

EXTRA

PHILLIP DUTTON

'DO SIMPLE THINGS WELL'

3 Steps to Stronger Stifles

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From Practical Horseman Archives

WINNING A DAY

with Phillip Dutton



Nine friends get the chance of a lifetime—riding with an Olympic gold medalist and renowned three-day event trainer.

By Melissa Roddy Wright
Photos by Amy K. Dragoo

The challenge: Take a small group of novice but determined eventers with no regular access to professional event training and give them eight hours with one of the country's best riders and coaches. How do you make the most of it as a rider? How do you make the most of it as the coach?

That was the scenario when a close-knit group of friends and barn-mates from the Savannah, Georgia, area won a clinic with six-time Olympian Phillip Dutton through *Practical Horseman's* "Training with the Stars: Win a Day with Phillip Dutton," presented in partnership with Cosequin. The clinic was in March 2014.

The contest winner, Shannon Brown of Guyton, Georgia, brought a group of eight friends who call themselves "Team Misfits"—a barn family ranging from preteen to middle-aged, who hail from a variety of equestrian backgrounds but share a common love of horses and help each other improve as riders (see "Team Misfits," page 5).

The night before the clinic, the sense of giddy anticipation among the friends made the barn aisle feel more like backstage at a Justin Bieber concert. Instead of fussing over

hair and makeup, though, they buzzed around making sure tack and horses would gleam for their face-to-face meeting with their own superstar.

When the clinic day dawned rainy and gray, the riders' smiles and the white patches on Paint horses were the brightest things in sight—an outward sign not only of their excitement and desire to make a good impression but also of their dedication to give and get 100 percent out of the clinic experience. That meant showing up for every session and listening to every word Phillip shared with them. The information was stashed away so they could remind each other of his tips once they returned home, where they serve as eyes on the ground to help each other improve.

For Phillip, more accustomed to coaching Young Riders or short-listed U.S. Equestrian Team hopefuls, the day meant delivering instruction that provided the most bang, with an eminently take-awayable bottom line: "Do the simple, important things really well."

The "simple things" Phillip focused on

Contest winner Shannon Brown keeps her Black Jack straight and centered over a vertical in a bending "S" line of three verticals.



ABOVE: Phillip shows Macy Harden how to ask Cherry for leg-yield.

LEFT: Beth Huddleston rides Inis up centerline changing flexion several times.



were fundamentals to help the riders and horses, most of whom were relatively new to the sport of eventing, build correct foundations: First, teach the horse to go forward from the leg; second, connect him from inside leg to outside rein; and third, teach him to stay on the line you ride.

'Training Is All the Time'

Each participant rode in a morning arena session of flatwork and jumping and in an afternoon cross-country school at Lel-

lie Ward's Paradise Farm in Aiken, South Carolina. The riders were divided into three groups for the morning session, roughly based on the horse's eventing experience level: never-evented/Starter, Beginner Novice and Novice.

The arena sessions began with a speech from Phillip about the importance of having clear goals for every ride and understanding that everything you do on your horse is training in some way.

"Every time you ride your horse, you should be creating good habits. You can't just pick and choose when you are going to ride the horse correctly," he said. "Training is all the time."

That doesn't mean your horse must be on the bit every ride. Instead, it means that whether you are doing a formal dressage school or on a relaxing hack, you always insist that the horse respect certain parameters, like going forward when you put your leg on and following your steering aids. Don't allow him to ignore your

leg or cut corners because you're on "just" an informal ride. "Horses are creatures of habit, they learn by repetition," Phillip said. "Every time you get on, you should re-introduce the correctness of your riding. Keep it simple but the same every day: He should be obedient to the leg, going forward and coming back easily, and should be connected from inside leg to outside rein. He should know when you get on that it's time to get into work mode."

First Priority: Forward

Phillip underscored the importance of good habits from the moment he sent riders out to the rail with their first assignment: Create a forward walk. Every step counted, and those who ambled away from the center of the arena were admonished to get their horses marching.

