

Fitness Countdown: *Ready to Ride!*

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As winter winds to a close, riders of every type itch to get back into the swing of things. Longer, sunshine-filled days mean trail rides, horse shows, and more time in the saddle. Whether you've taken the winter off riding or were able to keep going, now's the time to get serious about integrating your own fitness into your riding program.

Many of us see riding as a workout in and of itself. So, why is exercise out of the saddle important, too? How can we get motivated and stay motivated? *Equine Journal* chatted with Debbie Rodriguez, creator of the best-selling equestrian fitness DVD series, *Success in the Saddle*, who tells us all we need to know to get in gear.

What aspects of fitness do riders of all disciplines need to keep in mind?

Debbie Rodriguez: Riders from all disciplines will benefit from a minimum level of strength through the hips and core; a strong, stable chest supported by the back and shoulder muscles; flexibility through the hips and hip flexors; and balance and coordination. Most riders will benefit from a good cardio base, as well.

Being flexible is good, but it is not enough. Riders need to be able to control and sustain a position for some time to be effective. This means that some form of strength training needs to be part of any rider's fitness program.

No other athlete would consider being competitive without some kind of strength and conditioning program. Riders are no different.

How much does riding itself count toward the fitness component?

Debbie Rodriguez: The body will adjust to the amount of work it does over time. Once a skill becomes automatic, like posting the trot, it takes less effort for the body. That is why when you first take on eight horses a day to train, the riding itself helps keep you fit. But, then after a year or two, riding that same number of horses is not enough.

Your body needs to up the intensity or type of exercise to keep the same benefit. This means that actual riding is not enough to develop the level of fitness needed for your best performance.

What kinds of changes have you seen in your students who begin working out?

Debbie Rodriguez: Part of my motivation in developing the "Success" core fitness program was to have a workable program for my students. Most of my students tried the routines and gave feedback during the development of the program. Fairly quickly, most of the riders were able to activate and control their seats much more effectively. Regardless of age or physique, riders were able to stay stable in their core and sit the trot in a more controlled position. Two students with sore backs felt less pain as their back and core muscles strengthened.

Where There's a Will, There's a Way

Dr. Chrisoula Andreou, a philosophy professor at the University of Utah, recently discussed on National Public Radio techniques for beating procrastination. She recommends utilizing a concept she refers to as intention implementation, in which you focus on a step-by-step approach toward your goal as opposed to the big goal itself. "Instead of having a vague goal like 'I will lose weight' or 'I will get into better shape,' you come up with a way of implementing that in a kind of specific plan," notes Andreou. She explains this could be walking home from work three days a week.

By having these small tasks as part of your daily life, you set yourself up for success with the big goal. For riders, this may mean instead of focusing on the goal of winning the regional championship at the end of the season, you focus on doing 20 minutes of exercise every other day, which will make you a stronger rider.

Andreou also explains that people may be very motivated in one area of their lives, while procrastinating in another. To counteract this, she suggests creating a reward system that feeds into the activities we enjoy; you "pay" yourself for performing a task that may cause you to procrastinate by then getting to enjoy a favorite activity. If you are the type who doesn't like to work out but loves to ride, work out before you head to the barn, so the reward for exercising is precious time in the saddle.

What are your tips for fitting fitness into a tight schedule?

Debbie Rodriguez: Often I hear the excuse, "I don't have any time for one more thing." The person who says this may also be the rider that has been struggling with a certain riding skill for some time. An example is the rider who has difficulty sitting the trot. Developing a stronger core with supple, stable hips will make sitting the trot much easier and more comfortable.

Time spent off the horse will greatly increase your success on the horse. Another example is the rider who has difficulty getting or keeping one lead. While it is easy to blame this on the horse, often the rider's uneven seat is to blame. Doing some simple exercises off the horse to isolate and strengthen each hip and leg individually will help solve this riding issue. Pain in the hips can be greatly controlled by working the muscles that surround and support the hips. Just like with our horses, the stronger the muscles surrounding the joints are, the less wear and tear there is on the joints.

Doing specific exercises doesn't take long or involve much equipment. You just need to make the decision to do it. Chose exercises that can be done at home or at the barn, eliminating commuting to the gym. There are many existing programs that put together workouts that are short and full of combination exercises that work several body parts at once. A good program may work one set of muscles intensely one day and a different set of muscles the next day, rotating during the week's program. This is more effective than trying to cover each muscle group briefly every day.

Want to Know More About Equestrian Fitness?

At successinthesaddle.com, you'll find free exercise video clips, recipes, motivational tips and more. Debbie Rodriguez, an active trainer and competitor, is a United States Dressage Federation Gold Medalist, United States Equestrian Federation "S" Dressage Judge and "I" Eventing Judge, and International Sports Sciences Association certified personal fitness coach.

