



***Former top rider helps equestrians excel as a physical therapist and performance training fitness expert focused on sport-specifics for equestrians.***

National Three-Star Champion eventer Frankie Thieriot Stutes thought a generic gym work-out would suffice as a saddle-time supplement fitness-wise. While getting a chance to work with Britta Pedersen, Frankie learned she was sorely wrong about that. And, we do mean sorely wrong.

Working with Frankie at the behest of US eventing chef d'equipe Erik Duvander, Britta designed a sport specific training program for Frankie, with an exercise prescription tailored to her strengths and weaknesses. Britta recalls Frankie first describing the work-out as not too hard, then calling the next day to report that muscles she never knew she had were reporting otherwise – very loudly.

Britta hears that a lot. The New Zealander has an extensive eventing and international dressage background, but a severe riding accident in 2006 sidetracked that dream and left her instead to enjoy the sport vicariously through those she's helping excel in it.

Now based in San Diego, she moved to the States in 2014 and began building up a fitness and physical therapy program catering to rider performance. About 80 percent of clients, primarily eventers and dressage riders, come to her for injury rehab. "Then it trickles across when they realize the performance enhancement benefits," says Britta of what goes on at her San Diego clinic, The Performance Refinery.

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She also runs Rider Biomechanics clinics and often partners with dressage rider and trainer Niki Clarke in presenting combined clinics where the horse/rider pair is assessed under saddle, then the rider dismounts for Britta to make hands-on adjustments and treatments.

*California Riding Magazine* editor Kim F Miller enjoyed talking with Britta about her work.



### **Kim: Where are equestrian sports in their embrace of your work's benefits?**

**Britta:** The most exciting thing is that it's becoming more accepted regarding how important rider fitness and body work really is. There's a developing understanding of how beneficial both body alignment and fitness is for a rider in order to be the most effective on the horse. It's not just a case of being able to ride three or four horses every day, but taking ownership of your training by developing specific strength and stamina to ride either your one horse or your entire string in the most effective way possible.

The USEF is making brilliant steps in the right direction. They've employed an incredibly experienced and fantastic "physio" from the U.K., Andy Thomas, who is the high performance human science and sports medicine advisor for US riders. He flies to most major competitions to help the riders on the ground. So, things are definitely changing for the better!

### **Kim: Where do you think that acceptance is coming from?**

**Britta:** It definitely starts with the elite riders. The weight placed on sport specific work across all leading sports, not just in equestrian, has been in the media a lot and helps to strengthen its importance, especially at a young professional level. I think this has encouraged the spill-over into all professional, amateur and weekend warrior fields alike. Charlotte Dujardin and Adelinde Cornelissen are both firm believers in the importance of off-the-horse fitness work. They often share their workout routines across social media platforms and articles which has had a very positive influence on up and coming riders.

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### **Kim: Why do most riders first come to you: injuries or fitness?**

**Britta:** Often Injuries, especially with those riding multiple horses a day. A common injury I see with dressage riders is related to low back pain. So, we fix the acute injury, then we take a look at why the injury occurred in the first place and implement a plan to prevent further injuries. It's not foolproof, and horses can be horses, but the stronger you are through your postural stabilizers, the less likely you are to end up with a lower back injury. When riders experience that and see the benefits, they tend to come on board into an off-the-horse training program.

### **Kim: Why is a sport-specific work-out important?**

**Britta:** Boot camps and generic work-outs play an important role in a lot of society. I am not knocking them. But for riders, let's say you are blasting 50 front-weighted squats. You're over-developing your quads, a muscle that is already strong from riding. Instead, you need to think about the opposing or "stabilizing" muscles (in this case, your glutes) required for riding. Not doing so can lead to more imbalance issues for a rider. Riders don't need body builder type strength. They need "intrinsic stability," aka core strength and stability, along with mobility.

### **Kim: Within the sport-specific context, is it also important to do a rider-specific exercise program?**

**Britta:** Yes! It should be 100 percent rider specific. Not one of the riders I work with has the same plan. They may do some of the same exercises, but never the same program.



**Kim: Do the tendencies of the rider's horse affect the program you design for its rider?**

**Britta:** Not really. The work is structured to how the rider sits on the horse, instead of trying to adjust how the horse is going. Once we address the rider, it's amazing how the horse's way of going often changes too.

**Kim: How do the clinics with you and Niki Clarke work?**

**Britta:** Niki and I are very aligned in both the way we teach and our philosophies. The rider first starts on the horse and I watch and take notes relating to their alignment while they warm up. I then take them off the horse and work through a detailed muscle balance assessment after which I help them from a manual therapy biomechanics perspective: such as the alignment of the legs, pelvis, torso, shoulders and neck. We then get the rider back on the horse and Niki and I work together from there.

**Kim: What are some typical types of biomechanics work that you do in a riding clinic setting?**

**Britta:** It could involve joint mobilization, soft tissue work and postural education. I am a true manual-trained PT and a certified kinesiotaping therapist. You will see me use a lot of taping techniques for the benefit of my riders.



