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# GET FIT TO RIDE LIGHT

In this excerpt from her new book, *Riding Through Thick & Thin*, author and equestrian Melinda Folse describes how taking care of your body can help you become a better and happier rider.

For riders, a balanced program of strength, stamina and flexibility makes up the “Holy Trinity of Fitness.” This is probably not news to you.

But how can we add a healthy side dish of off-horse conditioning work without capsizing a plate that’s already too full?

The good news is that adding as little as 30 minutes a day of focused conditioning exercises (especially if you’re doing zero minutes right now) will probably yield results that will make you want to keep doing that much—and maybe even more.

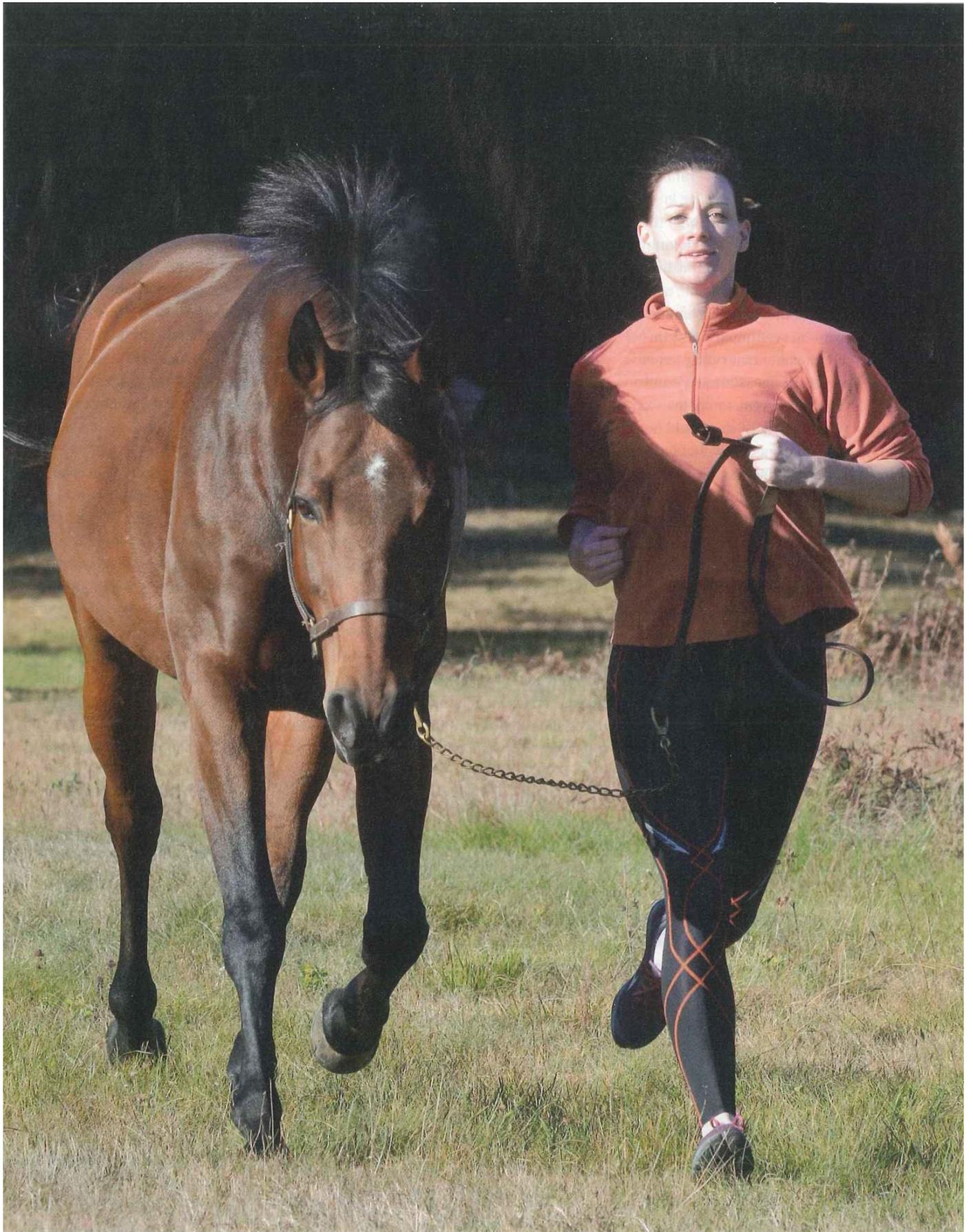
“If you knew the only thing that separated you from better riding and less risk of injury or strain was about 15 to 30 additional minutes a day of training you could do from your home or barn without expensive equipment, what would stop you from starting today?” asks certified personal trainer Heather Sansom of EquiFITT.com.

