



The Equestrian Athlete: Key Muscle Strength & Flexibility

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Whether you are a showjumper, barrel racer, dressage rider, eventer, or polo player the ability to control a 1200+ pound horse requires a great deal of strength, endurance, mobility, and flexibility. As you learn to ride you will develop the movement patterns required for your particular discipline, and your muscles will start to improve in strength. As an experienced rider you will typically have the strength required but may start to pick up bad habits due to muscle imbalances that begin to creep up if you don't take your overall rider fitness seriously.

Let's take a look at the key muscle groups involved in riding and why they are important. I'll split this into upper body, abdominals, and lower body components.

Upper Body:

Scapular Stabilizers: These are the muscles that help stabilize your shoulder blades (scapulae). This includes rhomboid major & minor, serratus anterior, levator scapulae, and the trapezius group. These muscle groups are an important part of maintaining riding posture whether you are in full seat or half seat position. Strengthening these muscle groups will help prevent rounding of the shoulders as well as provide strength when dealing with a strong-willed horse.



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Erector Spinae group & Quadratus Lumborum: These muscle groups create stabilization, rotation, and side flexion of the spine which are key components to maintaining posture and position in the saddle, and allow quick recovery if jostled out of the saddle. They are important in aiding in the coordinated movement between the upper, abdominal, and lower body muscle groups.

Pectoralis major & minor: These muscle groups are typically strong in most people due to habitual 'desk' type posture (rounding of the shoulders or slouching). In order for the scapular & spinal muscles to maintain posture and stability, we focus on the flexibility of the pectoralis group as opposed to strength. Stretching the pectoralis group will aid in strengthening the opposing upper back/scapular stabilizer muscles.



Abdominals:

Your abdominals (rectus abdominus, internal & external oblique, transversus abdominus) in coordination with the spinal muscles mentioned above help to create core stability. Riding actually requires more core stability than core strength. Why? Because the nature of riding requires our hip, pelvis, and low back to move with the movement of our horse. These muscles all need to coordinate with each other to produce stability, not rigidity. Excessive rigidity through the abdominal & spinal muscles inhibit shock absorption and can create significant back pain.

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Lower body:

Hip Adductors: These are your inner thigh muscles (adductor magnus, longus, brevis; pectineus, gracilis), and of course, these are typically the strongest muscles in a rider. However, riders often rely too much on these muscles which can create asymmetry or imbalance with the other important upper & lower body muscles. Excessive gripping with the adductors can create too much rotation through the hip and can lead to excessive toeing out in the stirrup – not a good look in the equitation classes or an effective position overall.



Hip Abductors: These are your outer thigh/hip muscles (gluteus maximus, medius, minimus, and tensor fascia latae). Generally these are underdeveloped in riders. They have an important function in helping with the stability of the hip & pelvis and aid in maintaining proper alignment of the leg, which will allow for technically correct leg aids without excessive movement in the saddle. If you find you sit in the saddle with more pressure on one side or lean to one side when jumping you likely have an



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imbalance in your hip abductors. Check out my Facebook or Instagram pages for banded abductor strength exercises you can do at home, on the road, or at the horse show.

Hip extensors: These are your posterior hip/thigh muscles (gluteus maximus, hamstrings). These are your power muscles. They help create the drive and forward momentum of your horse's movements (whether doing an extended trot or collected canter). The gluteus maximus also plays an important role in acting as a buffer between your hamstrings (which are often tight) and your lower back muscles. Without a strong glute max the tight hamstrings will shift the pelvis to create a pulling force through the low back – this is another cause of back pain in riders. You need to ensure you have strength as well as flexibility in your hip extensors to ward off injury.



Adhering to a fitness program that will target these key muscles is crucial in order to endure the physical stress of training and competing.

Remember...YOU ARE AN ATHLETE!