

THE
ULTIMATE
EXERCISE
PLAN!



Fit to ride

IN 9 WEEKS!

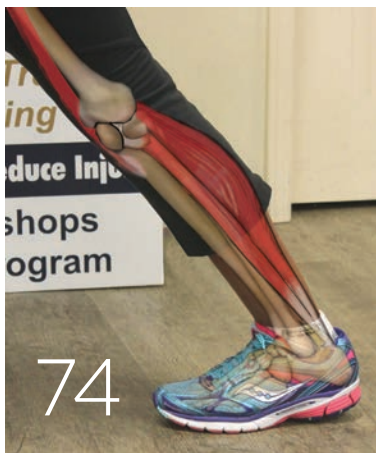
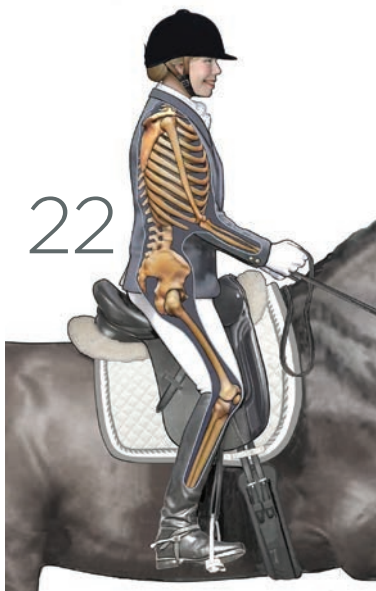
ACHIEVE STRAIGHTNESS, SUPPLENESS & STAMINA IN THE SADDLE

CERTIFIED FITNESS TRAINER

HEATHER SANSOM

CERTIFIED RIDING COACH

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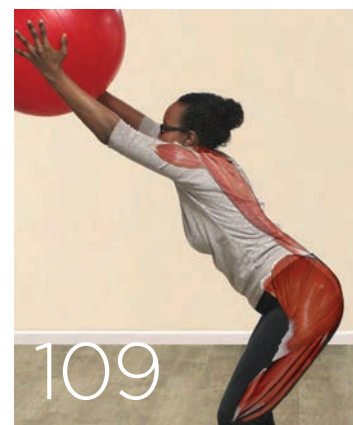
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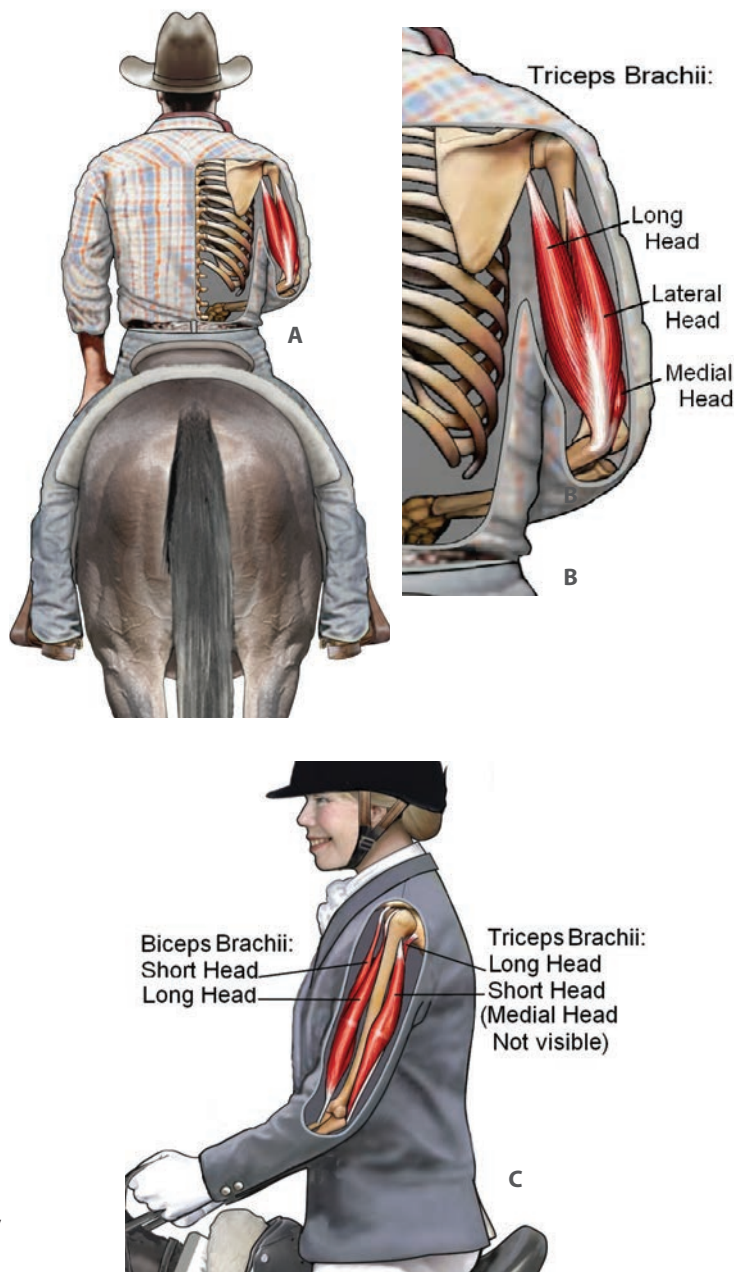
the back of the arms (figs. 3.20 A–C). When there is better physical mechanical balance through softness in the front and shoulders, and counterbalancing supportive tone in the back and back of arms, the rider has a much better chance of having neutral posture and using her body without automatic creation of tension in the wrong places.

