Ready, Set, Get Fit!

Being physically fit makes an impact on your abilities in the saddle. Learn how to get started with the following helpful tips and exercises.

It only takes one look at rider, instructor, trainer, TD and judge, Debbie Rodriguez, to see that she is a person who takes physical fitness seriously. This Williamsburg, Virginia, based FEI level dressage rider is obviously not one to just take it easy. In addition to being a USEF “S” Dressage Judge, USEF “r” Dressage Technical Delegate, and USEF “r” Eventing Judge, she is also an International Sports Sciences Association Certified Personal Fitness Coach. Her journey through the ranks of three-day eventing, and later dressage, has been interwoven with an increasing awareness of the critical role personal fitness takes in

The “Superman” is great for developing balance and proprioception. Standing on one leg, extend both arms forward and one leg back into the superman position. Come back to standing. If you feel balanced, stay on one leg through the movement. If it is a challenge, come back to standing on both legs between repeats.
The “Renegade Row” starts in the push-up position. Make a rowing motion with one raised arm. Change and row with the other arm. Stay steady and stable through your hips and core. Keep your neck in a neutral position.

The success and enjoyment of riding

A former event rider, Rodriguez knew that being fit was critical to a clean and safe cross-country ride, but it still wasn’t high on her agenda. “I went kicking and screaming into a fitness regime,” remarks Rodriguez. Upon the advice of her eventing instructors, Rodriguez maintained her fitness by running and jumping rope; nevertheless, she struggled with not enjoying the exercise while simultaneously questioning its necessity. “I was a young professional, riding eight to 12 horses a day. I could not conceive that I needed to do something else for my fitness, yet at the same time, I would constantly be corrected in my lessons for sitting crooked in the saddle and having rounded shoulders,” she says. “I didn’t realize that my mental focus and desire could not correct that. I always thought that if I would just try harder, I could fix it.”

Rodriguez’s outlook on fitness changed while teaching a longtime student, a Preliminary level event rider who had the same issue of riding with rounded shoulders. “One day she came for her lesson and her shoulders were back,” tells Rodriguez. The key to the amazing change: the student had begun working with a core fitness trainer. This was a pivotal moment for Rodriguez as well. “I signed up the next day and never looked back. That was a turning point in my life. I realized my shoulders weren’t back because I didn’t have the muscle structure to put them back, and riding alone was not going to give me that structure.”

“You wouldn’t take a horse from the pasture and expect it to gallop around a cross-country course or do an I-1 dressage test; yet, many of us don’t have the same expectations of conditioning ourselves as riders, as athletes – and riders are athletes, whether we want to be our not, by the nature of what we do,” comments Rodriguez. “If you are cardiovascularly fatigued and your muscles are not strong enough, you are less able to regain your balance or correct your mistakes than you would be if you were physically ready for that challenge.”

Rodriguez’s fitness regime now consists of four key elements: core strength, cardiovascular fitness, mobility and balance. These elements work hand-in-hand to develop a rider who is ready for the physical challenges in any discipline.

Core Strength

Core strength is a concept riders are familiar with these days, and with good reason; it forms the essential pillar of the rider’s position. “If you want your horse to be in self-carriage, you need to be in self-carriage,” notes Rodriguez. Having that core strength is what allows the rider to sit correctly and independently.

Core strength also counteracts many of the aches and pains riders experience. “If you had an arthritic horse, you would know that you had to keep that horse’s muscular strength up to support the joints,” explains Rodriguez. “The same thing applies with the rider – if you have a little back pain, simply taking anti-inflammatories is not enough. The more you build up your stomach muscles and the muscles that support your spine, hips and shoulder girdle, the better chance you have of relieving some of the pain and therefore enjoying your riding and being a more effective rider. One of the biggest benefits I’ve noticed from core fitness work is that I have a lot less hip pain, because the muscles around my hips are a lot stronger and more flexible.”

Balance

Proprioception is a term that may be new to many, but the concept behind it is not. In proprioceptive exercises, the development of body awareness is created using muscle memory. Proprioception is essentially the feel of where your body is, where limbs are, where your center of gravity and balance are,
and so on. This is learned by doing exercises that challenge your balance, so that you learn to engage your core and stabilize yourself.

