

Exercise and Riding *How cross-training is beneficial to horseback riding*

by Julie Christie

Skillful riders are knowledgeable about horse training and have a good understanding of the aids used to control the horse. They also have a combination of physical strength, endurance, balance, flexibility, coordination, and mental focus, all of which can be improved while off the horse using cross-training. Cross-training is exercise done off the horse, such as Pilates, yoga, running, walking, swimming, dancing, martial arts, etc.

There are many reasons why cross-training might be beneficial to you. The biggest reason is that exercise is good for you and it makes you feel good when you do it!

Eight reasons to cross train:

1. Exercise helps maintain a healthy weight.

It's common knowledge that being overweight might lead to disease and other health conditions, but what you might not know is that it could also influence your safety. Being overweight affects your balance, which in turn affects your ability to stay on the horse. Balance is also involved in keeping your horse symmetrical and steady. Even 15 lbs. can make a difference in your balance!

Here are some statistics to help motivate you to exercise:

- There are over 50 million overweight people in the USA
- About 80% of Americans do not

Horse people spend many hours conditioning their horse to make sure that they are fit enough to compete. But do riders really put the same effort into their own fitness? Generally not. Horseback riding is a sport, and riders are athletes, so in order to succeed, cross-training is required. You don't have to join a gym or buy fancy equipment to cross-train. Go to your local library to see what fitness videos you can borrow, borrow the neighbor's skipping rope, or open the door and go for a jog.

get sufficient exercise

- Diseases associated with being overweight include diabetes, breast cancer, colon cancer, & cardiovascular disease

2. Cross-training improves your body awareness

In riding, we want to be able to use our aids (hands, legs, seat) independently and with fine-tuned precision. Everyone has some asymmetries in their bodies and cross-training helps us become more aware of them. For example, your right leg might be stronger than your left or you might have a tendency to carry your left shoulder higher than the right shoulder. When you do activities such as pilates, yoga, or anything that involves looking into a mirror, you become more aware of these asymmetries and can work towards improving them.

3. Increased energy levels

It may seem counter-intuitive, but exercising does give you more energy.

Increased activity level might improve your productivity at work and give you the extra motivation to ride more often.

4. Exercise reduces fatigue in the saddle

Not only does exercise give you more energy in general, but it also allows you to ride for longer without getting tired. When you aren't tired, you don't get as sloppy in your riding and your horse benefits as well!

5. Core strength is improved

Most forms of cross-training involve using your core muscles (abdominal and back muscles). For riders, having strong core muscles means that you are more likely to stay on the horse in a sticky situation, have better posture, and the aids used to control the horse are more polished.

6. Mental focus is enhanced

When the body is more fit, the mind is better able to focus. Any type of exercise will help mental focus, reduce anxiety and stress, as well as improve your quality of sleep. In addition, cross-training such as pilates, yoga, and swimming will improve breath control. Being able to relax your body through breathing is a very valuable skill for riders.