Fixing Tension Areas

Making muscle areas that carry tension more supple and relaxed is only half the equation in achieving a more consistently neutral upper body. First, it involves training the muscles that have become weak and less toned as a result of infrequent stimulus; then it's about teaching the brain to trigger tonality in different muscles, instead of the ones that carry tension.

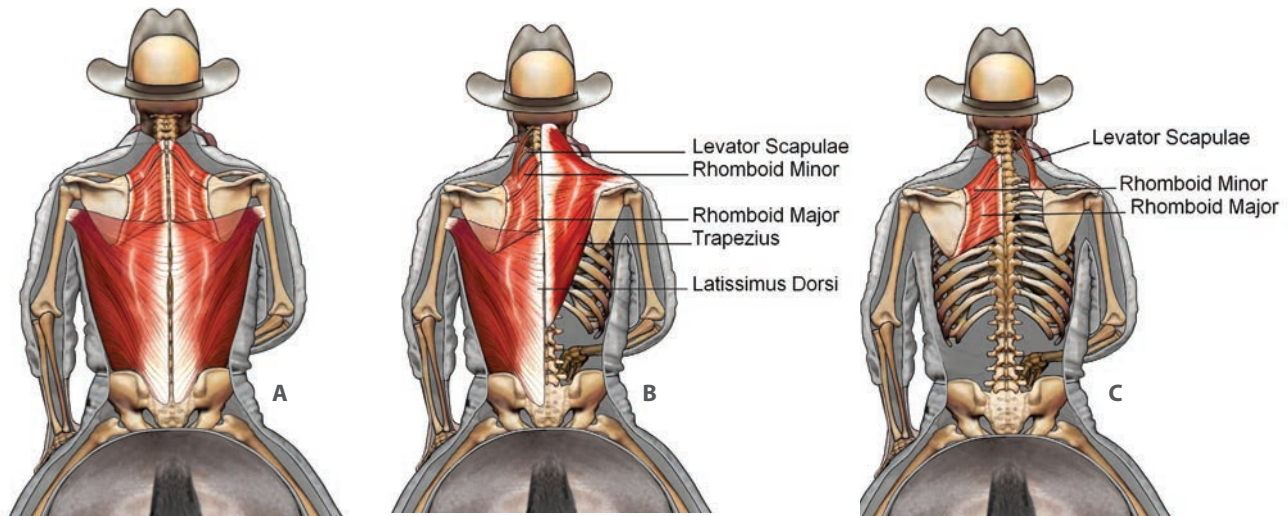
One way to think about the retraining is to liken it to teaching vocabulary. To get the brain to use other “words” (pathways to different muscles), it has to learn them. Otherwise, the brain always resorts to the “words” (muscles) it knows best, especially when under tension.

