracting over-active free arms in horsemanship to

“chicken necks” jutting out from the shoulders of hunter riders. They’re caused by your physical weaknesses, they carry over into the show pen, and they reflect in your placings and points.

“Many times, those habits start with a muscular weakness,” Kenda says. “You compensate in some area of your body for that weakness, and then it becomes habit.”

Kenda says the best way to become a stronger rider is, of course, to ride more. But can we ride enough to become the strongest rider we can be?

“We’re so busy,” Kenda says. “Many riders have full-time jobs. They’re riding their horses in the evenings or on the weekends, their one horse, that’s all they can afford, and they can’t spend enough time in the saddle to get in shape and stay fit as a horseman.”

Michael C. Meyers, a senior research scientist in health at Montana State University in Bozeman, is a sports physiologist who has worked extensively with equestrian and rodeo athletes on and off the horse.

He has known enough riders to know that most don’t have time to spend an hour in the weight room three to five days a week. He showed us a few common exercises that can be done at home or even in the barn, and how to alter them to target muscle groups used most when you’re on your horse.



Standard Push-Up

An equestrian push-up starts with your elbows bent and your fists on the floor, like you're on a horse. Your abs should be pulled in to stabilize your middle and keep your back straight. Push your body up until your arms are extended, then lower yourself back down to your starting position.

Upper Body: The Push-Up and Plank

While it might stir up repressed memories of grade-school gym class, the most efficient upper body exercise is none other than the push-up.

"It is the No. 1 exercise for equestrians," Michael says.

By adjusting the placement of your hands, the push-up can be altered to work different muscle groups. From the standard push-up position, on all fours, with your abdominals stabilizing your core and your body parallel to the ground, taking a wider stance with your hands will focus the workout on your chest muscles. Bringing your hands closer to your body will redirect the focus to your triceps.

But the ultimate position for an equestrian is different still.

"A regular push-up builds wide shoulders," Michael says. "Is that what you need for equestrian? No."

To make the most out of an exercise, Michael says,

think in terms of the sport you are participating in and make changes to create a sport-specific version of a classic exercise.

"Think about what you're doing on the horse and then put yourself in position," Michael says. For a push-up, imagine you are sitting on your horse, elbows at your side, fists holding imaginary reins in front of you.

"Then tip yourself forward into push-up position," Michael says. Doing push-ups from this position, pushing off your fists rather than a flat hand, elbows low and by your side, mimics the force of transfer from the bit through the hand, arm and shoulder. The plank can be performed from a similar position, focusing on the abdominals, the protectors of your back, a rider's most common source of pain.

"Get down like you're going to do a push-up, put your elbows down, straighten your back and hold it," Michael explains. "That strengthens the transverse abdominals, the girdle of the abdominals."

While it won't develop the coveted "six-pack," as an abdominal workout, the plank is superior to the bulk-building crunch for equestrians for its tightening and stabilizing effect on the core.

The Plank

The plank position is similar to the starting position for a push-up, but your elbows are lowered with your hands

The Plank



relaxed in front of you. Raise your body from your toes, straighten your back and hold. Try to maintain a solid position for 30 seconds and increase as you become more fit, working up to three minutes.

The plank will work your transverse abdominals, tightening your core like a girdle and developing your abdominals so they can protect your back from the stresses of riding.

The Lunge

With your body tall and your shoulders relaxed and back, stride forward with one leg. Then lower your body over your leading knee, forming a 90-degree angle and being careful not to let your knee get in front of your foot. Maintaining your posture, push your body up and back into your starting position. Repeat the exercise with the opposite leg leading.

Lower Body: The Lunge

Just as every horse has one side stronger than the other, so does every rider.

“You want equal strength on left and right,” Michael says. “You should be just as strong on each side. But we know we’re not.”

The lunge, says Michael, is the No. 2 exercise for equestrians.

“You have a push leg and a lift leg,” Michael says. “When you take off, you’re always going to lift the same leg first and push off the other.”

Lunges, done properly, will make your body use each leg equally as a push leg and lift leg and help you achieve what Michael calls bilateral symmetry, equal strength in both legs.

“A true lunge is touch and go,” Michael says, cautioning against moving lunges, a popular variation of the exercise. In a moving lunge, you’re constantly moving forward with each lunge as if you were going down a track. But most people don’t have equal stride lengths, causing one leg to work harder than the other and perpetuating the inequality of strength between left and right.