Kick him or use your stick if he doesn't immediately move forward from your leg, Phillip told a rider whose horse moved off lazily. When the horse cantered in response, Phillip instructed his rider to try again. "The canter isn't wrong. He went forward from your leg," he said. "Now walk again and try to make the walk more forward and active."



Meet Team Misfits

Rider descriptions from time of clinic in March 2014. **Shannon Brown** (fourth from right): Contest winner Shannon Brown is finishing her master's degree in sport psychology and hopes to work with equestrians in the future. She also teaches beginning riders and takes on occasional horses for basic riding and desensitization training.

She has owned her 7-year-old Black Jack, a presumed Standardbred/Quarter Horse cross, since he was about 8 months old, when a family member in law enforcement found him living tied to a tree, covered in rope burns and lice, in a suburban backyard. She saddle-broke him as a 4-year-old, discovered he loved to jump and did jumpers and eventing with him, progressing to the Novice level before an accident at a cross-country ditch in 2011 shattered Shannon's arm and Black Jack's confidence about ditches.

After rebuilding slowly, they now are competing successfully again at the Novice level and hope to move up to Training soon. During the clinic, Phillip praised Black Jack's "great attitude" and desire to please as they tackled everything Phillip asked of them—including an intimidating Training-level ditch.

"I'm still a little star-struck," Shannon said after the clinic. "I've got a lot of good stuff to work on. Phillip was awesome: He's very precise and to the point. He doesn't flood you with information. He lets you work through it, he lets you think and then he tells you to get on with it."

Shannon currently boards Black Jack at Dove Field Farm, which is owned by fellow clinic participant Amy Collins and her family.

The following riders are pictured above from left.

Amy Collins: Primarily a hunter/jumper rider, Amy rode her 4-year-old Canadian warmblood, Ruger. A jumper, Ruger had never seen a cross-country fence before the clinic but calmly tackled them all. Like other noneventers and multidiscipline riders in the clinic, Amy said she was eager to learn from someone of Phillip's caliber and happy to give her young horse a variety of experiences.

Ann Boese: A friend from nearby Richmond Hill, Georgia, Ann got back into riding five years ago, after a long break. She brought her Artisan's Mark, an 11-year-old Thoroughbred whom she has competed at the Beginner Novice level. "I don't pay attention to striding," she observed after her morning session. "I need to push myself to be a more thinking rider and use my dressage during jumping."

Abbie Jones: Also from Richmond Hill, Abbie met Shannon through clinics and schooling sessions they attended together. She rode Bellagio, an 8-year-old dressage horse who only recently began jumping.

Macy Harden: The youngest of the clinic participants at age 12, Macy is one of Shannon's students at Dove Field. She rode Shannon's lesson pony Cherry, whom she has competed at a Starter event. Cherry started the day in lazy walk-trot lesson-pony mode and ended it in forward-thinking eventer mode, galloping to his fences.

Haley Zimmerman: A friend of Shannon's from a previous horse job, Haley is an assistant trainer at the International Riding Academy in Hilton Head, South Carolina. She brought the academy's Forwin, a 7-year-old

warmblood transitioning from jumpers to hunter derbies. Forwin had not jumped cross country before the clinic and initially acted up when asked to canter in the open. The only horse Phillip rode during the clinic, he abandoned his shenanigans quickly once the master got on and demanded the horse go forward. After a brief gallop to establish that leg meant forward, Phillip jumped the horse easily over an impromptu course, building from a small log to a Preliminary-level roll-top, much to the spectators' delight.

Beth Huddleston: A friend who lives in Aiken, South Carolina, Beth currently competes at the CCI* level. To stay with the clinic groupings, she brought her Irish-bred 4-year-old, Inis, who has competed through Beginner Novice.

Katy White: A friend of Shannon's, Katy brought her 6-year-old Thoroughbred, Monty. An athletic jumper and one of the more excitable horses of the group, he rushed fences and overshot turns in the morning gymnastic, so Phillip had her halt him *after* each fence (rather than pull on him in front of the jump), then pick up a canter and turn to jump the next. By learning to wait and listen between fences, he improved greatly.

