

Rider Fitness: Building Strength Astride

By *Patrice D. Bucciarelli* Photos By *Lesley Ward*

Horse Illustrated May 2008

Riding instructor Kari Sullivan believes that no matter what the discipline, good riders are fit riders, and since their horses are their performance partners, it makes sense to build strength astride. Sullivan's student roster ranges from children as young as age 5 to men and women over 50. "Balance and leg strength are things riders can build in the saddle," says Sullivan, owner and trainer at High Hopes Stables in Monticello, Ky.

No Stirrups

Sullivan promotes these tenets by asking students to drop their stirrups and ride two circles around the arena at a walk. More advanced riders perform this task at both sitting and posting trots, too, and later at a canter. Gaited horse riders go sans stirrups at the walk and their alternate gait

"No-stirrup work forces riders to not only keep their balance, but to wrap their legs around their horses for long muscle development," she says. She kicks the challenge up a notch by asking students to lift themselves out of the saddle a fraction of an inch and ride a circle or two in this position at the walk to build inner thigh strength. Two-Point
Sullivan helps her students build lower leg strength by asking them to ride in the two-point position, first at the walk and then at a slow trot. "The two-point position builds calf muscles quickly, stretching the muscles that keep the heels down, and prepares students who ride hunt seat for jumping," she says.

Leg Lifts

Finally, Sullivan's classes end with mounted leg lifts designed to stretch inner-thigh and hip muscles one last time prior to dismounting. With their horses standing still, riders hold their reins in their left hand and lightly grip the saddle pommel or horn with the right hand. Next, they drop the right stirrup, and with their right leg in the basic riding position — knee bent and heel down — move the leg away from the saddle and back, keeping the foot parallel with the ground. The exercise is repeated 10 times with the right leg and then the left leg.

"Being able to perform simple exercises in the saddle not only builds strength, but confidence, too," Sullivan says. "However, riders should do mounted exercises at their experience level."

Read on for core-strengthening groundwork exercises.

[View a video of groundwork exercises.](#)

[Find more ways to improve your fitness.](#)

[Back to Get Fit to Ride.](#)