

Written by Kim F. Miller
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Dressage rider Susan Ighani, eventer Erin Kellerhouse & jumper Lane Clarke share fitness & nutrition routines for themselves and their star equine partners.

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Show ring success is always a reflection of what happens at home, on an everyday basis, between shows. When it comes to staying in shape for their sport and feeding for peak performance, every horseman has a different approach for themselves and their horses. We enjoyed getting the skinny on that front from these top California equestrians.



Susan Ighani & Liaison

Susan

Riding eight horses a day and toting a nearly 2-year-old toddler around in between gives

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dressage rider Susan Ighani plenty of exercise, but to ride and compete at her peak, she goes beyond that. Not more, but different exercise, targeted at creating balance and symmetry in her body.

Before giving birth to her and husband Daniel's daughter Luciana, Susan was a big fan of Pure Barre's mix of Pilates, ballet and weightlifting. "I like that type of exercise because it's helpful in isolating parts of your body." Since then, time constraints and sessions with a "physio" have turned her on to symmetry-targeted exercises, which can be incorporated into everyday activities because they involve mindful posture, whether riding, driving, standing or walking.

As a USEF Developing Athlete, Susan had the chance to work with two physios who introduced her to an "insightful" way of approaching rider fitness. "The more symmetrical I can be, the better I can ride," she explains. "It makes sense. When you think about how much we ask our horses to go evenly in both directions, but we can forget to do the same things ourselves. Horses are so sensitive, we don't let them do their best if we aren't balanced ourselves."

The first step is identifying a weakness, which is easy because it's "that one thing where you say, 'If I could do that, I would!'" One example for Susan is a left lower leg that has always been difficult to apply in the desired amount. She learned the problem had nothing to do with her left lower leg and everything to do with her right hip and right seat bone. The fix involved strengthening the muscles on the diagonal opposite. "The problem is not always where you think it is." Often it's not about getting stronger in a certain muscle, it's about getting looser in a strong muscle.

Susan loves that fact that these exercises can be easily incorporated throughout the day and that they help prevent injuries. She likens what she learned from the physio to physical therapy, except without an injury involved.

"It's all about being able to use your body correctly." She's wasn't prone to injuries or aches and pains even before this work, "but we all carry our tension somewhere." Between the shoulders was Susan's not-so-sweet spot and the work has helped eliminate that while creating both strength and ease in the body. As she's targeting the Grand Prix ring with her mare Liaison, the improved overall fitness comes at the perfect time. "Physically, my body is the best it's ever felt."

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As for nutrition, Susan counts herself lucky. “Cooking and eating at home gives you the best chance of eating healthy and when things taste incredible that helps.” That comes from living in the foodie haven of Napa and having an excellent in-house chef in her husband, show jumper Daniel Ighani. She’s always leaned toward healthy eating, and went more so, and specifically organic, during her pregnancy. “That made me really aware of what I was putting into my body.” She eschews a “super rigid” routine, indulging her sweet tooth occasionally without guilt because she eats healthy most of the time. A dairy-free diet feels best and, after a year gluten free, she and Daniel were impressed with how many alternative ingredients can produce delicious results.

In the weeks preceding a big competition, Susan does “tighten the bolts.” She holds off on the wine she normally enjoys and emphasizes staying hydrated and being extra conscious of what’s she’s eating. “That gives me better clarity, both physically and mentally.”

Intensified competitive goals mean travelling more. She’s grateful that the VIP options at many shows include healthy eating options and says that mindful menu perusal is key to staying on track while dining out. Lara Bars, Epic Bars and nuts are go-to snacks that produce good quality energy during long days at the barn and shows.

Liaison

As for Liaison, aka “Lia,” the 14 year old Westphalian is a relatively easy keeper as high performance horses go. Her lean Thoroughbred frame puts her at a slight risk of getting thin with the weight dips that often accompany long travel to shows, so her calorie intake is upped a few weeks ahead to compensate.