Courtney Goss: Courtney lives on a farm next door to Dove Field and saddle-breaks young horses. She rode Hootie, her own 4-year-old Paint stallion, who has been under-saddle less than a year and has competed at a Starter event and 2-foot-6 jumpers. The pair ended the clinic jumping Novice level cross country and left with advice to focus on the straight approaches and landings.

"I think so much of Phillip," she said before the clinic. "I just want to go into this being a sponge and learn all I can."



ABOVE: Phillip has Haley Zimmerman lengthen and shorten Forwin's stride to make him more adjustable.



LEFT: Phillip taught riders, including Amy Collins and Ruger, how to use the whip correctly because "an important part of keeping the horse in front of the leg is knowing how and when to use the whip," he said.

Once the forward walk was established, Phillip asked for the same exercise in trot and canter. At each gait, riders were told to lengthen and shorten the strides to make their horses adjustable. For the green horses and riders, this translated to "big trot" and "trot on the spot." Phillip wanted the horses to respond quickly to the forward aid and shorten again willingly.

"The horse needs to understand and be obedient to the leg, so that when you put your leg on, he doesn't ignore it or pin

his ears and bolt," Phillip said. "As he gets more trained, you'll use the leg to move him laterally or slow down by coming under himself and collecting."

Asking for forward and back in the canter, Phillip noted that the ability to control the canter stride is a cornerstone to success in all three phases of eventing: "You want to have lots of options in your canter, so you can ride an 8-foot or a 14-foot stride," he said. "If you can't do that, you can't do a proper dressage

test, show jump successfully or go cross-country, where it's so important to have your horse in front of your leg because there's so much more out there to back him off."

For most of the riders, opening their horses' stride and having them respond quickly to the leg proved a bigger challenge than shortening the stride. After 20 minutes of Phillip's instruction to "find a new gear" (a bigger stride within the gait), however, there was a visible change in the lazier horses as they became sharper to the leg and more forward-thinking without getting anxious.

Add Flexion and Connection

Once riders had established that leg meant forward, Phillip asked them to create a connection from inside leg to outside rein.

He first had each rider ask the horse to flex around her inside leg, applied at the girth, while on the rail. Cueing the riders to "see the horse's inside eye," he explained that flexion involves softening the horse's jaw and neck by using the inside leg to create a better connection

to the outside rein. (With greener horses, Phillip said, he asks for flexion only; as the horse's education and suppleness increase, he asks for bend through the entire body.)

Next, he asked them to trot up the centerline and leg-yield to the track beginning at X, all on the same rein. The tighter turn onto the centerline gave riders an opportunity to emphasize flexion around the inside leg and feel the push into the outside rein as the horse straightened onto the centerline. The leg-yield to the rail helped further establish the connection from inside leg to outside rein, while also encouraging the horses to step under themselves with the inside hind leg for a more engaged, powerful stride.

"With a green horse, we don't expect anything too marvelous in terms of lateral work, but we do expect a reaction," Phillip explained. "The first priority is forward, then we add flexion to the inside, then connection."

Flexed and Straight

After the leg-yields, Phillip asked riders to trot straight down the entire length of the centerline while changing flexion several times. Riders had to focus on staying straight and keeping their horses forward and in front of the leg through the changes in bend.

"Flexion doesn't just happen on a bend or circle. Your horse also needs to be able to stay straight on the long side or centerline," Phillip said. "Having the ability to ride the line you want is so important. Your horse needs to stay forward and straight when you change flexion."

When Phillip noticed the occasional rider depending too much on the reins and pulling the horse into a frame, he gave her a visualization to focus on: "Imagine the bit being *in front* of your horse's mouth," he said. "Instead of pulling back, you want to push him forward into the bit for a softer, springier horse."