She notes that the muscles we use when we ride are different—or rather, we use them differently—than in any other sport. And particularly when we’re trying to create a “framework” so we can ride lighter regardless of weight, we need to be intentional about the conditioning activities we incorporate into our lifestyle.

How is being intentional about conditioning different than just plain conditioning, you ask? Well, I’ll tell you: Conditioning just for the sake of conditioning can be (and is for me) kind of a sporadic approach to doing things I know I should do, whenever, however and if I can. Being more intentional about it means I have a bigger plan, and I am making a deliberate choice to follow this plan to achieve a desired result. For me, “be intentional” implies more of an endgame focus than “just do it.” While to some this may seem like a word game, I tell you it works wonders

DUSTY PERIN

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in helping me stick to my program.

While we all know that riding is good exercise (we often remember this quite clearly the morning after a long ride), and it does condition our riding muscles, it is not, in and of itself, nearly enough to make the kinds of changes in our bodies we're seeking. It's also important to remember that riding tends to create or aggravate asymmetry and strength imbalances in our bodies—as well as tightness where we should be supple—that take specific work to overcome. To address these issues, we must also work “off the horse” with a consistent training routine that is as much a part of our day-to-day routine as brushing our teeth. If we're faithful to these off-horse routines, we can mitigate strength imbalances before they start to set up muscle strain, repetitive-use injury, or even the tightness and muscle knots that interfere with our ability to connect with the motion of our horses.

“Creating balance and flexibility, muscle memory, proprioception (body awareness), core strength and cardiovascular endurance (stamina for long show days/long

rides) is more effective when you can work on these areas out of the saddle between your rides,” says Sansom. “Working ‘off horse’ allows us to take our muscles through their full range of motion, taking the time we need to reset our body's muscle memory patterns and sense of ‘straight’ so that we can begin to use our bodies to assist our horse's movement effectively.”

## FORGET SKINNY— GET STRONG!

Strength training for most athletes is remarkably similar: We all have pretty much the same muscle groups, and they get stronger in pretty much the same ways.

While it's true that riding uses almost every muscle in your body, the muscles most important to our sport are in your back, hips, legs, butt, shoulders and abdomen. “It's important to strengthen each and every one of your riding muscles,” writes international trainer and instructor Daniel Stewart in

his book *Ride Right with Daniel Stewart*, “because weakness in one muscle will compromise the integrity of the muscles surrounding it.”

Stewart, who has developed a lot of rider-specific exercises targeting these muscles, says the key to striking the ideal balance between stamina, strength and suppleness in your riding muscles is to use very light weights, do lots of reps, and be sure to include all these muscle groups on a regular basis.

The result? Sinewy and “moderately strong” muscle that will give you the strength you need for effective cues and aids and good posture—with the flexibility to move easily with your horse. The difference in conditioning a rider's muscles over a tennis player's or a football player's, Stewart explains, is that the strength a rider needs is the ability to use muscles as economically as possible in order to continue riding strong without resting these muscles. This is very different from the strength

DUSTY PERIN



**Always warm up and stretch. Five minutes of rider stretches before each ride will save you from injuries that keep you out of the saddle.**

required to make a single hit with as much force as possible, and then rest until the next one.

Stewart describes this pairing of efficiency and effectiveness as the “dynamic duo” of muscle control. “Muscles contract two ways,” he explains. “Dynamic and static. Regardless of which way they contract, they are always subject to fatigue.”

Remember this: In riding, dynamic and static muscle contractions work together to create the continuous effectiveness and efficiency you need to work them without rest. This is one of those factoids you may be tempted to skim. Don't. It offers clues to finding success when building your own routine.

According to Stewart, dynamic muscle contractions (isotonic) involve visible movement, such as opening your hips while posting to the trot. Static muscle contractions (isometric) are invisible, such as the core strength expended to control your posture. Even though you can't see these muscles working, they work very hard all the time; when they fail or fatigue you'll see (and feel) it in slumped or sagging shoulders or rounding in the back.

Conditioning for this special kind of strength takes focused work, along with a solid understanding that will stand you in good stead as you work toward the next feat of “riding light,” whatever your size—the biomechanics that help create what our dressage friends call “self-carriage.” (Only now we're not talking about the horse.)