What's your best bit of advice as a fellow rider?

Debbie Rodriguez: Find a fitness program that fits your schedule and personality, and give it a try! Once you feel how extra strength and fitness improve your riding, it is easier to stay motivated to stick with the program. There are so many choices; don't let excuses like lack of time stop you from improving your fitness and the quality of your ride. ■

The Psoas Stretch



Ready to Give it a Try?

Here are some exercises to start with or add to your fitness program. You can perform these at the barn or at home. No equipment is needed!

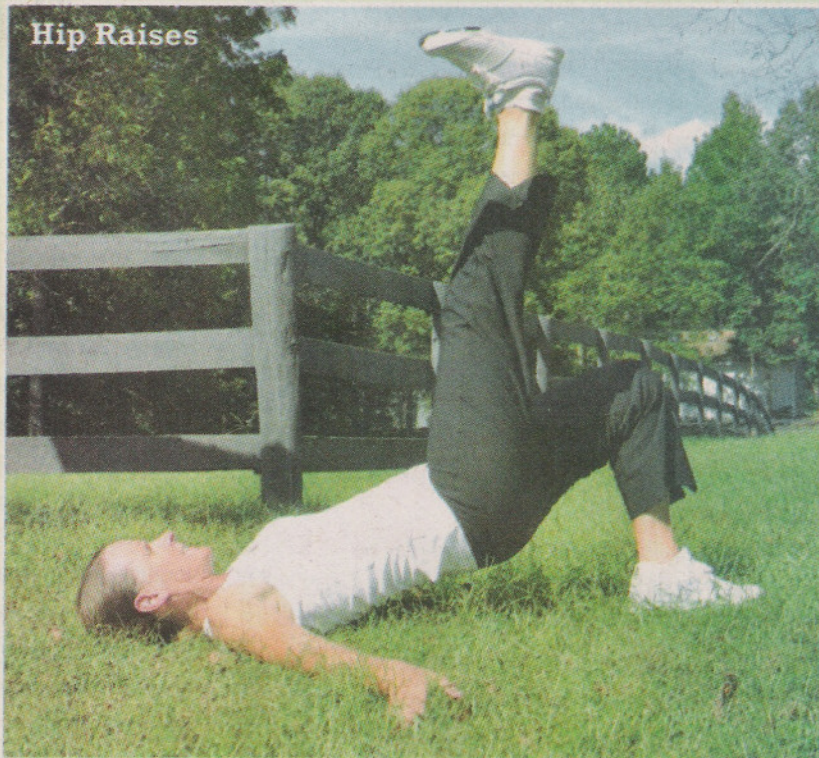
The Psoas Stretch is useful for opening up the front of the hips, which allows the thigh to stretch down. For riders, this means more weight in the stirrups. This is especially useful in overcoming any hip tightness you may encounter if you are active in other sports that have a limited range of motion, such as cycling and running. Start in push-up position. Place your right foot to the inside of your right hand, stretch up and take your hands off the mat. Push your hips squarely forward until you feel the stretch through the front of your hip flexors. For best results, raise your left arm. Repeat on the other side.

Knee Hugs stretch



Knee Hugs stretch and activate the glutes and hamstrings. For the rider, this helps increase the control of the seat. Stand with both feet underneath your shoulders. Raise one knee while keeping your core engaged. Hug the knee to your chest. Alternate legs for a count of ten.

Hip Raises



"Hip Raises are my single favorite exercise for reducing hip and lower back pain," says Rodriguez. This move really activates and strengthens all the muscles that surround the hips. Lying on the ground with your arms out and knees bent, raise your hips until there is a straight line from your shoulders to your hips. Then drop your hips and repeat. There are many variations. The one shown here is a single, straight-legged hip raise.



Leg Swings

Leg Swings open the hips and increase range of motion. For riders, this allows the upper leg to fall in better alignment in the saddle. Stand facing a fence or wall. With a hand on the fence for support, stand on one leg. With a gentle and controlled swing, swing the leg back and forth in front of your body to a count of five. Switch legs and repeat.



The Curtsey Squat



The Frankenstein Walk

The Frankenstein Walk also stretches the hamstrings. You can do the Frankenstein walk standing in one place or walking forward, depending on the space you have available. From a standing position, put your arms straight in front of you. Raise one leg to your hands. Be careful not to bring your hands to your feet. Stay as straight in the back as you can. Alternate legs.



The Curtsey Squat with Twist

The Curtsey Squat works the hips flexors and core. It's also a great exercise for balance and coordination. This is perfect as a short, warm-up move. Start standing with feet shoulder width apart. Take your right foot and step behind and across your left leg, keeping your core engaged. Squat down like a curtsey. Add some challenge by twisting your torso to the left while in the curtsey position. Repeat on other leg. Try several repetitions.