And while his emphasis was on the exercises happening on the centerline, Phillip also instructed riders to "do simple things well" around the rest of the arena—stay straight along the rail and ride deep,

A Far-Reaching Impact

Clinic winner Shannon Brown was chosen from more than 450 entries in part because she and her friends do not have eventing trainers near their home, and the selection committee hoped a day of training would help boost eventing at the grassroots level.

"She conveyed a strong sense of camaraderie among the riders at her barn," *Practical Horseman* Editor Sandra Oliynyk said. "There aren't a lot of training opportunities in her area, so she and her friends work to be each others' 'eyes on the ground.' This made us think that Phillip's teaching would have a far-reaching impact. For these reasons, we, along with Phillip, felt that Shannon was the best recipient for a day of his training."

Phillip's clinic teachings were designed and delivered to be portable—advice the group could take back and help each other with easily. "If there's one thing I want you to remember, it is doing simple, important things really well," he said often. "Do your transitions well, jump your fences straight. Give your horse every chance you can to fulfill his potential by being diligent about his training, his fitness, his care and his preparation for competition."



square corners, for example.

Those who allowed their horses to cut the corners or overshoot the turn onto centerline were reminded about establishing good habits: A horse allowed to veer off his line on the flat is more likely to do the same thing over fences, where it could translate to a run-out or bad jump. A horse allowed to cut corners at home will be confused and less willing to ride deep into those corners when asked during a dressage test at a competition.

Hold the Line

Over fences, Phillip used two basic exercises to reinforce the lessons of forward, connected and straight: a bending "S" line of three verticals that required riders to be disciplined about their line and a vertical-to-oxer line that rode in five to seven

strides, depending on the canter stride the rider created.

Phillip started riders over a single small vertical in the center of the arena, asking them to trot in and canter away, flexing the horse to whichever lead he landed on, then turning that direction at the rail.

The exercise seemed simple, but it helped Phillip make two major points:

First, the horse must stay forward and in front of the leg. For those horses who wanted to stall and land trotting, riders were instructed to give a tap with the stick over the fence to remind them to land and go forward. Second, the horse must stay straight over and after the fences, then flex properly around the turns rather than collapse into them.

From the first vertical in the center of the arena, Phillip added a second vertical



ABOVE LEFT: Katy White makes sure Monty stays in front of her leg and straight over a bank.

ABOVE: After the clinic, Ann Boese, riding her Artisan's Mark, said, "I need to push myself to be a more thinking rider and use my dressage during jumping."

on a 90-degree turn, then a third vertical on the opposite side of the center fence to complete the full "S" line. Riders were instructed to approach the line at a canter and jump the fences center to center, riding straight after the first fence, bending their horses around a left-hand turn, riding straight to the second, then riding the right-hand turn to the final fence. The focus was on riding a straight approach and departure and a good turn, as opposed to getting a specific number of strides.

For those who didn't jump the center of a fence, Phillip again emphasized doing simple things well: Discipline yourself to build the good habit of jumping 12-foot-wide fences in exactly the spot you want, and you and your horse will be much better prepared when you progress to jump-



ing cross-country accuracy questions that are half that width or less.

"Attention to detail is how good athletes get great," Phillip told a rider whose horse, who had been cutting arena corners on the flat, repeatedly drifted over jumps and collapsed through the turns. "Make him bend correctly around the turn and stay straight after the jump. On his own, he'll do what's easiest. He's not going to improve unless you take the lead."

'Options in the Canter'

Riders next moved to an oxer-to-vertical line set at 60 feet. The distance offered a range of striding options, challenging riders to test the adjustability they'd developed on the flat.

In their first trip, riders were asked to count their strides in the line, a simple exercise in building awareness of what their horses were doing underneath them. Later, Phillip challenged them to develop a more sophisticated feel for how forward the horse was, asking the riders first to jump the line in one fewer stride than the horse got naturally in the first pass, then to jump

it in one more (for either five, six or seven strides).

Getting the right number of strides in the line started by establishing an appropriate canter beforehand. Although you may need to push or hold between the two fences if you realize you've misread the canter, your focus should be getting the job done on the approach, he said.

