



WELLBEING SERIES

EXERCISE

RIDING MAY COUNT AS EXERCISE BUT ON ITS OWN, DOES IT MAKE US FIT ENOUGH TO GET THE MOST FROM OUR HORSES? **ANDREA OAKES** INVESTIGATES THE BENEFITS OF EXERCISE BEYOND TIME IN THE SADDLE AS PART OF YOUR OVERALL WELLBEING.

You may be a dressage competitor, but would you describe yourself as an athlete? Most people refer to the horse as the athlete; he's the one doing the hard work, after all. What the leading dressage partnerships are proving, however, is that both halves of the team must be physically fit to perform.

Taking a more athletic approach can reap rewards: studies have revealed that horses are sounder and move better when their rider is fitter. Charlotte Dujardin is a dedicated gym-goer, while Laura Tomlinson recommends a regular swim or cycle. But what kind of exercise has the potential to give us the winning edge?

Victoria Lewis, a senior lecturer in equestrian sport science at the University Centre Hartpury, explains that our modern lifestyles do us no favours when it comes to maintaining a strong, supple and centred position.

"Driving long distances,

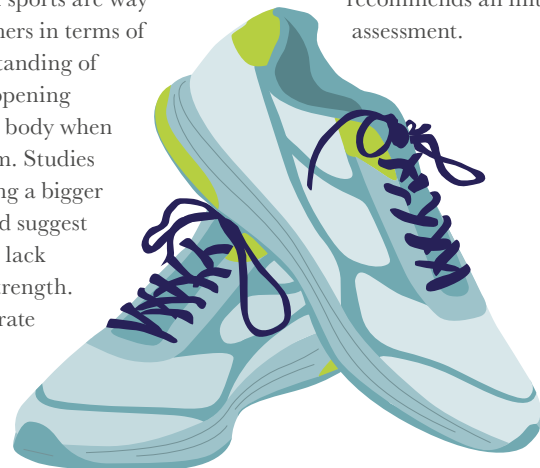
spending hours at a desk or carrying a bag on one shoulder all encourage poor posture," she says, emphasising that so much time spent crouched over can create weakness in the core, in the hamstrings at the back of the thighs and in the group of buttock muscles known as the glutes. "Riders are also seen to have tightness in the ankles, hip flexors and pectoral (chest) muscles, while stable duties can build up asymmetric movement patterns. It's important to counterbalance these activities with strengthening exercises."

According to Victoria, equestrian sports are way behind others in terms of an understanding of what's happening within the body when we perform. Studies are building a bigger picture and suggest that riders lack postural strength.

"Heart rate is a fairly good indicator of fitness,"

she says, explaining that recent research revealed an unusually high heart rate among riders in a British Eventing (BE) novice dressage test. "Something was sending heart rate up. It could have been adrenalin or an intra-abdominal pressure to maintain bodily position, but the fact that grip strength was seen to decrease quite significantly suggests an element of fatigue. As a rider, you also need to train your heart."

If the promise of greater symmetry and stamina is enough to tempt you to up your game, where's best to start? Victoria recommends an initial assessment.



"A qualified physical trainer can identify any injury issues and see what's causing asymmetry – perhaps you're tight in one set of muscle groups and weak in others," she says. "Core-strengthening exercise such as pilates will help, along with some strength and conditioning activities. Cardiovascular work is good. Running, swimming and cycling are popular, or HIIT (high-intensity interval training), which boosts heart and body fitness."

"Avoid doing just one type of activity," adds Victoria, who points out that going overboard with the sit-ups, for example, will create shorter and tighter abdominal muscles that may not be an advantage. "Aim for whole-body exercise that enhances functional movement, building up gradually. Try squats, alone or with weights, speeding them up and then adding a jump in the middle."

An alternative for the matwork element is yoga. This can benefit

both body and mind, according to yoga teacher Jo Fellows.

"Yoga can help you understand the mechanisms of movement," says Jo, who explains that options range from a gentle yoga class to the more dynamic and demanding Ashtanga. "Learning to breathe consciously is a useful relaxation technique for competition, but perhaps the greatest gift of yoga is training for your mind – having control of your thoughts and emotions."

"Yoga also promotes core strength and flexibility, strengthening the muscles that elongate the spine and encouraging the deeper muscles of the hips and back to relax and open up," she adds. "A few hours of stretching every week will change your ability to sit properly in the saddle."

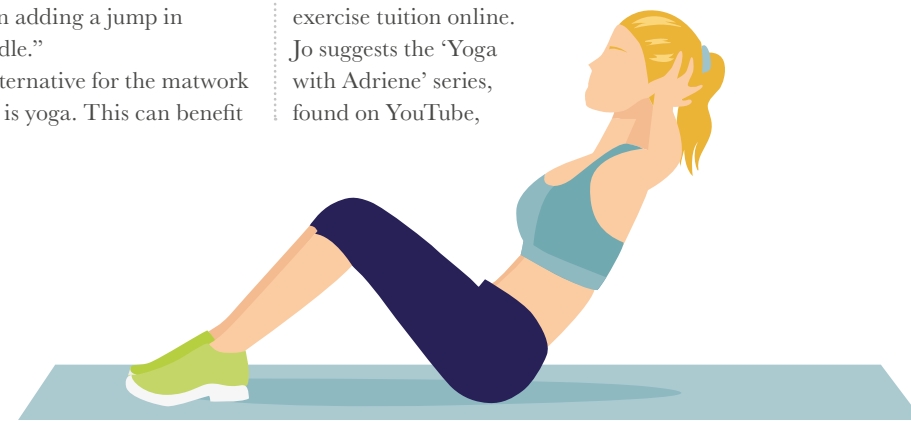
Busy riders who cannot spare the time to attend classes can find exercise tuition online.

Jo suggests the 'Yoga with Adriene' series, found on YouTube,

while Victoria favours EventFit, a programme of classes by fitness expert Jenni Douglas, aimed at riders in all disciplines.

"Being fit to ride is not just about improving performance," says Victoria. "Our studies found that 74 percent of riders are competing with pain, which can cause fatigue, affect concentration and limit movement. The good thing about exercise is that it has the potential to reduce problems such as chronic back ache, or prevent these issues from arising in the longer term."

"There is some evidence that you will see an improvement in your riding if you restore functional movement to your body and address asymmetry," she adds. "For maximum benefit, however, remember that fitness work must go hand-in-hand with good riding instruction." ■



CASE STUDY: EXERCISE

When she stepped up her fitness routine with boxercise classes, running and gym training, Melanie Phillips saw her dressage scores improve.



"I had always been fit but I was surprised at how lacking I was in some areas," she explains. "Improving my core strength made a huge difference to my riding."

With a training and livery yard, a small stud and a teenage son to organise as well as a string of competition horses, Melanie's exercise plans fell by the wayside.

"I became so busy that I stopped," she explains. "But the exercise I did certainly re-established the core strength that I'd never really regained after having a child. I hadn't realised that those muscles had evaporated, so working on the wobble board and the gym ball was especially beneficial."

"My dressage horses now require a very physical effort, so I have maintained some fitness," adds Melanie, whose homebred mare Ruxton Bridget Jones will be aimed at Inter II and Grand Prix this season. "I do miss the stretching, though, as suppleness always needs addressing. It can be difficult to get yourself out of the door to an exercise class, but I have every intention of restarting!"