“You should lunge and then push back,” Michael explains. “If you keep going forward, you don’t get the reverse movement. You want to be able to touch and go with no hands. Again, this is about core strength. If you need something to hold onto, you’re not controlling your body.”

To make sure your lunge is sport-specific, Michael says to double-track, taking a wider stance than what feels natural.

The Lunge



“You’re not walking a tight rope,” Michael says. “With most people, one foot goes in front of the other. You’re taught to walk like this. But isn’t there a horse between your legs?”

The lunge also works as a quad and hamstring stretch.

“You’re doing two things at once,” Michael says. “Think quality, not quantity. You don’t need an hour in the weight room. You’re an equestrian. You need to get on the horse.”

Core Value

“Everything starts at the core,” Michael says. “Then we

build out, down and up. Equestrians can’t spend a lot of time in the weight room. That’s the complaint I always get. You’ve got an hour with your horse; you don’t want to spend it on yourself.”

Strengthening your core, with exercises like the plank, will make it easier to practice other strength exercises, like the push-up and lunge. And ultimately, the strength you gain from a few minutes devoted to your own muscular strength will allow you to communicate more effectively with your horse

“If you take care of your fitness level and you take care of your horse’s performance level,” Michael says, “then all of a sudden, you’re working together a lot better.”

Part 6: 18 Exercises for Equestrians



Your sights are set on horse-showing success. You're dedicating all your time to making sure your horse is in perfect condition to turn the judges' heads.

But what about your condition? It's just as important for you to look and feel your best during intense competition.

Certified personal trainer and accomplished rider Emily J. Harrington challenges has developed a fitness program that will help you to become an equestrian athlete who can compete with the best.

"Focusing on strength, flexibility and stamina, during the next several months, this program will build fitness in you!" says the Aubrey, Texas, fitness expert.

The Low Down

Emily's program combines strength training, Pilates, a stretching routine and a variety of aerobic activities that approach fitness for the equestrian athlete in a safe, balanced way.

You'll need a foam roller, an exercise ball and a resistance ring to get started.

Listen Up

Emily's program assumes that you can ride at least two times a week. You may substitute riding for one cardio workout and one strength-training and Pilates workout, if necessary. If you ride more than four times a week, you've already established a higher level of riding fitness. So, only two of your riding days can be substituted each week. During horse shows, skip your training during busy days, but continue your stretching routine. Resume your training at shows when you have non-busy days.

"Use common sense, and listen to your body," she says.

While incorporating this exercise program, it's OK to ride and do cardio or strength-training exercises on the same day.

"If your body is used to a consistent amount of riding, adding a fitness program on riding days is appropriate," she explains. "Your body has adapted to the stimulus of riding and requires new demands to become more fit."



1. Lay on roller. Begin by sitting on the end of a foam roller with your feet shoulder-width apart, then slowly roll down. Make sure you're supported from your head to your tailbone. Breathe slowly and allow your body to rest.



2. Arms overhead. Begin with arms at your side. Inhale as your arms come up in line with your shoulders. Exhale as your arms continue over your head. Then reverse the motion. Inhale as your arms come up, and exhale as they return to your sides. Let your shoulder blades saddle the roller through this movement. Repeat six times.



3. Shrug toward the ceiling. Begin with arms up in line with shoulders. Round your shoulders toward the ceiling, then with control bring them back to the

roller. Don't allow your shoulders to creep up toward your ears. This will help stretch the rhomboid muscles as well as aid in opening the chest. Repeat six times.



4. Scissor arms. Inhale before you move, then exhale as you take one arm over your head and the other returns to your waist. Inhale, then bring the arms back together over the shoulders. Exhale as the opposite arm reaches over your head and the other returns to the waist, creating a scissor-effect. This stretches the upper back muscles. Repeat six times.



5. Circle arms. Begin with arms at your waist. Inhale as your arms drag over your body as if you are pulling off a shirt. Reach with full extension through your fingertips before exhaling, and circle your arms around to your waist. Repeat three to four times before reversing the motion. Now, inhale as your arms circle around until you are reaching overhead, and exhale as you drag your arms over your body as if you are putting on a shirt. Repeat three to four times.



6. Shell on ball. Begin by kneeling behind the ball, and slowly roll over the top of it face down. Your

head should feel heavy as you release around the ball. Knees and head are off the ground while your feet and hands support you. Feel your spine release as you inhale deeply to your lower back, then slowly let the breath out as you tighten your abdominals against the ball. There is no movement, relax and let gravity do the work of lengthening the tight muscles of your back. Stay here for three to four slow breaths.