For a short-strided, unhurried Paint pony whom Shannon uses for walk-trot lessons, that meant his 12-year-old rider had to use the full arena to get a true gallop before successfully attempting the line in six strides. (Over the course of the day, the pony appeared to discover extra forward gears he didn't have at the beginning of the day, prompting Shannon to joke that her beginner riders back home would be in

BELOW: Abbie Jones also practices forward and straight as she introduces Bellagio to jumping down a small bank.

BELOW RIGHT: Phillip Dutton told clinic contest winner Shannon Brown and eight of her friends to "do the simple, important things really well."





Courtney Goss and her Starter-level Hootie ended the clinic jumping Novice-level cross-country fences.

for a surprise at their next lesson.) For other riders, that meant approaching in a slightly collected canter to get six strides in what rode naturally as a five for their bigger-strided horses.

As a final challenge, Phillip asked riders to ride down the line in six strides, turn around and immediately jump it in reverse in five strides. For the more experienced Novice-level riders, he asked for a bigger difference in pace, riding it first in seven strides and back in five.

"You need to have a feel for what's underneath you," Phillip said. "Go through a checklist when you start—is he forward or connected enough? Is the canter con-

nected enough to jump from? And if the answer is no, fix it before the first fence."

Taking It Outside

Riders were divided into two groups for the afternoon's cross-country school: Beginner Novice/Novice and never-ever/Starter, the latter of which included two jumpers who had never seen cross-country fences before.

For the relatively green horses, much of the school was about gaining experience with banks, water, ditches and varying terrain. In that context, "do simple things well" echoed again: Keep the horse in front of the leg, make the horse stay straight over fences and demand that he ride the line you dictate.

"Cross country is all about the horse

staying in front of your leg and jumping out of stride," Phillip said. "You want to have your horse in front of your leg and then have the jump to hold the horse, rather than you pulling as you approach the fence. On a really well-trained horse, you could drop the reins and the horse will keep coming, shorten his stride if necessary, and jump."

Phillip had the riders practice using their whips correctly, by bridging the reins in one hand and using the stick behind their leg in the last stride before the jump. "An important part of keeping the horse in front of the leg is knowing how and when to use the whip," he told them, asking them to practice the hand motions over several fences. "If you use the whip too far away from the fence, your horse rushes. If you use it in the last stride, the fence holds the horse and the whip keeps him in front of the leg."

Occasional run-outs gave Phillip a chance to re-emphasize the morning lesson about jumping straight and holding a line. Most riders' natural, but incorrect, reaction to a run-out was to circle the horse in the direction he ran out.

"If he runs out to the left and you circle to the left, you are training him that he decides where you go," Phillip said. "Like staying straight over the fences in the arena, if your horse always drifts left, make him stay straight. If he runs out to the left, turn him right to correct him."

The riders finished the clinic with a wealth of knowledge that they planned to bring back to their barn and practice, while helping each other. During an unmounted session earlier in the day, Phillip said this was a great asset. "Eventing is an individual sport, but when I have other great riders at my barn, I watch what they are doing and it pushes me to be better. You can do that for each other. It's great that you guys work together. If you can encourage each other and push each other, everyone will continue to improve." 🐾



For more about the clinic, go to go to *PracticalHorsemanMag.com*. Search for "Phillip Dutton, Shannon Brown."

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3 STEPS TO **STRONGER** STIFLES

Progressive stretching and strengthening exercises that target specific muscles and ligaments can keep this important joint in peak condition.

By Kenneth L. Marcella, DVM



Careful progressive strengthening work, such as stretching exercises, can help protect your horse's stifles against injury.