Specific exercises are really up to you! This training need not be complicated or expensive; however, Stewart says that regardless of the strength-training exercises you choose, there are seven important rules to follow:

**1. Always warm up and stretch.**

Five minutes of rider stretches before

each ride will save you from injuries that create setbacks and keep you out of the saddle.

**2. Lift the proper amount.** Light weights only! While individual strengths vary, this means lifting the weight you can lift repeatedly for a long period of time without sacrificing form.

**3. Exercise in your “normal riding position.”** This feels weird at first but it makes total sense. You want the conditioning work you're doing to translate directly to your time in the saddle.

**4. Do each repetition slowly and smoothly.** Make the contraction phase last three seconds and the elongation phase last four to ensure the maximum benefit you'll never see if you rush through your reps. “Just because it's lightweight doesn't mean your reps should be faster,” Stewart reminds us.

**5. No bouncing.** This means putting a full one-second pause between the contraction and elongation of each rep. Failing to do this will not only rob you of the full benefit of this exercise, but “bouncing” without putting these essential pauses in your reps can lead to injury. Don't do it.

**6. Perform isotonic and isometric contractions.** When we ride, we're asking our muscles to perform both dynamic

(isotonic, or movement you can see) and static (isometric, or tightening, squeezing or “zipping up” your muscles) work. While most exercise programs focus solely on the dynamic side of this coin, a rider needs to follow every dynamic movement with a five-second static hold, which means we pause, check and straighten our posture, and “zip up” our core.

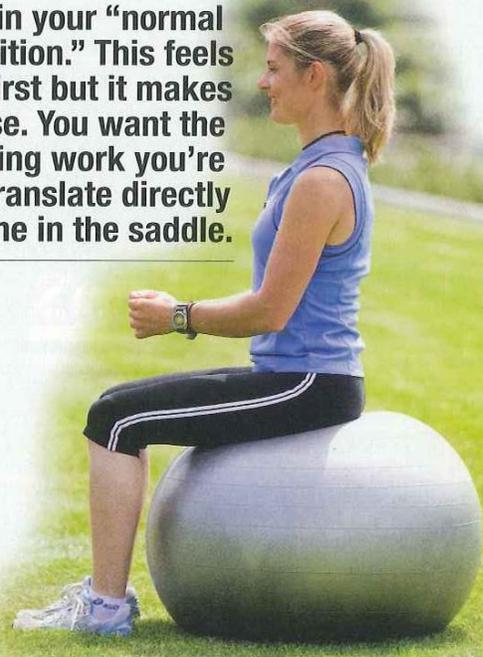
For the uninitiated, these terms describe visually how we pull in

and tighten the full length of our abdominal wall progressively (as if we're zipping up a jacket), starting at our pelvis, traveling up our abdominal wall to the top of our rib cage. Cassandra Stephens of ABSolute Pilates gave me another great visual for holding this without getting too stiff. Imagine your core as three boxes: one is your pelvis, one is your mid-section and one is your shoulders. Now imagine that these boxes are stacked and aligned evenly, with rubber bands attaching them. You can move any of these boxes as you need to, but when you tighten those rubber bands, the stack realigns into a straight, even tower.

**7. Don't overdo it.** More is not better, and results show best when muscles get enough time to recover fully (48 hours) between sessions.

Echoing this last rule, in her book *Age Is Just a Number*, Olympic swimmer Dara Torres tells of how she had to learn not to compare herself to other

**Exercise in your “normal riding position.” This feels weird at first but it makes total sense. You want the conditioning work you're doing to translate directly to your time in the saddle.**



ARND BRONKHORST

## EXERCISE: **CONDITIONING SIMPLIFIED**

As you can imagine, designing your own program carries its own risks and rewards. I recommend you keep it all extremely simple. To maintain your level of conditioning requires a daily overall routine you can do in a matter of minutes, followed by a good stretch to the muscles worked to keep them long and strong.

Here's the simple version a trainer taught me years ago that has stood the test of time for her clients trying to maintain an overall level of conditioning: You can work all of your major muscle groups with three things: squats, a four-way crunch series and pushups.

• **Squats.** Sit in an invisible chair, then stand up. That's it. The only rules are: Don't let your butt go below your knees or your knees extend forward past your toes. Do these in sets of 10 with a quick rest in

between. Start with three sets and work up to 10.

