

The importance of rider fitness -:

Cherry and I are both in the same profession managing a gym, teaching fitness classes and PT. Our age difference is 30 years. We are both competitive riders who are very passionate about endurance and fitness. In this session we will explain and demonstrate a few key fitness elements to assist you with being a fit rider and hopefully allow some time at the end for questions. When it comes to running Cherry would out run me and most other people with very little effort. Anybody who is a regular at endurance would have seen Cherry's high knees in action, always a fabulous to watch. Would I ever be able to keep the pace with Cherry on foot? Not a chance this is why as an older rider remaining fit, balanced, maintaining strong core, glute, leg strength and flexibility is of up most importance.

The goal of every rider is "oneness" with your horse, the feeling of coordination, balance and communication that you are working as a team. This is especially important over distance riding. A rider who is unfit physically, mentally or emotionally will be unable to achieve "oneness".

For any of us to ride the best we can your muscles, ligaments, coordination, balance and brain must all be working as well as possible.

The six critical elements of equestrian fitness are:

Balance – Demo instructed by Cherry

Flexibility – Mounting/dismounting with ease and not putting the horse off balance is a good example of the flexibility needed by riders. A rider should be able to get on without using their lower spine which will tilt the pelvis.

Strength – Joint demo squats/bands

Mental/physical independence – A rider needs to be able to multi task many body parts, while being relaxed and focused to ride the course ahead.

Core strength – Demo instructed by Deb

Aerobic (cardiovascular) – Joint demo

Lack of fitness does not only result in soreness and muscle strain at a time when you need to be at your peak, but it can contribute to slower completion time or non-completion, possibly even accidents when your body doesn't respond precisely when you need it to, or starts to collapse with fatigue throwing off your horse's balance.

A rider fitness program is to build stamina and strength appropriate to your discipline. All riders should have a strong core, good balance, good general flexibility and a fairly high level of awareness of where your body parts are in relation to your body and movement.

You should also not train intensely on the day before an endurance ride. Stretching and walking to keep loose, keep your joints supple, and maintain your flexibility while lowering your stress levels would be more appropriate the day before a ride.

You will see your own progress as you continue to track changes in your strength program and your cardio intensity intervals. For example, you might start out speed walking for three minutes and then need a two minute recovery period before picking up speed again. Within a month of diligent training, you could expect to be speed walking or even running for five to six minutes, with only one minute of recovery. Increasing your walking speed with progression to short runs will be effective for riders to provide a good balanced trot out for the vets.

Generally, you should begin to see improvement at the following rates:

Flexibility improvements within a week of daily stretching;

Cardiovascular improvements within two to three weeks of cardio activity at least twice a week;

Strength gains within two weeks of training at least twice a week.

If you stop training for a period of time, it will take you about the same amount of time to get back to your pre-stopping level of fitness. In other words, two weeks off takes about two weeks to recover. The time to ramp up your training is early in the season for about a month, then lowering the amount of time and

intensity to a maintenance level, with more focus on stretching to keep you supple. Any riding or training must include stretching to prevent injury.

Training Tips

1. To be time effective your cardio intensity level should be enough that you are breathing out of your mouth. Working aerobically means with air you should be able to speak whilst training. You can't skip this part if you want oxygen to your brain and muscle stamina at the precise moment you need it.
2. Select strength training that encourages multi-joint movement over bulk. Free weights, elastic stretch bands, bodyweight exercises or cable-based machines you can use creatively are better for a rider than machines which support your body for you while targeting only one or two muscles.
3. Work muscles you use for riding in a fuller range of motion than you do riding so they do not shorten and tighten.
4. Work your glutes and outer thighs to support your hips so you can sit deep, light and avoid lower back strain.
5. Work your shoulders, especially women as we are weaker, this can cause us to hunch our shoulders causing back and neck strain.
6. Two minutes of core exercises every day is better than 15 minutes once or twice a week. Try to aim for a variety of exercises that together equal 100-200 repetitions daily. Teach yourself to breathe into your abdomen, and use that deep breathing when you exercise and ride. Providing your body with more oxygen in performance and also relax both you and your horse.
7. Remember your core includes your sides and back too. Most riders do not work the back enough.
8. Be mindful of posture at all times, no matter what you're doing. Engage your core through every exercise, every task and moment of your day if you want to develop good posture that maintains itself without effort.
9. Give your body a day off. You do it for your horses. All athletes build rest into their schedule because overtraining and overwork breaks you down.