

# Improve your horse's way of going by improving yours

Chartered physiotherapist and dressage rider Anna Risius discusses how a profiling system is used to maximise potential and performance.

Performance, particularly in dressage, could be regarded as 50% horse and 50% rider; after all you need to push the right buttons to produce even the most talented horse to perform at his best. Historically, riders are often the neglected part of the partnership, in the athletic sense that is! Chartered veterinary physiotherapists do a lot of maintenance work for their equine patients but often only see the riders when there is an injury.

Equestrianism is a sport, and any athlete requires conditioning to be fit to do their sport. Professional athletes 'train' 24/7 as this includes rest (sleep), fuel (eating), conditioning work and practice. However most riders are required to do other activities during a 24 hour period, which often includes sitting at a desk or other repetitive activity for long periods of time, predominantly working to fund the horses!

## CREATING IMBALANCE

Our bodies are excellent at adapting to a given task if repeated regularly. Unfortunately many of us have different extremes of activity that contradict our riding, from sitting at a desk to mucking out and stable chores. This can give rise to ingrained muscle imbalances and movement patterns that will limit our abilities in the saddle. But this does not have to be the case; improving the way in which we do these daily activities could actually have positive effects on our riding.

## CURING IMBALANCE

Pilates has been advocated as an excellent way to enhance strength and flexibility for riders but, unless you are assessed individually, pilates may not effectively address your personal weakness or imbalance.

Physiotherapy is commonly associated with the treatment of acute injury, and whilst horses are regularly given maintenance check ups, it is often assumed that riders maintain themselves, however

with the pressures of modern lifestyles this can be increasingly difficult and many do not know where to start.

The musculo-skeletal profiling system is a one-off assessment that takes about one and a half hours and looks at posture, movement patterns, range of movement and strength at the relevant joints. Use of gym equipment mimics motor tasks required in the different equestrian disciplines and video of a test or jumping round can also be useful. Appropriate exercises and stretches that can be fitted into the busiest lifestyle and which would not replace recreational pilates classes or other fitness work done to support riding, can then be given. We can also refer a rider for assessment in other areas such as nutrition or sports psychology if it is felt these areas are affecting performance.

## VULNERABLE AREAS

Riders often show lumbar spine, pelvic and hip imbalance. For example someone who sits at a desk for long periods with a VDU or phone or even colleagues to one side (and often crosses their legs the same way!) will get used to sitting slightly rotated which is not a problem until they sit in the saddle and then feel they need to ride in odd length stirrups or cannot keep their weight through one seat bone as easily.

Another example is someone who does a lot of yard work, particularly using a fork in the same direction. This can give rise to an upper body rotation which can manifest itself when trying to turn your shoulders in line with the horses.

A lot of time and money is spent on feeding horses in the best way to maximise performance and wellbeing, however how much thought is given to what we eat particularly at shows when the burger van or bar is often the best option!

Equally nerves can often ruin a dressage test and transfer tension to an otherwise willing horse. There may be a few easy tips that a sports psychologist can use to help these issues with an individual.



## VALUE OF PROFILING

There is a wealth of information about the best way to manage equine performance and it is hard enough to sift through what works for your horse even when you can stand back and look at him. This is almost impossible to do with yourself as you cannot see what you are feeling. A musculo-skeletal profile can highlight how to maximise your own potential and the ultimate performance of your partnership with your horse.

The musculo-skeletal profiling takes place at the Abbey Clinic in the grounds of Bisham Abbey National Sports Centre. The clinic is where I work and is directed by Gillian Morgan, who was a physiotherapist to the British equestrian team riders at the Sydney Olympics.

Contact: Abbey Clinic 01628 481866, enquires@theabbeyclinic.co.uk or for veterinary physiotherapy, Anna Johnson and associates 01296 747723.

Thanks to Leah Beckett for allowing us to use the photograph, taken by Alison McLaughlin.