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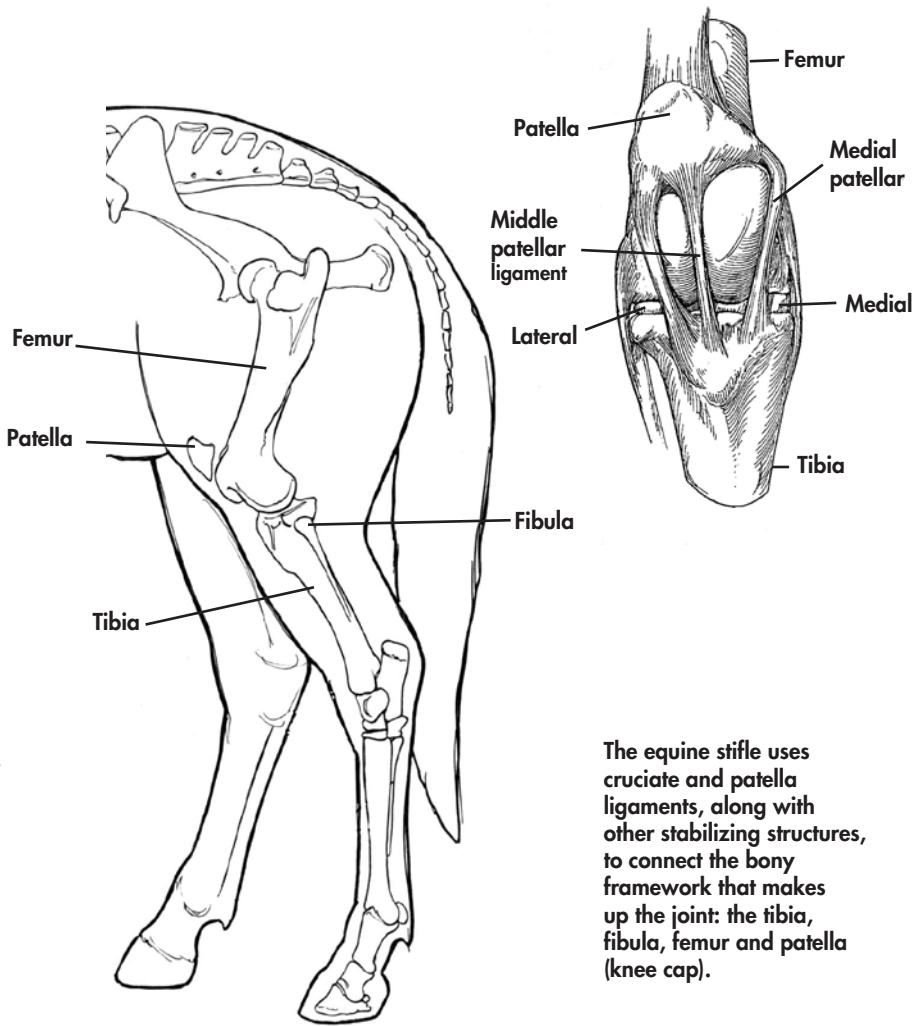
The equine stifle is similar, anatomically and physiologically, to the human knee but a bit more complex and generally more stable. Both joints use cruciate and patella ligaments, along with other stabilizing structures, to connect the bony framework that make up the joint: the tibia, fibula, femur and patella (knee cap). Horses, however, have much bigger quadriceps, the large muscles above the knee that make up the thigh, and three patella ligaments compared to only one in humans. These extra ligaments factor into the unique biomechanics that allow the horse to “lock” his knee cap and achieve a deep resting state while standing up, which was an important evolutionary advantage for a prey animal.

Even so, the stifle is susceptible to arthritis, resulting from a slow process of wear and tear occurring as a normal consequence of athletic activity, and/or more acute, traumatic soft-tissue strains and tears. Soft-tissue damage, such as cruciate-ligament tears and meniscal (fibrocartilage discs between the femur and tibia) injuries, are generally less common in horses than in humans because of the increased stability of the equine stifle. These types of problems, however, are serious and can end a horse's athletic career.

