

Written by Kristi Frishman  
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### ***Kinesiology reveals why strength, flexibility and balance are big keys to consistent success in our sport.***

*by Kristi Frishman*

At some point most of us have stood by the arena and watched somebody having a fantastic round and thought to ourselves, “How do they make it look so easy?” and “Why can’t I ride like that?”



It’s one thing to have a great trip over the jumps now and then, but it’s a whole different ballpark to be consistent and lay down good round after good round. As much as this mastery of the sport often appears utterly elusive, there are simple things we all can do to improve our chances for success.

I rode all my young life and competed in the Junior Hunters and Equitation. I took a break from the horses to study abroad for a year and afterward earned a degree in kinesiology from UCLA.

Kinesiology is defined as “the study of the physiology of motion.” It’s an in-depth look at anatomy, physiology and biomechanics and how it pertains to the body in motion. Biomechanics was my favorite topic, because I was fascinated by how the laws of physics and angles affect physical performance and the risk of injury.

Directly out of college, I went to work in a medical rehab facility. This was a great career opportunity, but did not prove to be my calling. I soon returned to my passion of working with the

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horses and eventually started my own training barn, Genuine Farms in San Juan Capistrano. I feel fortunate to have a college degree that continues to be very relevant in my training program.

Over the years it's been apparent that riders often lack enough strength and balance to coordinate their efforts to positively affect their horse without offending them or taking away their natural athleticism. With a sufficient amount of strength, balance and flexibility, the skill level and poise necessary to be a winner comes with detailed instruction, practice and show experience.

Anyone who has had the good fortune to sit on a horse knows that riding is an athletic endeavor. The resulting soreness testifies to this fact. We use many large and small muscles to hold on, or better yet, to balance ourselves in the center of the animal.

From the walk, through the trot, canter, gallop and over the jumps, the level of fitness needed to balance and control the body position increases. To be an accomplished rider with effective aids you must have a good base of support in the lower leg and be able to maintain your own body weight in and over the middle of the saddle.

Proper stirrup length and positioning of the rider are the first keys to success. If your legs are too far forward or back you can't be balanced. If your stirrups are too long or short, your base of support is compromised. Leaning the upper body ahead of the motion, behind the motion or to either side are also incorrect and can usually be fixed by making sure the lower leg is working correctly.

Riding even slightly out of equilibrium puts the horse out of balance and affects their natural ability to perform well. If you continue practicing in an unbalanced position, it's a huge detriment to the horse's progress and it can be hard on them physically. The best riders make it look so easy because they have the strength and confidence to stay centered over their horse and affect its way of going positively and seamlessly.

For anyone serious about the sport, it is imperative to have a trainer who is very knowledgeable and detailed about correct positioning. It is common to hear instructors saying the same thing over and over and over again. This, hopefully, is not for lack of something else to say, but

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instead stresses the importance of learning to ride properly. It is much easier to train your muscles to work correctly from the start than it is to break the old, instilled bad habits from practicing in an incorrect position.

With a good foundation, riders can move on to master the finer points of riding. If you feel like you work really hard without making a lot of progress, chances are your basic position is not where it should be. The old saying “form follows function” exemplifies this.

Whether your goal is to show successfully on the A circuit, enjoy riding for pleasure or anything in between, here are some key considerations.

- Core strength and a strong base of support are critical to help maintain body position while riding.
- Flexibility is almost as important as strength.
- Cardiovascular fitness is very helpful.
- The mental component of riding cannot be ignored.

Lastly, remember that your horse is also an athlete. The same rules of physics and physiology apply and must be addressed. They may be big strong animals, but they also need a properly planned training and recovery schedule that prepares the level of strength, stamina, flexibility and skill necessary to accommodate their discipline.

Young horses need special consideration and more rest time to avoid breaking down their joints in the process of teaching them. There are horses that are mentally and physically more naturally suited to each discipline but there are no real short cuts in training.

Improving your own riding skills through proper position and adequate fitness while regarding the needs of your equine partner will make the journey to success much smoother and more enjoyable. Becoming a good rider can be a slow road.....like most worthwhile accomplishments!

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## Fitness Boosters

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Without going into too much detail, here are a few simple ways to increase fitness for riding. There is so much good information out there but not enough room to expand on it here.

Every fitness program should be specially tailored to the needs of the individual, based on body type, general health and level of fitness. It is always recommended to consult a professional when starting on a fitness program.

But, here are a few exercises that may be helpful:

**Squats:** Stand with legs shoulder-width or a bit wider, with your most of your weight on the balls of your feet. Be careful not to lock your knees and ankles. Slowly squat down while bringing both arms up and forward in a smooth controlled motion. Make sure that you're balanced with your legs staying right under you. As you return to the upright position, bring your arms back as if you are pulling on the reins. For more advanced work, this exercise can be done with hand weights or on a balance ball.

**Walking Stairs or Hills** is great for strength, stretches calves and hamstrings and is a good cardiovascular workout. Do calf raises and/or stretches on the stairs as needed.

**Posting exercises:** While posting the trot, change diagonals every few steps on a predetermined count. You can change by sitting and then by standing in the stirrups or two-pointing to change. When beginning these exercises, it can be difficult to keep your balance while changing diagonals, especially on the "up beat." This exercise will force your leg to get into the correct position. Focusing on a number of steps in between changes, for example "post 5, sit 1, post five," also helps you tune into the rhythm of the horse.

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**Yoga, Meditation and Positive Visualization** are also beneficial, especially for the nervous competitor.

**Breathe!**

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