

## Get Fit to Ride

**Improve your riding with simple exercises from the ground up.**

*By Patrice D. Bucciarelli*

Linda Denniston's clients know when they arrive at her fitness center that it will be a while before they sit on a horse. Denniston believes that fitness comes before equitation. So her classes start in the gym, not in the saddle.

"We start with the groundwork because people don't understand the biomechanics of their own bodies. And that's critical to staying on the horse," says Denniston, an experienced dressage competitor and training manager for Cedar Rowe Lusitanos Equestrian Fitness Center in Bollinger, Md.

According to Denniston, most clients come to her as referrals from trainers who believe muscle conditioning and fitness will help their students get more out of riding lessons and improve their scores in competition.

The desire to better connect with her horse is what led Kathryn Bono to believe that fitness is essential to good riding. Advised by her dressage instructor to get fit, Bono began working with Denniston. Nearly three years later, Bono, 56, credits the program with building her body and her confidence — even after having bilateral hip replacement surgery.

According to Bono, working out can enhance any equestrian discipline because it improves the rider's overall fitness and coordination, and results in a seat that is independent of the reins. A fit rider allows the horse to perform better and without interference.

During 60-minute sessions, Denniston's clients work on flexibility, balance and cardiovascular stamina by working with body weights, free weights and on treadmills. Next, they practice achieving a balanced seat on the longe line astride one of Denniston's school horses. As part of her program, students commit to a 20-minute exercise routine a minimum of twice a week — much of it focusing on developing core (abdominal) strength.

"It's very progressive — step one, step two, step three," she says. "People get a chance to understand how their bodies work."

Equestrians who adopt and maintain an exercise routine get other perks, too, according to Rallie McAllister, MD, a physician, author and lifelong equestrian based in Lexington, Ky.

"Conditioning, building strength, flexibility and endurance have huge confidence benefits and create body awareness — knowing where you are in space," McAllister says. "All are necessary for equestrian sports."

McAllister stresses building strength in the arms, legs and upper body using resistance training with hand weights, and stretching exercises to promote flexibility. "The more you work out, the stronger you will be," McAllister says.

Yet, despite the benefits, many equestrians are reluctant to view exercise without a horse as relevant to their success. "The key to getting equestrians engaged is to prove to them that fitness will actually improve the quality of their rides," says Elizabeth Hanson, certified pilates instructor and founder of Equestrian Pilates, a program designed especially for riders of all disciplines. "When riders have limited upper body and core strength, they're out of balance. And when they're out of balance, their horses are, too."

According to Hanson, that's because horses mirror their riders. It's an easy concept to test. "Start your horse out at a walk and engage your abdominal muscles," Hanson says. "Your horse will engage his abdominals, too. You'll know this because you'll see his behind go down. Now he's balanced and collected."

Try out these featured exercises, and you may be surprised to notice immediate improvement to your strength and stamina in the saddle.

Try these mounted exercises to work on at the barn.  
View a video of some exercises you can do at home.  
Find out some easy ways you can improve your fitness.  
Get some tips on nutrition for equestrians.