7. Posture is improved

Provided that you do the exercises

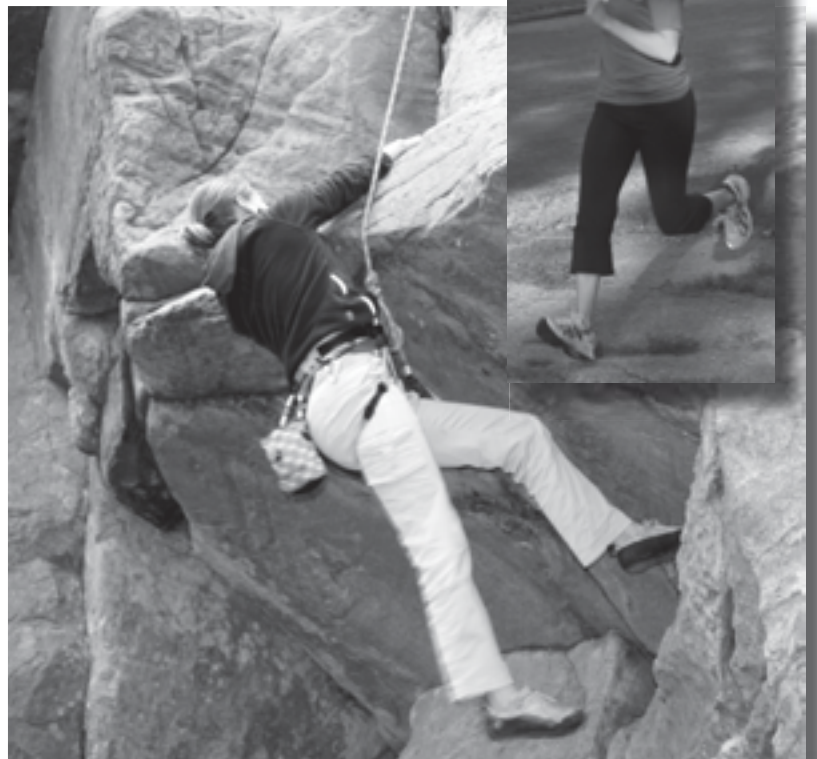
properly, cross-training can improve your posture. The best exercises



Bottom Left: Go to your local library to see what fitness videos you can borrow

Top Right, (Inset): Open the door and go for a jog

Bottom Right: Try something new, like yoga or rock climbing!



Good Luck!

for posture improvement are dancing (ballroom, ballet, etc.), yoga, and pilates. To get better posture, try to be aware of it when you are sitting at a desk, in the car, or at work. Keep your body symmetrical (don't slouch to one side), abdominal muscles engaged, and the spine in a neutral position as often as possible. Posture faults in riders are generally evident when not mounted, as well. These are best fixed through cross-training and everyday awareness of bad habits.

8. Coordination is fine-tuned

When muscles are stronger, it becomes easier to isolate specific muscle groups without others accidentally becoming involved. For example, when using your left leg to cue the horse, it is undesirable to move your seat around at the same time. Coordination can be improved through racquet sports, video games (especially active video games such as 'Dance Dance Revolution', or some of those marketed by Nintendo Wii), and step aerobics.

Over the years, I have taught many people how to ride. With beginner riders, there is a definite trend with athletes - people who are athletes in another sport have the easiest time with position and control over the horse. One of my most amazing beginners was also a windsurfer - she had an excellent sense of balance, kept her eyes up, and knew how to relax her joints while engaging her muscles.

When you start your cross-training

<i>Types of cross-training, and how each might improve your riding skills</i>	
Cross training	Benefits
Pilates	Core strength, posture, breath control, and reduced tension
Yoga	Breath control, posture, symmetry, flexibility, mental focus, and balance
Walking, jogging, or hiking	Weight loss, endurance, lower body strength, increased energy level
Dancing (i.e. ballroom)	Posture, core strength, weight loss, endurance
Racquet sports (i.e. tennis or racquetball)	Coordination, strength, endurance
Swimming	Breath control, upper body strength, reduced stress
Ice Skating	Balance, posture, strength, endurance
Biking	Lower body strength, endurance
Aerobics	Coordination, strength, endurance
Jump Roping (skipping)	Endurance, weight loss, coordination
Rock Climbing	Upper body strength, endurance, balance, core strength
Cross country skiing	Endurance, weight loss, co-ordination, strength.

program, I recommend writing down your goals (type of exercise, number of times per week, and/or weight loss goals), schedule your training ahead of time, and enlist a friend to help motivate you.

About the author:

Julie Christie teaches Equine Science at Rochester Community and Technical College in SE Minnesota. She is a CEFT (Certified Equestrian Fitness Trainer) and has degrees in bio-chemistry, equine science, and adult education. She is an eventer, rock climber, jogger, and practices yoga.