



The Equestrian Athlete: Why Fitness is Important

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[Back to Articles...](#)

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What are some words that come to mind when you think of an athlete? Perhaps words like skill, strength, focus, commitment, passion, sacrifice, and drive come to mind. Do those words fit what you do as a rider? Do you think what you do as a rider is difficult? How do you feel after a long day of showing? Fatigued, sore, mentally drained? Think about those questions for a minute.



How often do you mentally prepare when you compete at your show? Do you walk the show jumping course, visualize the route you will take, the strides you may cut out, the inside turns you may attempt? Of course you do! Do you go over your dressage patterns and tests knowing exactly when and how you will cue your horse to ensure precise movements? Definitely! Do you practice a fast barrel racing run in your head and visualize how close you can come to the barrel through a turn? Absolutely! Mental preparation is a significant part of any equestrian sport, so these questions are likely no-brainers for you.



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[Back to Articles...](#)

Now what if I asked you how often you **physically** prepare when you are schooling or competing? Do you warm-up or go through any flexibility or mobility exercises before you get on your horse? Do you incorporate resistance and endurance training to ensure you have the strength and stability to ride effectively? Do you perform a cool-down to prevent excessive muscular soreness and stiffness after a long day of showing? I would guess the response rate would be much less positive. What about your equestrian partner – do you ensure you warm-up your horse before you jump a course, perform an intricate dressage pattern, or race to your first barrel? Unquestionably – why? Because you believe your horse is an athlete.

Let's go back to those words you may use to describe an athlete. I think many equestrian riders would agree that those words describe themselves. If that is the case, then why would you not prepare like an athlete for your sport??

Equestrian sports are unique as they are a sport of two athletes – horse & rider. Ideally both athletes need to be physically conditioned in order to withstand the stress of training and competing. You know how to condition your horse, so let's talk about how you condition yourself.



Lesson 1: Why is Fitness Important? Being physically conditioned has many benefits for your equestrian sport including:

- **Decreasing the risk of injury (both acute and chronic injuries):** Working on & off your horse is physically demanding and requires repetitive types of movements and awkward positions (mucking out a stall, picking hooves, maintaining posture during sitting trot...). Having the appropriate strength, endurance, flexibility, and mobility enables you to perform the specific movement patterns involved in riding with less imposed stress on the body.



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[Back to Articles...](#)



- **Quicker recovery time:** Riding is a great sport as it caters to all ages. You may have started riding in your pre-teens or early teens, or perhaps you started in your 30's, or returned to riding in your 40's (shout out to all the riding alumni out there!). As we age our bodies become less efficient and somewhat less resilient. It can be much harder to recover from an intense lesson or show series than it was when you were younger. However, engaging in a consistent strength & flexibility program and increasing your overall fitness level can aid in physical recovery from soreness, stiffness, and fatigue; as well as the ability to withstand the short & long-term stress of the sport and associated activities.
- **Coordination & Balance:** Controlling a 1200 pound animal to respond to a variety of subtle cues from the rider (without the rider flailing or using distracting cues) takes an enormous amount of body awareness that comes from balance & coordination of movement patterns. Both balance & coordination are directly related to muscular strength, flexibility, and stability.



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[Back to Articles...](#)

- **Improved performance:** It is well-documented that improving physical fitness has a positive effect on performance in any sport. Of course on show day there are a lot of factors that come into play that can make a difference on whether you are counting ribbons & prize money or not (weather, footing, judges, condition of your horse, whether gremlins jump out of the water jump or not!). Your fitness level should not come into question as a reason your performance suffered.
- **Longevity in the sport:** You love horses! You love the sport, the training, the competition, the camaraderie, the bond between horse & rider, the lazy hack days, the smell of the barn. You love it all and want to ride and/or compete for as long as possible. To reiterate what I said above, your fitness level should not be the reason you stop riding!



Remember...YOU ARE AN ATHLETE!