Lia has a neuromuscular condition called “shivers.” It’s not a lameness, Susan clarifies, but it does cause Lia’s hind leg to occasionally lift up and shiver. Dr. Clair Thunes of Summit Equine Nutrition helped create a diet that keeps the condition at bay. Vitamin E (10,000 IUs of human grade product) and a daily ounce of coconut oil have been especially helpful. Increased fats, in particular, seem to address the nerve condition, along with producing shiny coats. Equusani’s EFA-X is a vegetable concentrate of fatty acids that aids digestion and seems to help the muscle tension side effect of shivers.

Lia is barefoot behind because shivers prevents her from holding her hind legs up long enough

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to be shod. Mushroom Matrix' Farrier formula helps keep her hooves strong and healthy. She also gets a magnesium supplement from Nupafeed. It's a mineral that's lacking in California hays and one that contributes to muscle development and mental calm, even though Lia is a calm gal to begin with.

Grand Meadows Premium Plus, Mushroom Matrix' ECP and Equine Senior by Triple Crown are additional supplements that keep Lia in peak form.

As a naturally fit horse, Lia needs a routine with plenty of outdoor time and exercise but not one that gets her too fit. Like all horses in Ighani Sporthorses' program, she has pasture time at least twice daily and frequent hand walks. She "works" six days a week, often with one day of lunging in the round pen or a bigger ring where she can stretch out without a rider's weight. The Ighanis' barn at Toyon Farms is surrounded by beautiful trails and Lia is getting braver on the "baby trails," walks that help her stay loose and mentally relaxed.

After a rigorous competition schedule peaking at the National Dressage Championships at Gladstone, NJ in May, Lia enjoyed a few weeks of therapeutic treatments and general spa time at Circle Oak Equine in nearby Petaluma. "She deserves it," Susan concludes. "We ask our horses to do a lot for us and it's our responsibility to make sure we use every tool possible to keep them healthy and happy."



Erin Kellerhouse & Woodford Reserve

Erin

"I ride six to eight horses per day six days a week. I do a private Pilates lesson one day a week with my amazing instructor Jamie McDaniel in Temecula. She's fantastic at pinpointing my weaknesses and also really helping with any injuries or problems that I have. I think Pilates has

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been amazing for my core strength and has really helped my riding. It also feels fantastic to stretch out after a long day in the saddle.

“I also do two to three days of Orangetheory Fitness after work, depending on if I’m at a show or not. It combines cardio and weight training and it’s fun and upbeat and competitive. That’s really important for me: otherwise I lose interest.

“I try to eat fairly healthy. Lunch during the week consists of Greek yogurt and protein bars. Any more than that and I don’t want to keep riding: I’d rather take a nap. I usually cook four to five nights a week and we eat a lot of chicken, fish and vegetables and always have a salad. We usually have red meat once a week.

That being said, I totally believe in everything in moderation and don’t deprive myself of anything. Dieting really doesn’t work for me and usually backfires.

Woodford Reserve

Erin’s 6 year old Irish Sport Horse, “Woody,” was the West Coast Young Event Horse champion in 2016 and more recently finished second in the Preliminary Challenge Horse division at the Woodside Spring Event.

“He works five days a week. If we don’t have a show I usually will let him have two days off per week because I just think it’s good for his mind and body.

“On a typical week he would do two days of dressage work, starting and finishing with a lot of stretching and, in the middle, working on him carrying more and doing some lateral work to get him stronger and carrying himself. He would normally only jump once a week and start with a gridline and then do some course work.

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“The other two days he would be out trotting and cantering up hills for fitness or even doing some flat work out on the cross-country course for a change of scenery.

“He has not yet had to be fit for a CCI but I’m aiming for one at the end of the season this year. That course is longer and so he will need to be more fit. That’s when I will introduce more hill work and some interval training for him.

“Woody lives in a field during the day and a stall at night. I’m a big believer in the horses having hay in front of them all the time. He gets high quality alfalfa and grass hay: 1 and 1 in the morning, two grass flakes for lunch and 1 and 1 in the evening. He’s also supplemented with Triple Crown Complete and Equine-D Superior Mushroom Supplement and all my horses are on Smartpaks. His Smartpak has Smartcombo Ultra pellets, Smart Immune pellets, Smartlyte electrolytes and APF.



