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ULTIMATE EXERCISE ROUTINES FOR RIDERS

Fitness
That Fits a
Horse-Crazy
Lifestyle



Contents

Preface ix
Exercise Routine Models xii

Introduction 1

Get Fit and Stay Fit for the Sport You Love 1
The Costs of Poor Rider Fitness 2
Lack of Fitness Holds You Back
 from Reaching Your Full Potential 4
The Four Pillars of Rider Fitness 5
Make Fitness a Priority 10

Part 1: What to Know Before You Begin Your Rider Fitness Program 11

1: The First Pillar of Rider Fitness: *Riding* 12
2: The Second Pillar of Rider Fitness: *Strength Training* 18
3: The Third Pillar of Rider Fitness: *Stretching* 26
4: The Fourth Pillar of Rider Fitness: *Rest and Recovery* 33
5: Setting Yourself Up for Success 41
 Program Building Blocks 42
 Schedule Your Fitness Program Around Your Horses 44
 Pick a Routine and Stick with It 45
 Time Management 46
 Special Considerations 47
 Dealing with Setbacks 53



Part 2: 8 Rider Exercise Routines 55

Routine 1: Full Body 56

Jumping Jacks 56
Curtsy Squat 57
Lunge 58
Quadruped/Bird Dog 60
Side Lying Abduction 62
Tricep Dips 63
V-Up 64
Lizard Pose Stretch 65

Routine 2: Full Body 66

Alternating Sit-Up 66
Bridge with Leg Lifts 68
Clamshell 70
Reverse Lunge with Lateral Extension 71
Lateral Low Lunge 72
Body Saw 73
Superman 74
Butterfly 75

Routine 3: Full Body 76

Narrow-Leg Squat 76
Wide-Leg Squat 78
Knee Push-Up 79
Fire Hydrants 80
Scissor Kicks 81
Bridge 82
Bicycle Crunch 83
Tricep Dips 84
Frog Stretch 85

Routine 4: Full Body 86

Bridge with Arm Lift 86
Cat-Cow 88
Downward Dog with Pawing 89
Reverse Lunge with Lateral Extension 90
Tempo Body Weight Squat 91
Push-Up 92
Plank 93
Leg Lifts 94
Reclined Butterfly 95

Routine 5: Full Body 96

Butt Kicks 96
Twisted Knee Raise 97
Front Plank 98
Knee-Pull Plank 99
Thigh Rock Back 100
Kneeling Side Kick 101
Double-Leg Ab Press 102
Reclined Pigeon 103

Routine 6: Pregnancy 104

Windmills 104
Marching Crunch 106
Squat with Abduction 108
Bent-Over Fly 110
Shoulder Press 111
Standing Row with Tricep Extension 112
Wall Push-Up 114
Arm Stretch 115

Routine 7: Upper Body 116

- Arm Circles 116
- Twist 118
- Side Bend 119
- Tricep Extensions 120
- Shoulder Press 121
- Elbow Press 122
- Pec Press 123
- Elbow Pulls 124
- Broken Wing 125



Routine 8: Lower Body 126

- Lunge 126
- Tempo Body Weight Squat 128
- Standing Abduction 129
- Side-Lying Adduction 130
- Straight Leg Glute Bridge 32
- Active Butterfly 134
- Wide Leg Up the Wall 135



Part 3: 2 Yin Yoga Routines 136

Routine 1: Full Body 137

- Sphinx 137
- Twisted Roots 138
- Reclined Butterfly 140
- Child's Pose 141
- Bolster Under Glutes 142
- Supported Fish 143

Routine 2: Full Body 144

- Banana 144
- Cypress Knees 146
- Supine Pigeon 147
- Butterfly 149
- Mermaid Twist 150
- Supported Fish 152

- Conclusion 153
- About the Author 157
- Acknowledgments 159
- Index 161

The Third Pillar of Rider Fitness: *Stretching*

For the longest time, I ignored yoga and stretching in my own exercise regimen. While I knew on a practical level that stretching was an important aspect of fitness, I was never really drawn to it. But as the saying goes, when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. I have learned more about anatomy through my yoga practice than I have in any textbook. Through my yoga practice I was able to alleviate pain that I thought I would just have to live with for the rest of my life. Yoga has enabled me to be more present in my daily life and give me more power over my “racing thoughts” than any other form of exercise or medication.