• **Four-way crunch.**

1) Lie on your back with your fingers interlaced behind your head, knees bent, feet flat on the ground. Lift your chest and shoulders straight up toward the ceiling; repeat till you feel a burn. That's your starting number. 2) Now straighten your legs and lift your heels toward the ceiling for as many reps as it takes to feel that burn in your lower abs. Write that number down. 3) Take your left elbow to your right knee, and repeat till you feel it in your left side. That'll do. 4) Now repeat with your right elbow to your left knee till you feel the pinch. Don't overdo this one: Start where your body allows and work up to a max of 25 of each with good form. Remember to breathe out upon exertion (when you "crunch"), and keep your abs "zipped" and your bellybutton pulling toward your spine as you perform each move.



• **Pushups.** Can't do pushups? Try to do just one with good form. (If you can do more, great.) A Pure Barre instructor told me that just holding your pushup in the "up" position with a straight body, square shoulders and straight arms for as long as possible will work the same muscle groups as actual pushups and start to build the kind of strength that will eventually allow you to lower yourself with good form into a single perfect pushup. Once you can do that, you're ready to build toward adding one pushup a day until you get to 10, and then start working on adding additional sets of 10, with three sets as a good goal.



swimmers, other training regimens and other people's ideals. I think we can all relate to this scenario. Who among us has not looked at another rider and thought, if I worked harder I could look, ride or show like that. We need to take Torres' lessons from the pool into our riding arenas: We have to do what is right for our own bodies to retrain our frames to be better, stronger and more supple riders—this, for once, isn't a competition.

## **BUILD STAMINA**

"You perform a triathlon every time you ride," says Stewart. "Instead of swimming, biking and running, you walk, trot and canter!"

What I think Stewart means by this sage bit o' wisdom is that when we ride, our effectiveness depends on our body's ability to tolerate and resist the different types of fatigue. When fatigue sets in, our posture changes, our muscles tighten as if to brace against it, our breathing changes, and at some point, our mental focus starts to fade, compromising our decision-making and cognitive functions including timing, judgment and body awareness.

Stewart identifies three types of stamina: muscular, cardiovascular and psychological. "The good news is that an increase in one type of stamina nearly always causes an increase in the others," he says. "The not-so-good news is that to increase your stamina, you're going to have to do a little hard work."

• **Muscular stamina** refers to how long you can use your muscles and hold good posture and form before fatigue and muscle burn make this impossible. Improve muscular stamina with things like progressively longer/more intense rides, circuit training with light weights, and perhaps a barre class, in which shaking muscles indicate complete

## EXERCISE: BEHOLD THE LOWLY JUMP ROPE

Traversing several sports and more trainers than I can count easily is a single piece of exercise equipment that is inexpensive, highly portable and easy to use: the jump rope. It was while watching my 75-year-old Taekwondo Grandmaster do a jump-rope demo before a self-defense clinic audience of children and adults (and remembering how he starts every class and workout of his own with the ragged old jump rope that hangs on the wall beside his desk) that I realized the power and longevity of this simple practice he had kept all his life. If his stamina is any indicator I'd say we'd all best go get ourselves a jump rope and hop to it. Making a three- to five-minute jump-rope routine a part of our daily fitness regimen is one of those things we can definitely find time to do to warm up our muscles and build and maintain our base-level stamina without even thinking of it as "exercise." What's more, the stamina, agility and focus it takes to complete a good jump-rope conditioning routine takes this apparatus from child's play to serious contender.

Instructor and coach Daniel Stewart offers a great equestrian-specific jump-rope exercise called "Skip to the Trot," which he claims



enhances our sense of rhythm, balance, breathing, body awareness, symmetry and mental focus: "While other aerobic activities—jogging, for example—help develop your stamina, they do very little to improve other areas a rider needs to work on," he writes.

If you haven't used one of these little dynamos since gym class, spend some time just playing around with a jump rope and getting your rhythm sorted out before attempting anything more complicated than simple "skipping" (and believe me, if you haven't

done this for a while, simple skipping for two to three minutes is plenty complicated!). If you feel sassy, try hopping on one foot, then the other, then switching back and forth between them. Once you're pretty confident you have your "jump rope legs on," here's Stewart's twist on this timeless classic:

1. Stand with your knees bent, kneecaps facing forward and down, putting your body in exactly the same position it's in when riding. Now, with your eyes focused forward, keeping your knees bent, skip rope normally. Once you can do that, instead of keeping your hips fixed in place, start opening and closing

your hips in time with your footfalls, imitating exactly the motion of a posting trot. (I never said this would be easy.)