Increasing your neuromuscular vocabulary of response involves activities that also build strength. By building strength through exercises targeting the balancing muscles, you are also wiring or widening the pathway of response to that area. By practicing new muscle-engagement patterns on the ground, you increase the probability of your body



3.20 A–C Balanced arm position showing the triceps, rear view (A & B), and triceps strength in a supple rider with a relaxed arm (C).





using those new patterns automatically while you are busy focusing on riding tasks. Without strengthening the balancing muscles, the suppleness attained in stretching will be lost as the body continues to revert to using its “favorite” muscles under stress (that is, loading or demand).

STRENGTHENING THE CORRECT BACK MUSCLES

Latissimus Dorsi and Rhomboids

To bring the shoulder blades back and down, allowing the rib cage to lift, thus permitting a truly neutral, “ready” posture with a lowered center of gravity and a neutral spine, it is important to train the *latissimus dorsi* (“lats”) and the *rhomboids* (figs. 3.21 A–C). These muscles draw the shoulder blades back (*rhomboids*), and down (lats).

The lats also help to shorten the rider’s back and support a neutral lower-back or pelvis position since they attach at the lower

3.21 A–C Three views of the *latissimus dorsi*, *rhomboids*, *levator scapulae*, and *trapezius*: lats and *rhomboids* (A); lats, *rhomboids*, *trapezius*, *levator scapulae* (B); *rhomboids* and *levator scapulae* (C).



back in the same area some of the hip flexor muscles attach. Most people who do not deliberately train the *rhomboids* and lats are weak in those areas and prone to tightness in the front part of the torso due to the fact that most manual labor and riding tasks happen in front of the body. Women are especially prone to weakness in these muscles.

A very common mistake made by riders with upper-back pain is to obtain therapy to further relax and soften the muscles in their back that are already weak and overstrained by being pulled forward by over-dominant *pectoral* muscles. Since the pain is in the back, the rider and therapist often think that the solution is to alleviate the pain through massage or other treatment.

In fact, such an approach makes the imbalance worse. A very good therapist

Week Two

Theme: Building on the base of core engagement and flexibility, and testing symmetry.

Equipment Needed: Exercise ball, mat, lead rope or tubing, hand weights.

Introduction: This week, you take your spine off the floor and introduce an opportunity to maintain spine neutrality when gravity is working against you. You'll focus on how to use a ball to get a deeper hip-flexor stretch.

Note for Special Modification Riders
For those who have discovered especially tight areas, you should continue to use the Standard Warm-Up Stretches (p. 67), and dedicate this week to regular intensive stretching of one of the particular areas.

Note for Advanced Variation Riders
Perform this week's exercises in a continuous loop and at a steady but faster rhythm so that your heart rate is elevated, without compromising your technique. See how many sets you can fit into 20 minutes.

WEEK TWO AT-A-GLANCE

Warm-Up	Standard Stretch routine and one set from the Core Training routine from Week One.
Core Training	Bird Dog variations on all fours, with individual limb reaches, then opposite limb reaches. Starfish—Isometric Crunch with Limb Reaches. Ball Crunches.
Strength & Muscle Memory	Seat Walking on Floor for hip mobility, Standing Deadlifts, Backstep Lunge with Overhead Reach.
Deep Stretching	Spend some extra time in one stretch each day, for your tightest area.
Stamina & Coordination	5 minutes cardiovascular intervals prior to each workout.
Special Needs Modifications	If you are still wobbly on the fitness ball, practice a few crunches on it to gradually gain your balance, and complete your crunch routine on the floor on a balance cushion.
Advanced Variations	Ball Crunches with Isometric Reaches.
Notes	Focus this week on stretching one area intensively, and learning how to use objects such as a bench or ball to get deeper hip-flexor stretch.