Lane Clarke & Balu U

Lane

Grand Prix show jumper Lane Clarke stays plenty fit riding eight to 10 horses a day as a partner with Mickey Hayden in Hayden & Clarke Sport Horses in Orange County. Beyond that, he mixes in a smattering of everyday exercises to supplement it: jogging between rings, chasing, keeping up and playing with his 2-and-a-half year-old daughter Emerson, plus sits-up and push-ups here and there. The one thing he’s religious about is stretching regularly, every night and often between rides. “Just generic stretches with a bit of yoga moves,” he explains of the non-riding

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activity that contributes most to his in-the-saddle effectiveness and general well-being.

Lane has several naturally healthy habits. No alcohol, smoking or soda, and water is his go-to for hydration almost all the time. Chocolate is a guilty pleasure, he concedes, but he feels best when sticking to protein-heavy meals and snacks, like almonds and his favorite: beef jerky.

Balu U

Lane's newest Grand Prix star Balu U is unusual in his size – 19hh – but he's pretty normal when it comes to fitness and nutrition requirements. He gets two flakes of Timothy hay in the morning and evening, with a lunch of wheat bran, one scoop of electrolytes and between 40 to 60 ounces of Timothy pellets. The quantity of the latter varies as his weight fluctuates. "He came to us with that feeding program and there's been no need to change it," Lane reports. Sometimes big horses have energy issues, but that's not the case for Balu, "who has a ton of blood." Colic is another non-issue and his coat is shiny. "He's really healthy."

Balu supplements his feeding program by grazing on fresh grass at shows whenever possible and saying yes to any type of horse cookie. "From generic to gourmet, he likes them all," Lane explains.

Variety is a foundation of Lane and Mickey's training program with all horses and that applies to fitness, too. To start with, Balu splits his time between Lane's Orange County base or at shows, and at owner Georgy Maskrey-Segesman's stable in Somis, where there's ample turn-out time and a quiet, down-time vibe. He gets light hacks there and lots of relaxing pasture time.

When Balu is with Lane, typically the two weeks preceding a competition, he stays fit with a flat work-heavy work-out routine. Suppleness, balance and adjustability are extra important for a big horse, and Lane works on those aspects of rideability in different settings. Poles on the ground and low cavaletti, for example, can simulate a lot of the challenges faced on course, while minimizing wear and tear and it uses variety to avoid boredom.

Jump schools of any significant size are typically limited to once a week. Once or twice a week, Balu hits the hilly trails surrounding the Nellie Gail Equestrian Center. And it's not total down time. He's ridden in light contact and collection as appropriate to maximize the training and

conditioning benefits, while getting the mental benefits of a change of scenery.

Other elements of Balu's routine include being lunged in driving reins, with long lines and occasionally in side reins. He's hand walked regularly and walks more on the hot walker.

"Variety is one of the keys to any horse's success when it comes to fitness and health," Lane states. Which form is Balu's favorite? "He likes them all. He's a happy horse," he says of the 12-year-old son of the famous jumper Baloubet du Rouet.

What Does A Physio Do?

One of the "physios" who made a big impact on Susan's fitness routine is Steven Davis. His practice, Teaching Alignment Practices, aka "T.A.P.", is based in the Los Angeles area's Thousand Oaks. It is part of a partnership with other sports medicine doctors, physical therapists and chiropractic practitioners in the same office. "I believe in networking with other respected wellness professionals to optimize each client's success in an environment of extensive resources if needed," Steven explains.

"My end goal is what I call 'optimal human performance,' which in essence is without weight or outside tools and how a person may best use their body to perform much like a gymnast, sprinter or dancer. The training is simply improvement through alignment practices, enhancing stability and educating individuals with self-awareness to not only create a symbiotic harmony of the body but through learned skills to better mobilize, dissolve imbalances, increase suppleness through strength and flexibility modalities.

Steven works with an array of people from collegiate and professional athletes to cancer survivors, surgeons and doctors as well as their patients, children and the elderly. He's also working on a book, *The Centaur Affect*, that outlines his system for riders.