2. While "skipping to the trot" as described above, now concentrate on your breathing as you "post" rhythmically, keeping a rhythm similar to your horse's stride, eyes up, hips relaxed, absorbing shock with your calves.

3. It is highly likely that in doing the above two steps you will drift around a bit. We all

have a dominant side, a stiffer side. And if you tend to ride too much forward or backward, you'll see evidence in the direction you move during this exercise. Using this as a bit of a diagnostic tool, Stewart advises us to draw or mark a square on the ground and try to "skip to the trot" within its borders. If and when you can keep your "pony" in the center of this square, work up to two minutes of skipping to the trot while holding your symmetry and balance without losing form.

4. Rest for one minute, and then try the same exercise (still posting and staying in the square) on one foot for 45 seconds. Now rest 30 seconds and try it on the other foot. Most likely, Stewart says, you will have more trouble with one foot than the other: "If you can skip more easily on one side than the other, it may indicate a muscular or coordination imbalance between your right and left side."

Stewart advises us to "skip to the trot" three times a week to build stamina and correct our asymmetry problems.



ARND BRONKHORST

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fatigue and are the goal of each class—and this, the instructors always exclaim, means your muscles are getting longer and stronger.

• Cardiovascular stamina refers to how long your heart and lungs will supply fresh oxygen and blood to your brain and muscles without rest and how quickly you can recover after a rest period. Build cardiovascular stamina by consistently pushing your body (gently!) past the point when you would normally stop. This is something Stewart calls “progressive overload,” which he says is well worth the hard physical work it entails. To avoid too much impact on my legs and joints, I like to mix up different sources of aerobic exercise each week, such as walking, rowing, jogging and swimming.

• Psychological stamina describes how well you can keep your mind focused, even when your body starts feeling fatigued. To improve your psychological stamina, your task is to ensure that oxygen-rich blood gets to your brain in steady supply; do this by keeping your oxygen delivery system in tiptop shape. The cardio work helps with this, as does building muscular stamina. A strange and delightful side effect of hot yoga, I’ve found, is that developing the ability to resist the urge to wipe sweat and instead remain focused on correct form for each posture builds psychological strength that translates especially well to pushing through fatigue in the saddle.

## GET FLEXIBLE TO FIND RHYTHM AND RELAXATION

Flexibility has earned its place in the rider fitness “Holy Trinity” for several reasons. First, a flexible body (and when I use the word “flexible” here, I mean it bends and moves easily and is supple) has elasticity that helps protect you against injury. Second, flexibility permits your body to move freely with your horse’s in an uninhibited way. Finally, by achieving flexibility in your

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own body, you help your horse—he will mirror your suppleness rather than your stiffness! In the short term, flexibility on horseback improves rhythm and relaxation. In the long run, you're going to be riding more relaxed, for longer periods of time, and for many years longer than you will without this crucial addition to your fitness regimen.

A good flexibility routine should include some basic daily stretching for all major muscle groups, plus specific stretches before and after every ride:

- Before you ride, a few targeted stretches help undo muscle tightness in your neck and back created by sitting at your desk and tightness in your hamstrings and hip flexors caused by sitting for prolonged periods or driving. They also help decrease muscle stiffness and lengthen muscle tissue, protecting it from trauma and tearing.

- After you ride, stretching encourages hard-working muscles to relax, improves blood circulation and helps remove lactic acid to reduce soreness.

## OR TRY A COMBO PLATTER

So ... what if you don't have time to do the "ideal" number of separate workouts for strength, stamina and flexibility? What if your weeks are, like mine, a running challenge to get people and animals fed, make clean clothes happen, and maintain a reasonably dirt- and disease-free home—not to mention meeting work deadlines, tending to barn and horse chores, spending some riding time, and paying at least a minimum of attention to personal needs. Oh yes, and then there are the urgencies of life that won't wait, like birthdays, car trouble, paying bills. If you, like me, look for places to double up (and double down on results), this could be as good a solution for you as it is for me.

The answer Dara Torres discovered and relates in her latest book, *Gold Medal Fitness*, is a form of resistance stretching called Ki-Hara, which she credits with maximizing her workouts

and making a huge difference in her overall physique. Ki-Hara is a form of combined flexibility, strength training and core work refined by Steven Sierra and Anne Tierney of Innovative Body Solutions. The gist of it is moving your arms and legs in specific rotational and diagonal patterns to continually engage your core muscles and gain strength and flexibility in all ranges of motion.