“If you’re on the horse and you lose your balance, you inadvertently grab the reins,” remarks Rodriguez. “With these exercises, you do exercises that challenge your balance. You train your body to press down through your heels, engage your core, and regain your balance through the muscles that center you.”

By teaching that habit over and over, your muscles begin to react on their own without any outside balancing forces. In new skills, proprioception is learned through repetition, thereby giving us muscle memory.

The single straight leg crunch is a great crunch for the equestrian as it targets the abdominal and psoas muscles. The psoas muscle runs from the lower back around the pelvic area to the upper inner thigh. Keep one leg bent and the other straight. Take both arms from over head and reach toward the shin of the straight leg as you raise it. Keep your toes toward the shin for the best results. Repeat with the other leg.

Cardio

Cardiovascular exercise is aerobic activity that exercises the lungs, heart and muscles. It can take many forms, such as running or swimming. In addition, most core exercises also have a cardiovascular benefit when they are performed as a group of exercises in a dynamic workout.

“A lot of people say that they don’t want to ride their horse
to the point where they need cardio; however, there are very few situations where it won't come into play. If you are schooling your dressage test and are getting into Second Level, your canter tour is now twice as long as it used to be. I can't tell you how many times I'm teaching someone in a clinic who wants to do Second Level, yet after counter canter and a lengthening, they want a break. You should be able to school twice as long as what's in a test, not half as long. Cardio is a factor,” says Rodriguez.

“In eventing and show jumping, if you want to be helpful to your horse on course, you need to be sitting up in the saddle, being just as ready for the last fence as the first fence. It's not fair that, as the course goes on, you lean on your horse more and more, especially as the horse is also probably getting fatigued. The horse has to then not only carry himself over the fence, but the rider, too.”

Mobility
Loosening exercises in the warmup phase of exercise gently increase the range of motion without putting stress on the body; at this point, there's not enough blood flow to the muscles for the muscles to have a good stretch. Stretching takes place at the end of every workout. Activities such as yoga improve the body’s

The “Superman Stars” targets the abdominals and back while also working the range of motion in the shoulders and hips. Begin lying face down. Extend the arms forward and legs straight together. Open raised arms and legs to a star position. Close arms and legs, lowering them to the ground. Repeat.
Heart Rate

When you are working out, your heart rate should get up into the target zone and stay there for a while. The heart rate monitor is a neat gadget well known within fitness circles. Worn like a watch, this device allows you to monitor your pulse throughout your workout and is a good motivator against slacking. "If you keep your heart rate up from start to finish for a certain amount of time, you get much more benefit from your exercise instead of constantly taking breaks," remarks Rodriguez. According to the American Heart Association, your workout's target heart rate should be within the 50-85% range. To figure your 100% heart rate, subtract your age from 220. Then, scale that figure down to your target zone to see what heart rate you should be aiming for during your workout.

flexibility through stretching.

Some riders may feel that if they aren't competing, being fit isn't so crucial; yet, physical fitness is a necessity for every rider, regardless of discipline and skill level. For example, a pleasure rider needs core strength to ride balanced and straight in the saddle while facing challenges such as steep hills. If the horse spooks, the rider needs to be able to sink the weight through the hamstrings into the heels so that the reins don't become a point of balance. Trail riders can become uncomfortable in the saddle on a long ride if they're not fit enough, resulting in sitting sideways or shuffling around in the saddle in an effort to redistribute their weight.

"Ride is a verb - you are an athlete!" challenges Rodriguez. Creating and sticking with a regular workout plan increases your energy level and well-being, in addition to helping you get more pleasure and success out of your riding.

Look for Debbie Rodriguez's new DVD workout series custom designed for the rider, Success in the Saddle. These six 20-minute workout routines can be done in front of any TV or computer without any equipment. "Anyone can commit 20 minutes a day, six times a week, or 40 minutes a day, three times a week, to improve their health, as well as their ability to be a good rider and partner for their horse," says Rodriguez. These DVDs are available online at www.SuccessInTheSaddle.com.

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