Finding the right teacher is what convinced me of the benefits of yoga and stretching, and you might need to do the same to really get into it. But if the idea

of attending a yoga class for the first time is intimidating (don’t worry, I get it), or if you’re a fan of yoga but struggle to fit regular trips to the studio into your busy schedule, I’ve put together a few sample sequences of yin poses (postures that are held for longer durations as you pay attention to your breath, thoughts, and physical sensations) customized for riders in Part 2 (see p. 136). As a certified yoga instructor, I’ve shared these, and other stretching poses, with clients and have seen great results. One adult amateur client has been strength training with me for a while. She was feeling stronger and more confident, but her riding instructor was not noticing much of difference in the saddle. We started incorporating long static holds (yin stretches) at the end of each workout, and within a month she was making noticeable

improvement in her sitting trot. Her instructor, a busy professional herself and quite skeptical of the need for exercise outside of what regular riding and horse management requires, even started training with me after seeing the progress her “weekend warrior” was making.

Before we dive deeper into the benefits of stretching, I want to tell you a little bit about fascia.

Fascia

For many years fascia was thought of as inert tissue that just encased the muscles and organs and connected everything from skin to bones. With new science emerging all the time about fascia, it is funny to think that we ever assumed that something so pervasive had no greater purpose. In recent years, in fact, researches are debating whether fascia should replace skin as the largest organ in the body. Although fascia has been recognized in Eastern medicine as a key factor in our overall health and physiology for centuries, in the West, we are just beginning to understand the important role it plays.

Fascia is predominately made up of collagen, and is responsible for structure and

lubrication of the tissues in the body. In her book *The New Anatomy of Rider Connection*, author Mary Wanless gives us a great way to think about fascia—she says to visualize an orange. The orange has an outer layer that protects it against the elements. The fruit’s skin is like your skin. Underneath the skin, there is a white pith surrounding the orange. It is also the connective tissue that runs down the middle of the orange and separates the wedges and holds each little droplet of orange juice, preventing the orange from becoming a puddle at the bottom of the skin. That is how fascia works in the human body too: It wraps around every organ, muscle, muscle fiber, muscle cells, nerve cells, and it even encapsulates your blood vessels and encases your bones. The fascia network extends from your head to your toes. If you were able to remove everything from your body except the fascia you would still be fairly recognizable as yourself.

Fascia provides critical structural support throughout our bodies, so we must take good care of it, keeping it supple and healthy with a combination of hydration, diet, and beneficial traction through long static holds. If we do not, we are in trouble.

Painful Fascia

Most athletes do not retire because of muscular injuries, which heal in time; they retire because of joint and fascia problems. Bad knees, a bad back, or a bad hip tend to boil down to excessive restricting of the connective tissues—such as the fascia, cartilage, and tendons—caused by overuse, injury, surgery, insufficient activity, excessive manipulation (like working too vigorously with a foam roller), and dehydration. “Bunched up” fascia becomes sticky, stiff instead of malleable, and painful. Painful fascia will not function properly, manifesting, perhaps, as scar tissue or as a joint “clicking” or “popping.” Scar tissue is bad because it is thick and not able to move as well as healthy fascia. The good news is that “motion is the lotion” that will get your fascia—and your body—back in working order.

How to Stretch

If we want to maintain the health of our fascia and joints we must exercise them, but not in the same way we exercise muscle. Muscle responds and adapts to repetitive motion while fascia responds to long static holds. That’s where stretching comes in, and the yin stretches in yoga, in particular.

Staying still in the same position for anywhere from three to five minutes increases the hyaluronic acid in the fascia network, which makes the “webbing” or “netting” more malleable where it has a tendency to get stuck. In each routine you complete in this book, there is at least one long, static hold at the end of the exercise routine to keep your fascia supple and stable. (Note that it is important *not* to stretch before you do strength-training exercise as doing so decreases the integrity of the muscle.) Longer stretches at the end of a workout are also great opportunities to practice mediation and mindfulness, which I discuss in chapter 4 (p. 33).

When you are stretching you are not actually stretching the connective tissue, you are stretching the muscle; however, stretching the muscle leads to changes in the connective tissue that makes it more pliable. You may feel a deep tug, ache, or even a fiery sensation. It’s also possible that you will not feel much during the stretch but will get hit with a tingly sensation as the blood rushes back to the area when you come out of it. Be as still as possible in your yin stretches. You should never bounce. And don’t hold stretches through sensations that are sharp, shooting, or that make it difficult

to breathe. These are signs that you're doing too much and need to back off before you tear something.