Torres explains that Ki-Hara teaches the body how to contract its muscles while they're being stretched and strengthened ("eccentrically") and while engaging and energizing the core ("concentrically") in ways that are most effective for strengthening and preventing injury. "Ki-Hara trains muscles in the way they are used most frequently," she adds. "This strengthens the body dynamically."

The object of this kind of stretching is "taking a muscle from its shortest position to its longest position, while continually resisting (contracting) the muscle." Also known as the e-centric

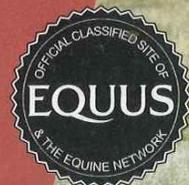
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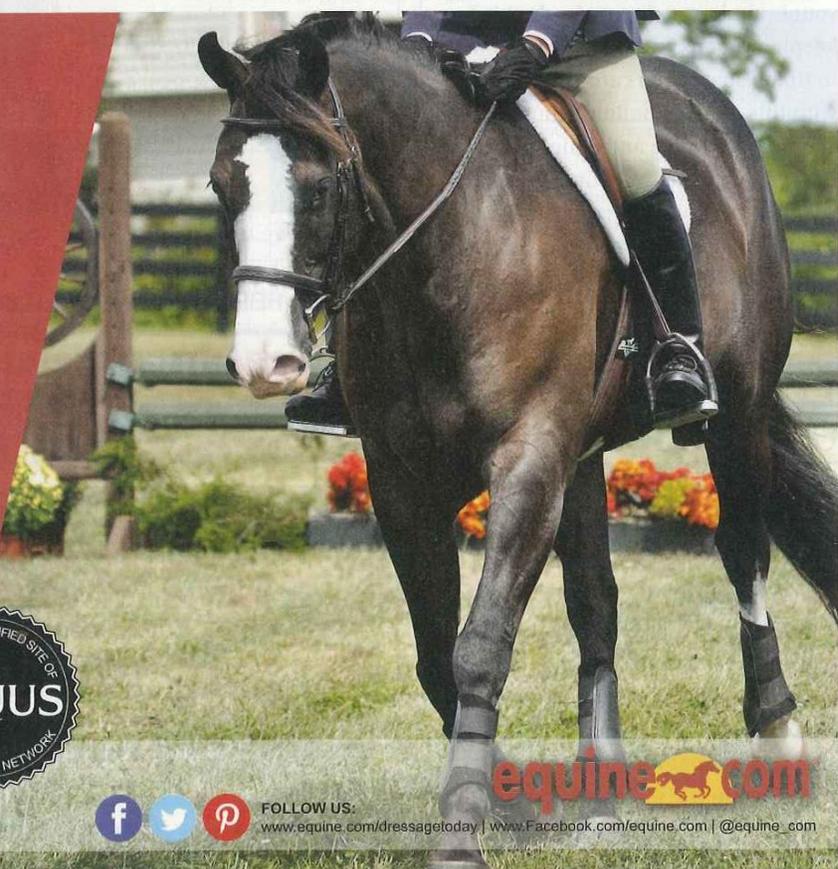
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pause of strength training, resistance stretching asks you to oppose elongation throughout the entire range of motion to build muscles that are longer, stronger and more flexible.

## EASY DOES IT

With a nod to our Holy Trinity of Fitness (strength, stamina and flexibility), Stewart advises us to consider what kind of work we each need to do in each area to fit our body type, activity level and personal riding goals. He recommends moderate progress forward, building—one step at a time—on whatever you've already got going for you.

"Try to find a few sneaky ways to increase your activity until you get to the next level," he says. Adding simple things like an extra ride each week or a couple of targeted, rider-specific exercises each day will likely do the trick.

Stewart also advocates a lighthearted focus, intent on adding (and maybe subtracting) "just a little here and a little there" until you find your conditioning improving, almost as if on its own. By making small, deliberate and consistent choices across all three areas—varying your activities to keep it interesting and giving your body the recovery time it needs—you will not only make the fitness gains you're looking for, but you'll create the lifestyle tweaks that will naturally maintain these changes.

And of course, before starting any new workout routine, check with your doctor to discuss the best exercises for your needs. It also goes without saying (but I'll say it anyway) that if you buy exercise equipment, read the instructions and learn to use it safely and correctly. A barrel racer I know required stitches after an unplanned dismount from a foul-tempered exercise ball. 🍷

*Adapted by permission from Riding Through Thick & Thin: Make Peace With Your Body and Banish Self-Doubt—In and Out of the Saddle, published in 2015 by Trafalgar Square Books. Available from [www.EquineNetworkStore.com](http://www.EquineNetworkStore.com); 866-655-2698.*

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