



WELLBEING SERIES

HEALTHY BALANCE



BALANCE MAY BE THE CORNERSTONE OF EFFECTIVE RIDING, BUT IT'S ALSO REGARDED AS THE KEY TO WELLBEING. IN THE SIXTH IN OUR SERIES, **ANDREA OAKES** LOOKS AT HOW TO ACHIEVE EQUILIBRIUM IN OUR LIVES.

Experts urge us to lead a balanced lifestyle and take a holistic approach to our health. But before you reach for the incense sticks and herbal teabags, what exactly does this mean? Put simply, living holistically involves treating your body as a whole rather than a collection of parts – by taking all aspects of wellbeing and how they interact into account.

Ashleigh Wallace, head of athlete health and lead physiotherapist for the British Equestrian Federation, believes that this holistic approach can enhance the performance of our top equestrian athletes.

“People tend to think of athlete health as the absence of illness, but it makes complete sense to consider the overall balance of a person – physically, mentally, emotionally and even spiritually,” she says, pointing out that if it works for the best riders, it can work for the rest of us. “By managing all of these areas we can experience a sense of thriving

and enjoying life, which should have a positive impact on performance.”

Achieving a healthy balance is not always easy, however, in a society full of excesses and centred largely around a sedentary lifestyle. The important thing, says Ashleigh, is to nail the basics: aim for quality sleep; eat a diet balanced with protein, carbohydrates, healthy fats and plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables; rehydrate yourself with at least eight glasses of water a day and exercise regularly to maintain stamina and flexibility.

“If you’re in a position to do this you should feel well and build resilience,” she explains.

“By making time for the fun things, too, involving family and friends, you’ll be more able to cope with whatever life throws at you.”

HOW EXACTLY CAN RIDING PERFORMANCE BENEFIT?

“If you are a healthy weight for your height, you are in balance,” says Ashleigh. “We know

the importance of refuelling properly with good nutrition, but taking too much into your system and not burning it up can create excess bodyweight. The opposite is also true and can lead to malnutrition and a resulting lack of energy.

“Fat is dead weight because, unlike muscle, it cannot contract,” she adds, explaining that every excess kilo will have an impact on a horse’s way of going.

“Being too heavy will change your centre of mass, particularly if you are carrying weight around your tummy, which will affect him biomechanically and inhibit his ability to extend his forelegs.

“A body mass index (BMI) reading is not always an accurate reflection of your height-weight ratio, since muscle weighs more than fat. If you feel that issues need addressing, your GP is probably your best starting point for a realistic assessment.”

While the odd cigarette or glass of wine is

unlikely to bring your dressage percentages down, when might you feel that you’re taking these habits to extremes?

“Again, it’s all about balance,” says Ashleigh. “If things such as cigarettes and alcohol start to control you, it might be worth re-assessing your intake.

“I don’t believe you can do a horse justice if you smoke or drink excessively,” she adds. “Riding with a hangover means you are dehydrated, which will affect your reactions and slow your decision making. An area of excess, such as an addiction to smoking or an eating disorder, often points to something that’s not quite right in life – there’s usually a reason.”

Achieving a healthier balance need not be too expensive or time-consuming. You’ll feel fitter for taking the stairs instead of the lift, for example, or leaving the office for a lunchtime walk, while a face-to-face catch-up with a friend is often more satisfying than a

Facebook post. On occasion, however, it is worth making a financial investment in your future health.

“For dressage, you need mobility in your hips and a good range of movement through your back,” explains Ashleigh, who recommends a regular physiotherapy session or sports massage to identify any weaknesses before they become an issue.

“Problems such as lumbar pain need not be a given, as long as you work on your riding position and take a proactive rather than reactive approach.

“Looking after yourself is so important, especially when you interact with an animal,” she says.

“If you’re tired, dehydrated or in pain, or you’re relying on sugary snacks for energy, your horse will find it harder to settle and work in harmony with you. Simply by addressing these areas, it’s far more likely that he’ll understand what you’re asking him.” ■

CASE STUDY: HEALTHY BALANCE

While she admits to being ‘a bit of a wild child’ in her younger years, Herefordshire-based rider Olivia Towers is now reaping the benefits of working on all aspects of her health.

“I believe in taking a holistic approach,” says Olivia, who is aiming for inter II later this year with Mercian Calisso. “Keeping myself fit and healthy has a knock-on effect – not only physically, when I’m handling the horses, but also mentally, boosting my confidence and motivation.

“I’m always active and really enjoy the gym, but I no longer train so hard that I don’t have the energy to ride,” she adds. “I’ve learned to listen to my body and not feel guilty about skipping a session if I’m working flat-out.

“I’ve struggled with balancing my diet in the past and tried some radical things such as cutting out carbohydrates, but my mum said I looked like a rag doll on a horse. Now, I eat what I know is good for me – including good fats, proteins and carbs – and I don’t count calories. Whereas my weight would once yo-yo, I know that I feel better when I eat well.”

Riding up to six horses a day, Olivia is careful to rehydrate regularly. She rarely drinks alcohol and treats herself to a monthly sports massage.

“I do lots of mucking out so I tend to get one-sided, but I know that I can’t expect my horses to perform if I’m crooked,” she says. “Taking care of yourself is so simple and basic. It may be a bit boring at times, but you’re only as strong as your weakest link.”