WARM-UP

This week introduces use of some light cardiovascular exercise to warm up your muscles.

- 1 | Prior to starting the new exercises for this week, complete the Standard Warm-Up Stretches (p. 67) and do one set of one of the Core Training exercises you learned in Week One (p. 77).
- 2 | Now finish your warm-up by straightening and stretching your core, lying on the ground with your arms overhead, resting on the ground. Rest your arms on a cushion or

stool if they cannot comfortably relax on the ground. Take two to three breaths, stretching your body as long as you can from the tip of your fingers to your feet, with a moment of relaxation in between.

- 3 | Do 5 minutes of cardio training. You can jog and walk, walk with intervals of added vigorous arm movement, bicycle, use cardio equipment, walk up and down stairs, or walk on the spot alternating with high leg elevations or arm movements to create intensity intervals. After you are thoroughly warmed up, you can proceed to the exercises for this week.

CORE TRAINING

Bird Dog—Single Limb (All Fours)

Goal: 6–10 reps.

Muscles Worked: *Transverse abdominis, gluteus maximus, shoulder rotators, latissimus dorsi, deltoids.*

The Bird Dog variations are intended to introduce asymmetrical loading to your back. These exercises also train muscle memory and muscle-firing patterns for the chain of muscles that stabilize your torso laterally and that help you control the placement of your shoulders and hips.

The goal of all the variations is to keep your spine neutral, using the floor under you to make sure your shoulders and hips are straight or square to the floor, even when you raise a limb. Training your body off the floor, but still using the floor to help you achieve straightness, prepares you for later freestanding work by training proprioception for true alignment.

- 1 | Start by positioning yourself on all fours so that you feel even pressure between both knees and both hands. Achieve a neutral spine by hollowing and raising your back repeatedly with gradually smaller movement until you can feel that mid-point where you are neither rounding your back, nor allowing it to sag.



2 | Once you are in a spine-neutral position, raise an arm and hold it for three seconds before resting and repeating (the same arm) 6 to 10 times (fig. 8.1 A).



3 | Do this exercise with the other arm (fig. 8.1 B).



4 | Repeat with each leg. With the legs, pay special attention to not allowing your lower back to hollow. The goal is not to raise your leg high in the air, but to use your *gluteals*, *hamstrings*, and *back* while maintaining a neutral spine (figs. 8.1 C & D).



Done correctly, you should feel the need to increase your *abdominal use* the higher you lift an arm or leg in order to maintain spine neutrality. The “top” of the movement is the point at which you still have a neutral spine, but you feel as if your body is having an internal tug of war between your core and the muscles used to raise the limb.



8.1 A–D Bird Dog—Single Limb

Bird Dog—Opposite Pair

Goal: 10–15 reps.

Muscles Worked: Same as Bird Dog—
Single Limb (p. 83).

Once you have mastered your spine stability and core engagement during the Bird Dog variations raising a single limb, you are ready to add coordination, balance, and the complexity of cross-body training by raising opposite limb pairs (fig. 8.2). Again, perform all the repetitions for one pair before switching to the other pair.

Special Needs Modification

Bird Dog with Bent Elbow or on Stool/Ball

If you have a shoulder impingement or lower back pain, you will need to be more conservative with this exercise. You can achieve the physical value of the exercise without lifting your arm as high, by bending your elbow or knee and raising it as far as you can without losing the straightness of your lower back (fig. 8.3 A). If your lower back falls down, you have gone too far with the lift.

Riders with wrist problems can also do the exercise on a stool or ball (fig. 8.3 B). When using a ball, rather than a more stable stool, lift only one limb at a time to maintain your balance.