Who's at Risk

Injuries to the ligaments of the equine stifle generally result from a combination of speed and rotation: awkward takeoffs or landings from jumps, sudden stops, quick changes of direction and other missteps a horse may take when traveling at speed or when out of balance. In these instances, a horse's attempt to unevenly load isolated parts of the stifle can overstress some of the joint's stabilizing structures, causing injury. Dressage horses, who do not perform at speed like jumpers and eventers, may also be susceptible to stifle injuries because the requirements of their sport necessitate bending and rotating their upper bodies, which can also place the stifle

>>> TIP: Injuries to the ligaments of the equine stifle generally result from a combination of speed and rotation. Dressage horses may also be susceptible because the bending and rotating of their upper bodies can put the stifle at risk.



The equine stifle uses cruciate and patella ligaments, along with other stabilizing structures, to connect the bony framework that makes up the joint: the tibia, fibula, femur and patella (knee cap).

joint at risk.

But it isn't only equine athletes whose stifles are at risk of injury. Any "pasture potato" can incur a stifle injury from direct trauma, such as kicks, slips, falls or problems often associated with bad footing from wet, muddy or icy conditions. In

fact, it is often these weaker, less fit and overweight horses who more commonly sustain stifle injuries. Inadequately developed abdominal and core musculing, along with a general lack of conditioning and tone, place these horses

at greater risk. Poor foot care and imbalanced landing and loading can amplify the uneven forces on the body and potentially lead to stifle injuries as well.

Young horses are especially vulnerable during growth spurts (periods of rapid bone and body-mass development, characterized by uneven growth of different structures) as their ligaments often become either tighter or more lax depending on the changing bones and joint angles. Since the stifle joint consists of four bones and various ligaments, this area is frequently involved in growth-related problems. As a young horse's stifle bones develop, it can take time for the slower growing ligaments to catch up and for the quadriceps muscle to also grow in size and strength.

During these periods, riders often comment that their previously problem-free horses now feel "weak behind" or "not connected." These horses may stumble more frequently; they may fall

out behind; and their stifle joints may even make popping or clicking noises. When going downhill, riders on these growing youngsters may experience a general unwillingness and inability to maintain a straight line (the horse will try to proceed downhill at an angle) and even intermittent near-collapse in severe cases. Although these symptoms occasionally indicate structural problems, they are most often signs of weakness.

Turnout and Stretching

Careful progressive strengthening work can help protect your horse's stifles against injury, especially if that area is already weaker due to conformation, lack of conditioning or other factors. If he is obviously lame or if a joint is swollen, tender and/or painful, then seek veterinary attention to rule out any medical causes before starting a strengthening program. Once you are sure he is capable of tolerating a fitness program, however, then the more you sensibly condition him, the fewer injuries he will likely experience. This is especially true for the stifle joint. Here are two general ways to strengthen it:

1. Increase overall daily movement.

Give your horse as much turnout as possible, ideally on pasture with rolling hills and with tractable companions (horses tend to be more active when pastured in the company of others). If you are feeding hay, spread it out in multiple piles so your horse has to be more active in his eating behavior.

2. Perform stretching exercises.

Always remember your personal safety and that of your horse as you attempt these exercises. They are best done in a flat area with good footing and it is usually necessary, especially initially, to have a helper hold your haltered horse with a loose but controlled lead. In each of the following exercises, lift your horse's hind foot off the ground and stretch as described until you feel slight resistance. Hold the stretch for 10 to 20 seconds as tolerated, then release. As he becomes more accustomed to and comfortable with a stretching routine, you will be able to work on gradually

>>> TIP: Careful progressive strengthening work can help protect your horse's stifles against injury, especially if that area is already weaker due to conformation, lack of conditioning or other factors.

Stretching



PHOTOS COURTESY © KIM EQUINE

Step 1: I flex the horse's hip and stifle by lifting the hoof upward and forward. As you flex the joints, help the horse maintain his balance by keeping the lower leg toward the midline and the horse's weight centered over the supporting leg. Each stretch should be held for 10 to 20 seconds initially. As the horse becomes more accustomed to the stretching routine, you will be able to work on improving his range of motion.