Stretches that are less than 30 seconds tend to be ineffective. Holds that are 30 to 90 seconds are good for your muscles. Holds that are between 90 seconds and three minutes begin to target the fascia. Static holds that last longer than three minutes are considered *yin holds*. The sweet spot is a static hold that is held for three to five minutes. These really get into working the fascia. Holding a stretch for more than 12 minutes tends to be a waste of time. It's better to use that time to fit in two six-minute holds or three four-minute holds.

Starting any exercise program can be intimidating. It's worth noting that it's common for long yin poses to feel challenging, subtle, intense, luxurious, or boring. The interesting thing about this style of stretching is that you can go through all of these sensations during a single stretch. This is one of the reasons why we hold our yin postures for three minutes or more. Learn to listen to your body and feel the subtle adaptations over the course of a stretch. Feel each sensation and accept it as it is, resisting the urge to chase a harder or more intense stretch. That's rarely what your body needs.

Being still for three minutes can feel like torture as your brain is going a thousand miles a minute. But you can do it! Try using your time on the ground or a yoga mat as an opportunity to practice mindfulness, focusing on your breath (then you're killing two birds with one stone!). Every time you notice your mind wandering, return to an awareness of the rhythm of your breath. The benefits of doing long, static stretches

■ TO KEEP FASCIA HEALTHY, ■ YOU NEED TO HYDRATE

I am not a nutritionist but I can tell you that I follow the guideline of drinking half your body weight in ounces of water a day. So if you weigh 100 pounds, you need to drink 50 ounces of water a day. This is something I have gotten from motivational speaker and author Rachel Hollis, and I stick with the guideline daily. As far as food goes, foods made up of collagen are very beneficial for fascia. A really good source of collagen is bone broth—you can make your own in a crock pot. (Or do what I do, which is buy an organic ready-made version at your grocery store.)

two to three times a week are well worth the effort. You'll keep your fascia and joints healthy and supple, target any constricted tissue, reduce pain and inflammation by improving pliability and blood circulation, and increase your flexibility.

The Other Benefits of Stretching

Flexibility is the ability to move a joint through its full range of motion with ease.

It is determined by your body's muscles

and connective tissue.

Flexibility is a good thing because it allows you to wrap your legs around the horse. It helps with shock absorption, so it is important in the lower back, or lumbar spine.

Improved flexibility is not just about improving

range of motion, although this is an important piece of the fitness puzzle. Improved flexibility can also lead to greater postural stability, correct muscle imbalances, improve balance control, and make movement easier—all of which can have a direct impact on your position and effectiveness in the saddle. Flexibility is joint specific, so just

because you have good range of motion and flexibility in your hips doesn't mean the same will be true of your ankles or knees. As riders we tend to be particularly tight in our glutes, hip flexors, and lower back, but an effective stretching program should address the whole body, targeting the major muscle and tendon units of the shoulder girdle, chest, neck, trunk, lower back, hips, posterior (back) of the legs, anterior (front) of the legs, and ankles. The yin sequences that I provide in Part 3 (see p. 136) incorporate stretches for each of these key areas. You can do full sessions dedicated to only stretching problem areas or sequences that include stretches for the whole body—it's your choice. Thinking about where your body feels tight or needs more flexibility is a good place to start. Targeted stretching will improve flexibility and lessen pain in problem spots and increase your effectiveness in the tack. (Note that *too much* flexibility is not necessarily a good thing, because it can lead to joint instability and dislocation.)

Beyond decreasing joint and fascia pain and helping you heal from an injury, improved flexibility can lead to a more independent seat as well. The elusive independent seat is two components: the ability to maintain balance while not being

Targeted stretching will improve flexibility and lessen pain in problem spots and increase your effectiveness in the tack.



influenced by the movement of the horse, and the ability to move one part of your body independent of other parts. Improved flexibility allows the rider to really sink into and go with the horse's movement instead of "clamping down" on the saddle. This leads to a seat that is more capable of both adapting to and controlling the horse's movement. The independent seat is a key skill for riding at any level and is absolutely essential at advanced levels.