8.2 Bird Dog—Opposite Pair.



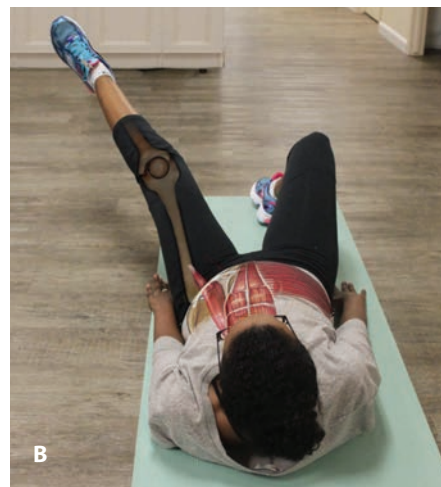
8.3 A & B Bird Dog with Bent Elbow or on Stool/Ball.



Advanced Variation

Bird Dog with Weight

Once you are comfortable raising the weight of your arm, you can add a weight.



Starfish—Isometric Crunch with Limb Reach

Goal: 6 reps per limb.

Muscles Worked: *Rectus abdominis, transverse abdominis, obliques, hip flexors (psoas), lower abdominal and back muscle area.*

Similarly to the Bird Dog exercises (pp. 83–5), this exercise also trains cross-body strength and stability, but now with your backside on the floor.

1 | Lie on the ground in the position for starting a basic crunch.



8.4 A–C
Starfish—
Isometric
Crunch
with Limb
Reach.



2 | Perform the crunch and hold the position at the top of the movement (head and shoulders off the ground—see p. 78).

3 | While holding the position with your *abs*, extend a limb out on a slight angle from your body (think of a starfish’s arms) and continue to hold for 3 to 5 seconds (figs. 8.4 A & B).

4 | Return to neutral (lying on the floor) and repeat with another limb (fig. 8.4 C).

Work your way around until you have used all four limbs. The exercise should be done quite slowly with an emphasis on maintaining core engagement with a neutral spine as you switch from supporting one limb to the next. Your body will be tempted to tilt to one side or another as you switch limbs. Preventing tilting or leaning is where the exercise works. Be as straight, stable, and symmetrical as you can. It may not feel like a dramatic exercise, but the asymmetrical loading will be giving your deep spine stabilizers a pretty hefty workout.

Ball Crunches

Goal: 20–30 reps.

Muscles Worked: *Rectus abdominis*,
transverse abdominis, *obliques*.

The goal of using the ball is to allow your head and shoulders to drop below the level of your stomach, so that your body has to work harder to lift them up.

1 | Start by sitting on the ball, then roll down until you are lying on it with the ball in the small of your back.

2 | Perform a crunch as you do on the floor (p. 78). At the top of the movement, you should be fairly level as shown in the picture and you should feel that your abs are definitely working (fig. 8.5).

You will also have to focus on lifting up your hips. The *rectus abdominis* connects from the bottom of your rib area to the pubic bone. If you let your seat sit, you will disengage the lower part of the muscle and the exercise will feel easy. If you have uneven strength in your *abdominals*, it will show up in this exercise because the ball will roll a little. Do the crunches with as little wobble as possible. If you have asymmetrical abdominal strength, this is an excellent exercise for retraining symmetry.



8.5 Ball Crunches.



Special Needs Modification

Ball Crunches on Balance Cushion

If you do not yet have your balance on the ball for a crunch, you can still introduce a balance element by doing the crunch on a balance cushion, flat pillow, flake of hay, or other lower-profile item for challenging your balance. The goal is to achieve symmetry, and use the raised surface to be able to stretch your torso longer before performing the lift in the crunch (fig. 8.6).



8.6 Ball Crunches on Balance Cushion.





8.7 Ball Crunches with Isometric Reach.



Advanced Variation

Ball Crunches with Isometric Reaches

For added difficulty, this exercise combines the Ball Crunch with the Starfish from this week.