7. Abduction. Put the resistance ring around your legs just above your knees as pictured. Inhale, making sure your posture is neutral. As you exhale, gently press your legs out against the resistance. Inhale and bring your legs back to starting position. This motion is very small. Make sure your posture never changes while doing this exercise. Repeat six to eight times.



8. Adduction. Place the ring inside the legs just above the knees. Inhale, making sure your posture

is neutral. As you exhale, hold one leg still as the opposite leg gently squeezes toward the center. Inhale and return to starting position. Repeat this motion six times before switching to the other side. Make sure your posture never changes while doing this exercise. Repeat six times.



9. Pilates squats. These squats work the feet, ankles and upper leg. Focus on not bending your knees too far (you want to be able to see your toes), keeping your knees aligned over your feet at all times. Don't let your spine come out of neutral.

Begin with a parallel position of the feet and legs. Inhale on the downward motion of the squat as you exhale on the way up. Control this motion. Don't go too fast. Repeat six times.

Now turn the feet and legs out at the hips. Continue to squat, inhaling on the downward motion and exhaling on the way up. Repeat six times.

9b.



Return to parallel and back the feet up slightly. Come up on the balls of your feet. Inhale on the downward motion of this squat as you maintain the heels-up position. Exhale on the way up. Repeat six times.

Inhale and squat down while still on the balls of your feet. Exhale and press your heels to the floor. Inhale and bring your heels back up without moving your upper body. Exhale and press back up to starting position. Repeat six times.



10b.



10. Push ups. Begin by kneeling in front of the ball and slowly roll forward until the ball rests on your thighs. Your arms are in line with your chest and wide enough so when you come down your elbows will be over your wrists. On each repetition, roll forward slightly to keep yourself over your chest. Repeat eight to 10 times.

11a.



11b.



11. Leg curls on ball. Begin with your legs over the ball about hip width apart with your knees bent and posture neutral. Bring your hips straight up and find your balance. Inhale before you begin. As you exhale, bring your knees toward your chest then

inhale as you return to starting point. Make sure your posture never changes as you work the back of your thighs and butt. Repeat eight to 10 times.



12. Swan. (If you have low back problems, take this exercise slow and keep the movement small. It is extremely important that your abdominal muscles stay engaged and pulled into the spine as breath continues to flow.) Begin with the ball under your hips with your hands in front of you on the ball. Your body should be in a straight line with your toes connected to the ground. Inhale and keep your shoulders relaxed. As you exhale, slide your shoulder down toward your waist and lift up through your chest. Your goal is to keep the bottom of your rib cage connected to the ball as you stretch up. Your back and abdominal muscles need to be working hard to keep balance in your posture. Do not reach through with your chin. Inhale and hold the upward

position, then exhale and return to starting. Repeat four to six times. Lay over the ball in shell position to rest the back at the end of this exercise.



13. Pelvic rock. This exercise teaches your body to move through the hips (pelvis) using your deep abdominal muscles. The three positions are neutral, imprint and extended. Begin by lying on the floor with legs shoulder-width apart. You should have alignment from the ankles through the knees and hips to the shoulders. Maintain this alignment throughout the exercise.

Imagine a bowl sitting on top of your hips. It is completely steady as you maintain neutral before beginning the movement. Inhale before you begin then exhale using your abdominals to make the bowl tip toward you, or imprint toward the floor with the small of your back. Make sure you are moving with your abdominals and not pushing off of your feet or grabbing with your seat. As you inhale, tip the bowl away from you as you move with control into an extended position. Your low back will feel arched. Listen to your body and don't extend too far. As you exhale, return to imprint, inhale then return to extension. Keep your neck and shoulders relaxed while the lower part of your torso is at work. Repeat six times.



14. Bridging. This exercise continues from the pelvic rock. Begin in neutral and inhale. As you exhale, begin with imprint then press the small of your back and feel as though you are peeling each vertebra off the floor until you reach the bridge position. Keep your shoulders and neck relaxed. Hold this position as you inhale. Then exhale and reverse the motion returning your spine one vertebrae at a time to the floor, finishing in neutral. Make sure your knees stay aligned over your feet throughout this exercise. Repeat four times.