**Kim: I thought Kinesiotaping was more for preventing injuries of vulnerable muscles or joints.**

**Britta:** That's only one aspect. One of my pet peeves is that many people don't know how much is actually involved in effective taping techniques. The direction in which it's applied, tension of the tape and the starting and end points will affect how the taping works. Kinesiotaping can prevent overuse by affecting an overactive muscle, or it can facilitate an underactive muscle.

**Kim: Can you give an example?**

**Britta:** Yes. At one of the US Developing Dressage Rider clinics, a young rider was struggling with her horse really hanging on her left hand. I noticed that she rode with her left wrist

completely flexed: there was a kink in what should be a straight line between the rider's hand, rein contact and the horse's mouth.

I took her off the horse and assessed how the wrist muscles were firing. I used kinesiotaping principles to facilitate wrist extension and when she got back on, her wrist remained dead straight throughout her ride, with her horse no longer hanging on that hand. I showed her parents how to apply the tape themselves so that they could reproduce this technique without me.

### **Kim: What led you into physical therapy and fitness work?**

**Britta:** I originally wanted to be an equine PT, but in New Zealand (Australia and the U.K.) you must be a licensed human PT before you can continue your Equine PT license. Once I had finished my human PT schooling, I realized that nobody specialized in equestrians – and we need so much help! So I rerouted to specialize in the equestrian athlete.

### **Kim: How far did you go in your own riding?**

**Britta:** I was a professional rider in New Zealand with my own team of five or six horses at its peak. I was actually competing as a young rider on a New Zealand eventing team under Tinks Pottinger when I first met Erik Duvander. He had just come onboard to coach the New Zealand eventing team. I was competing a team of eventers from training to Advanced at a National level, with aspirations to represent my country.

### **Kim: And then what happened?**

**Britta:** I had a bad crash during the cross-country phase at an Advanced Horse Trial in 2006. I broke everything, ending up in the ICU for six months whilst being pieced back together.

### **Kim: Did your training and experience as a PT help?**

**Britta:** I think my prior understanding of the human body and my attitude really helped. I was already a qualified PT working at one of New Zealand's leading PT practices, Flexa Clinic. I had/have a great mentor, Murray Hing, to whom I attribute to a lot of my professional success. We still regularly keep in contact.

### **Kim: How long until you could ride again?**

**Britta:** If I told you the first thing I did out of the hospital was sit on my horse, don't tell anyone! Haha. I was told I should not ride again. Have you ever heard of a professional rider listening to that!? I did a personal risk analysis and decided not to event anymore and switched to dressage. It took me a year of intensive rehab until I could start riding properly and around two years until I would compete again seriously.

### **Kim: That sounds fast.**

**Britta:** For the injuries I sustained I'd say it was super quick, definitely out of the normal.

### **Kim: How far did you go in dressage?**

**Britta:** One of my event horses was particularly nice on the flat and he helped integrate me into the dressage world. Once I found my passion for dancing within a rectangle, I had high goals again and wound up on the New Zealand Dressage Development Squad. I took my top horse to compete Internationally in the Sydney CDI, Australia, in 2013 where we had a fantastic

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International debut and ended up the highest placed female rider in all of my Prix St. Georges and Intermediare I classes.

I had aspirations to go much farther but realized it would be hard to do from New Zealand. Following training under Leonie Bramall in Germany I had planned to make the shift to Europe and move into the Grand Prix arena, but detoured to San Diego. Throughout all of this, I maintained my PT practice in New Zealand, with staff running the clinic whilst I was overseas. I then became so focused on the PT & Performance clinic here in San Diego as it became increasingly successful, that I sold my GP dressage horse to focus on the clinic setting.

### **Kim: Did you have connections when you moved to San Diego?**

**Britta:** Zero! One of my first clients was Emma Weinert, an Australian Grand Prix dressage rider based at Steffen and Shannon Peters' Arroyo Del Mar. We were introduced through a mutual friend and just 'clicked' the minute we met. As our friendship developed I wanted to help her from a PT perspective and structured a strengthening program for her. Emma worked with me in the gym and people started noticing her postural gains. That's how the ball started rolling. I have since ended up working with almost the entire Arroyo Del Mar crew, including Steffen and Shannon, for whom rider fitness is a very important part of their programs.

### **Kim: Do you miss riding yourself?**

**Britta:** Absolutely! But having been a professional rider, I can't just ride for fun. So until the time is right for me to get another horse, I'd rather live indirectly through my clients. The upside of having the experience and background I have as a rider is that I know exactly what it takes from a biomechanics perspective to ride the movements. I know what muscles are recruited and how a rider needs to best use their body to ride a successful half-pass.

I have an innate understanding of the biomechanics needed which has led me to develop a specific band strengthening system, P2 Performance Bands, for riders both on and off the horse. It's incredible to see the results of riders utilizing this system and I'm excited for the future of a more rider specific strength and stability world.

### **Kim: Thank you, Britta**

**Britta:** It's been a pleasure!