- 1 | Perform a regular Ball Crunch (p. 87) but hold your contracted position.
- 2 | Once your shoulders are lifted and your *abdominals* engaged, reach an arm out to the side or back behind you (fig. 8.7). Hold your opposite arm where it feels most comfortable

and helps you balance on the ball. Aim for a count of 3 to 5 before releasing the crunch and repeating.

The goal of the exercise is to introduce instability to this already asymmetrical task. If you have asymmetrical core strength, or a tendency for one side to dominate, it should show up in this exercise: you may find one side easier to do than another or that the ball rolls or shakes slightly. Practice over time until you can do the exercise without any change to the position of your torso or the ball.

STRENGTH & MUSCLE MEMORY

Seat Walking on Floor

Goal: 6–10 steps forward and backward.

Muscles Worked: Lower abdominals, obliques, erector spinae muscles controlling hip movement while maintaining upper body posture.

This is a fun little exercise to encourage hip mobility and train your body to shift a hip while keeping a stable upper body position.

1 | Sit on the floor with your legs out in front of you and your back as straight as possible. You may use your hands on the floor to push your torso into a nice upright

position. Feel the core muscles you need to engage to keep this position.

2 | Once you are straight, lift one seat bone off the floor and “walk” it forward an inch or two. Make smaller movements if you are stiff (fig. 8.8 A).

3 | Lower your weight onto this seat bone and lift the other one. In this way, you walk along the floor using mostly your *obliques* and other core muscles to lift and shift your hips (fig. 8.8 B).

If you have very tight *hamstrings*, this exercise may be difficult, so start out by sitting at the join of the floor and a wall to train your body into an upright position and teach your body to move away from the wall without losing your upright position.



8.8 A & B Seat Walking on Floor.



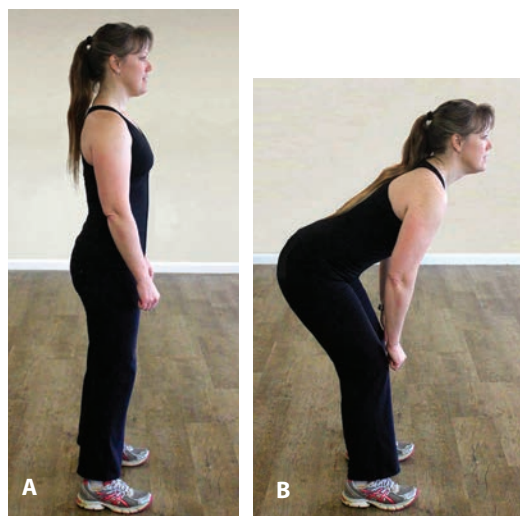
Deadlifts—Standing

Goal: 10–12 reps.

Muscles Worked: *Gluteus maximus, hamstrings, erector spinae, transverse abdominis, quadriceps.*

Deadlifts strengthen your entire “backline” of muscles, which correspond to the muscles you train in your horse. In a sedentary society, this exercise is especially helpful to riders because they frequently have insufficient base strength for supporting their lower spine. This base strength comes from the *gluteals* and lower back.

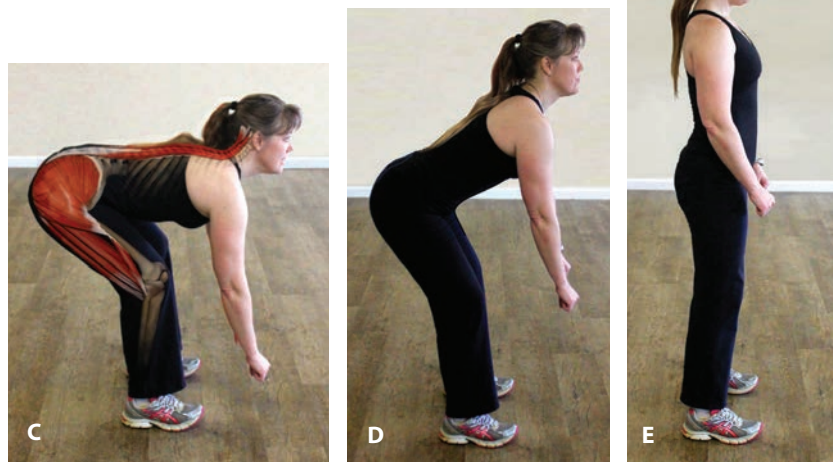
1 | Stand with your legs at shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent and spine neutral, arms dangling down. If you add weight, use the weight load that you can manage without compromising back straightness or having to “muscle” the weights with your arms (fig. 8.9 A).



2 | Tip forward, allowing the weights to shift as you grasp them at the end of relaxed arms. Ideally, you will tip forward until your back is level with the floor, and your arms are dangling directly down from your chest area (figs. 8.9 B & C).

3 | Bend your knees slightly and shift your weight back into your *gluteals* (your behind and heels), and lift your torso back up to the starting position. The challenge is to keep your back straight the whole time, and not allow any folding, collapsing, or rounding of the spine (figs. 8.9 D & E).

●●●
8.9 A–E Deadlifts—Standing.



You will find that the lower you tip, the more you need to bend your knees and stick your seat back, and the more your back will be engaged. As you tip, you use gravity to bring the workout farther up your back toward your neck. If you have weak back muscles—that is, your back starts to round and you just cannot straighten it—you have tipped too far for your strength level.

Back Step Lunge with Overhead Reach

Goal: 5–10 reps each side.

Muscles Worked: *Gluteus maximus, hamstrings, quadriceps, erector spinae, deltoids, latissimus dorsi, transverse abdominis.*

The first goal of this exercise is to continue to train correct folding at the hip, while building *quadriceps* (thigh) and *gluteal* strength. The other goals are: to increase your ability to engage your back muscles in integrated movement; improve shoulder strength; and increase your body's vocabulary for multitasking. Yes, these are a lot of accomplishments for one simple exercise!

- 1 | Start by standing in your athletic-neutral stance: legs wide, knees slightly bent, core engaged, spine neutral.
- 2 | Shift your weight almost completely onto one foot as you hinge at the hips slightly forward (fig. 8.10 A).
- 3 | Now that you have freed one foot from weight-bearing, reach it back until you can touch the floor with your toe behind you and descend into a lunging position (figs. 8.10 B & C).
- 4 | Ensure that most of your weight is on the front thigh—the one you shifted your weight to in the first place.



- 5 | Once you are in the lunge position, reach your arms up directly overhead to stretch your torso upright using your back and shoulder muscles. If you have impinged shoulders, you will not be able to lift your arms high. This is okay: the movement and coordination are the important parts of this exercise. If you are quite athletic, you may wish to hold free weights to add to the workload for your shoulders (fig. D).

Only use an amount of arm lift (or weights) that allows you to maintain good form in the exercise. You should not be wobbling or weaving. If you lose your balance, hold a wall or object and only lift one arm on one side at a time.

Be patient with yourself, since each step of the exercise asks something new of your body. It is better to start slowly, rather than rush and train undesirable or compensating muscle patterns. A common error is for people

to shift their weight back as they reach the second leg back. This places your weight in “no-man’s land” in the midair and causes you to lose your balance. Training your body to be very aware of which leg you are on, and where your body mass is, is very useful for learning better feel for horses under you. If you are unaware whether you are shifting your weight off the front leg, use a mirror or have someone observe you.

DEEP STRETCHING

Spend some extra time in one stretch each day for your tightest areas. Select from the Standard Warm-Up Stretches (p. 67), or others, and commit to holding the stretch for 2 to 3 minutes, a couple of times. Be patient and do not pull yourself into the stretch too deeply or too quickly.

STAMINA & COORDINATION

The cardio exercises are included in the *Warm-Up* for this week (see p. 83).