Try This

One great area for rider to target is the inner thigh. This area is always tight in riders, and this stretch offers the additional advantage of developing your seat muscles. The best way to target the inner thigh with a stretch is as follows:

- 1** Lie on your back and scoot your bottom as close to a wall as possible.
- 2** Extend your legs straight up the wall in front of you.
- 3** Bring your feet away from each other on the wall as wide as they will go.
- 4** Hold this yin pose for three to five minutes.

Coming Back After Injury

It's important to note that if you're coming back from an injury or want to address stiffness or soreness in a specific area, you'll need a combination of strengthening and stretching to heal. Say you have a bad back. Along with exercises to strengthen your back, such as leg lifts and planks, you should also incorporate long, static yin stretches that target the thick connective tissue that surrounds your lumbar spine. Doing forward folds along with back bends will flood the affected areas with *hyaluronan* (hyaluronic acid), which helps make the fascia more supple and less constricted.

Frequency of Stretching

Stretching once today will not magically improve your flexibility. You need to do it consistently over time and remain committed to the process. It takes months to become more flexible, and it takes work to maintain good flexibility. Although you do not need to stretch every day, tending to the fascia and the joints with long, static yin holds should be done at least two times a week. An easy way to meet this goal is by working it into your winding down

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routine at the end of the day. (It's especially beneficial to stretch after a long, hard day!) Stretching in a very slow, quiet fashion during this time is a great way to prepare yourself for sleep. You only need thirty minutes of stretching per session to keep your connective tissue healthy and pain-free.

As I've already mentioned, avoid stretching prior to strength training or riding—it actually decreases the integrity of the muscle, which can lead to injury.

Stretching should be reserved for *after* strenuous exercise.

I provide additional support for working long stretches into your life by including them at the end of each high-intensity exercise routine in this book. Although these isolated stretches should not be considered a substitute for full yin sessions (examples of which you will find in Part 3—p. 136), this is a great way to cool down while also caring for your fascia and connective tissue.

Tricep Dips

1. Sit on the floor with your knees bent and your feet in front of you, resting on your heels.
2. Place your hands behind you, under your shoulders, with your fingers facing toward your body and your elbows bent (Photo 1).
3. Straighten your arms to lift your butt off the ground (Photo 2).
4. Lower yourself back down slowly and with control.
5. Complete 30 repetitions.



V-Up

1. Lie on your back with your arms stretched straight over your head and your legs stretched long (Photo 1).
2. Slowly and with control, use your strength rather than momentum to lift your legs and your upper body off the floor at the same time. Bring your arms over your head and reach them forward.
3. Slowly and with control, keeping your core engaged, reach your arms back over your head and lower them and your legs back down to the floor and into your starting position.
4. Complete 30 repetitions.



Kneeling Side Kick

1. Start in a kneeling position on your mat.
2. Lean your upper body to the right and place your right hand on the floor under your shoulder. Place your left hand behind your head and stretch your left leg out to the side like a kickstand, then lift it up to the height of your hip and straighten it (Photo 1).
3. Then, keeping your left leg at hip height, kick it straight out in front of you (Photo 2).
4. Repeat on the same side for two minutes then switch sides and repeat for two minutes.





Double-Leg Ab Press

1. Lie on your back and lift your legs, bending your knees at a 90-degree angle. Your thighs should be perpendicular to the floor. Place each hand on the front of the corresponding knee (Photo 1).
2. Engaging through your core and pressing your lower back into the floor, lift your shoulders off the ground in a crunch. Keep your eyes up and your neck straight—don't tuck your chin. Create resistance by pushing your hands and knees toward each other (Photo 2).
3. Hold for 90 seconds.



Cypress Knees

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your arms at your sides (Photo 1).
2. Thread your right foot through your bent left knee and, if you have the mobility, hold your right toes with your left hand (Photo 2).
3. Maintain this position for three minutes.
4. Build the pose to the other side by threading your left foot through your right bent leg and holding on to your left foot (only if this doesn't cause you to bend or twist to grab it). You should feel this in your quad and hip, though it may, like the last stretch, be a subtle sensation that you feel more on the release.

Supine Pigeon

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent, and place your right ankle on your left knee (Photo 1).
(Photo 1).
2. Lift your legs and clasp the back of your left thigh with your hands (Photo 2).
3. Relax into this position, your legs resting in your hands, as much as you can, for three minutes. *(continued)*