15. Round back on ball. Sit on the ball with your legs in front of you and knees bent. Your feet should be just wider than your shoulders and your arms hanging down your sides. Start in neutral position. Inhale before moving, then exhale and begin with imprint. Continue up the spine rolling forward until your body forms a "C." Your abdominal muscles are pulled in toward your spine as you inhale while

maintaining "C" position. Exhale and, beginning with the tailbone, move out of imprint back to neutral one vertebra at a time. This requires focus, and with

practice will become easier. Inhale once you have returned to neutral, then exhale and repeat the exercise. Repeat six times.



16. Chair position. Begin in neutral position and inhale. As you exhale, move into inprint. Then inhale bringing one knee up in line with your hip. Exhale and bring the other knee up in line with your hip. This is chair position. Keep yourself in inprint. Think about pulling your bellybutton toward your

spine. Now inhale and place one foot down. Then exhale and place the other foot down. Remain in inprint. Inhale and return to neutral before repeating the series. Once again keep your shoulders and neck relaxed as your breath continues to flow. Repeat four times.



17. Rollover preps. Begin in neutral position and inhale. As you exhale, move to inprint. Then inhale bringing one knee up in line with your hip. Exhale and bring the other knee up in line with your hip into chair position. Now inhale and move your hips back to neutral while your legs are still in chair position. Exhale and return to inprint. Inhale and move back to neutral and so forth. Make sure your abdominals are purely responsible for the movement of your legs in this motion. Repeat six times.



18b.



18. Ring crunches. Place the resistance ring around your neck with the support at the base of your head. Inhale, then exhale and move to imprint. You must maintain imprint while you crunch. Now, inhale before you crunch. As you exhale, press your shoulders toward your waist and lift off the floor using your abdominal muscles. Do not strain your neck. The ring is in place to help keep your head supported. As you inhale, come down to just above starting position before repeating the crunch on the next exhale. Repeat 10 times.

ABOUT THE EXPERTS

BARBRA SCHULTE is a professional cutting horse trainer, certified personal performance coach, author, clinician and equine consultant. Barbra has numerous National Cutting Horse Association Trophy Crown event wins to her credit, and as a coach, provides online and live informational training for riders of all disciplines regarding mental and emotional skills.

Barbra lives in Brenham, Texas, with her husband, Tom, Brenham, Texas. To learn more, visit www.barbraschulte.com.

LINDA BENEDIK is an equestrian author, clinician, riding instructor and trainer in Southern California. She is the founder and director of Harmony With Horses, a riding program that integrates hatha yoga with classical balanced seat equitation and dressage. Along with Veronica Wirth, she wrote "Yoga for Equestrians." Also look for her instructional video/DVD series, "Yoga & Riding Techniques for Equestrians," which complements the book.

EMILY J. HARRINGTON, an American Council on Exercise certified personal trainer, is also a force to be reckoned with in the amateur show pen. Among her many accolades, Emily was the 1997 and 2001 amateur hunter hack world champion, the 1988 and 1989 amateur trail reserve world champion and a top-10 finisher in AQHA World Championship Show classes since 1986. She is also an All American Quarter Horse Congress champion.

Emily instructs fitness clients of all ages in Aubrey, Texas, where she resides with her husband, Tom, and their daughter, Maya. She is certified in "The Method" Pilates mat training. She also gives demonstrations and clinics to riding groups.

"I had a client who said, 'Your body is where you live,' " Emily says. "So cherish it and take care of you! It's never too late to start a fitness program.

"By pairing exercise with riding horses, you will gain winning results inside yourself and in the arena."

MICHAEL C. MEYERS, Ph.D., paid his way through graduate school roping on an Appaloosa-Quarter Horse cross named "DJ." He earned a doctorate in kinesiology from Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, in 1990. Since then, he has worked with many collegiate equestrian teams and professional sport organizations including the U.S. Equestrian Team, U.S. Gymnastics, U.S. Developmental Soccer and the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association, identifying talent, developing strength and conditioning programs, and assessing performance.

Michael is currently the associate professor of exercise physiology, department of sport science and physical education at Idaho State University.

Whether it's showing, breeding, training, coaching or judging, KENDA PIPKIN has been involved in some facet of the horse industry for more than 35 years. She has judged at national and international events including the Built Ford Tough AQHYA World Championship Show, Arizona Sun Country Circuit, AQHA Italian National Championship and AQHA British National Championship. She lives in Amarillo with her husband, John, also an AQHA judge, and sons John Luke and Joshua. In addition to judging, she runs her family's online health and fitness business.