Step 2: With the hoof still lifted and the hock flexed, push the point of the hock (Point A) toward the midline while you pull the foot laterally, or away, from the midline (Point B). This motion rotates the stifle and stresses, and eventually strengthens, the ligaments and supporting structures of the medial, or inside, stifle. Reversing this exercise—pulling the point of the hock outward and pushing the hoof medially, or inward, rotates the stifle in the opposite direction and serves to strengthen the lateral, or outward, supporting structures.

improving his range of motion.

■ Flex the hip and stifle by lifting your horse's hoof upward and pushing it inward toward the midline of the body. (This is similar to the motion veterinarians use to do a hock flexion test as part of a lameness or prepurchase examination.) Then, with the hoof still lifted and the hock flexed, pull the leg outward away from your horse's body.

■ Pull the hind hoof forward toward the back of the knee of the front leg on the same side.

■ Pull the hoof backward, stretching out the hind leg in the same position you would use to pick out the foot or that a

farrier would use to trim it. Slow pressure and your horse's relaxation will eventually allow you a good deal of extension in this position.

Another great way to begin getting your horse to stretch and use his stifles is with a good-quality working walk, which requires him to be balanced on each leg and to use his quadriceps to push forward. This, in turn, strengthens muscles and ligaments. Ask a dressage instructor or other equine professional to show you how to get your horse properly rounded in his frame and correctly stepping his hind legs up underneath his body. Understand that this may take some time as a weak horse

will have difficulty achieving a proper frame. Consistent, correct slow work will pay dividends over time, however.

Strengthening Work

A third way to strengthen the stifle is from exercises you do on the ground and in the saddle.

Unmounted

■ With your haltered horse held by a helper, stand a few feet off, perpendicular to his hip, and grasp his tail. Gently pull it toward you until you feel your horse resist the pressure and pull back. You will notice his back, abdominal muscles and, importantly, his quadriceps muscles tighten as

Strengthen Unmounted



PHOTOS COURTESY © KIM EQUINE

Walking downhill is a great exercise to make your horse utilize his hind end and work the muscles and structures that support not only the stifles but the lower back and pelvis as well. Keep your horse straight—not allowing him to swing his haunches left or right—and make him slowly weight each leg through the entire range of motion. This requires balanced use of the stifles.



Longeing on a slight incline isolates and strengthens the ligaments and muscle attachments on either the inside or the outside of the stifle as the horse moves around a circle. Find a place in a pasture where the flat terrain changes into a little hill. Stand at the break in the terrain and longe your horse in big circles so half the circle is on flat ground and the other half is on the hill. To go up the hill, your horse will use his outside quadriceps muscles. These muscles specifically support the stifle. The ligamentous attachments of these muscles to the bones that make up the stifle joint will become stronger with incline and unbalanced footing exercise.



Going down the hill, your horse will use his inner quadriceps muscles. The inner and outer muscles of these areas are difficult to target and people have to utilize side leg-pull movements to work and strengthen them. Incline longeing is well tolerated by horses and has the additional benefit of achieving balance as well. Insist that your horse maintain a steady pace without leaning to the inside or outside. Note: Our model in these photos is very calm and experienced at longeing so he is in a halter. If your horse is more energetic or animated, plan to use a bridle, longeing cavesson or other supporting/controlling aides.

he braces against your pull. Hold pressure for 10 to 20 seconds and release. Repeat this exercise 10 times on each side.

■ Hand-walk your horse up and down

slight inclines. Ask him to walk slowly and maintain a straight line, not allowing him to cheat and swing his haunches to either side. This requires balanced use of the stifles.

Periodically halt your horse—this increases the forces on the front part of the quadriceps and patella ligaments—and then walk off again. Doing this exercise unmounted is especially valuable because the horse can

focus on his own balance and movement without trying to compensate for the rider's weight and position. As with all attempts at strength and conditioning work, an improperly done exercise is nearly worthless and often damaging, so keep the exercises simple—and do simple well.

■ Find a place in the pasture where the flat terrain changes into a little hill or incline. