

For Best Performance Continue Training OUT of the Saddle

by Stacey Reap, graduate A, Huntingdon Valley Hunt Pony Club, Eastern Pennsylvania Region

If you want to improve your riding, reduce your chance of injury and shorten your recovery time if you do get injured, you need spend time some

Suggested reading for: Parents, Leaders, all riders

training time out of the saddle as well as in it. The three main components of a solid fitness program—stretching,

cardiovascular training and strength training—are as important a part of an equestrian's preparation as they are for any other athlete.



Pilato recommends general physical activities. Swimming and running, two of the four individual sports included in Tetrathlon, might be choices members would enjoy.

Mike Pilato, a National Athletic Trainers Association certified athletic trainer, became interested in the needs of equestrian athletes after meeting Dru Malavase, a member of USPC's Safety Committee and chairman of the ASTM's sub-committee on equestrian headgear, and has researched and written several publications on the subject in recent years.

"People whack me because I don't ride—I don't understand what feel is like," he admitted. "In athletics, my job as an athletic trainer is not to teach technique or skills associated with success on the field. My job is to make a person as a machine more efficient with less pain, to give the coach a better machine to work with. Practice is very important, but a proper conditioning program can make a good rider great and a great rider exceptional.

"It's a question of getting people off the horse and looking at them as a

machine, as a separate tool and making them into a better, more efficient machine that is better able to communicate with the horse," he

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explained. "There are two bodies that need to work together [when riding, and] this presented a unique difference from the traditional athletic setting.

What struck me as most interesting though is that many riders will place more emphasis on improving the skill and physical condition of the horse, while they focus on the technical side of the contest."

Riders need to devote the same energy to conditioning themselves as they do to conditioning their horses! For kids younger than 10-12, Pilato recommends encouraging general physical activity. Unhand the remote, mouse or controller and get outside and play! For older kids, when their bodies start to physically mature and they start to engage in higher-level activities, he

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explained the importance of developing their athleticism to help prevent injuries.

While riding, in itself, provides physical benefits, Pilato explained that it, along with the barn chores that typically accompany it, aren't enough to satisfy the conditioning needs of most riders.

Cardiovascular fitness, for example, keeps us from getting fatigued before our muscles themselves are pooped. If you're sucking wind at the end of your cross-country course, your level of cardiovascular fitness is likely the reason.

"We know what happens to a person's heart rate when they're on the horse. In order to reach the aerobic fitness training range for a half an hour, for a horse to get you there, you have to be a little over a canter—essentially galloping—and not many people will be galloping that long three or four times a week, particularly on one horse!" he said.

Pilato understands that horse people are often slinging water buckets, bales of hay and the like as part of their

daily routine, but he thinks riders need to do more to optimize conditioning. "Most everyone has heard the terms strength, power and endurance. Each is a different component of what makes a muscle strong. The activities we do increase the component that helps us most with those activities," he explained. "If all you carried was water all water all day, you would need less power and strength, but a lot of endurance.

"Even though you are using all of your muscles every day, if you are doing the same level of intensity activity, you can injure that muscle due to over using that one portion and under using the rest," he continued. "So it is not just 'weight training,' it is strength training with the purpose of maintaining the strength, power and endurance capacities of a muscle."

When all of the different parts of your body are strengthened in this fashion, Pilato said the key is timing, being able to coordinate how you use your muscles, so that you can increase your overall stability and improve your ability to communicate with the horse.

"Many books tie stability to posture. What they are saying is proper posture activates your abdominal muscles, thereby increasing your stability in the seat. While it is true that activating your abdominal muscles will make your torso more stable when riding, it takes a coordinated effort of lots of muscles to maximize stability," he explained.

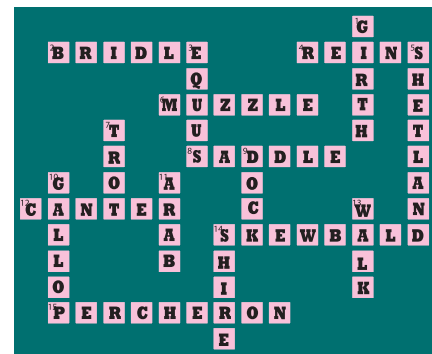
"If you were to contract all your trunk muscles, there is no doubt that your torso would be very stable; much like a box is very solid and stable. Now take that box and put it on a saddle with a moving horse under it. The box is very stable on its own, but how long

will it stay on a moving horse? Not likely very long," he continued. "You can envision a stiff novice rider bumping along as they try to stay with their new mount. So how do you improve your stability if you are not 'locking' your pelvis and trunk to make it stable? You make your pelvis and trunk reactive, or mobile, to what is happening under your saddle. A flexible and mobile pelvis and trunk that moves under control provides the most stable seat."

Developing strength, control and coordination in all these muscle systems, while out of the saddle, allows a rider to reap the benefits while in it. A more stable, efficient position can better follow and communicate with the horse and is safer and more effective. "A straightforward way to think of it is to say that every time foot, knee position, etc., is altered, the muscles have to allow other parts to move to maintain seat stability," explained Pilato. "Therefore, good riding posture is more than just a function of a strong core. It involves proper coordination of *all* your muscles."

Pilato has educational resources for the equestrian athlete, including specific training programs, available through his website: www.fitfocusedforward.com.

"Horseword Puzzle" answers from page 16.



**...develop
athleticism to
help prevent
injuries**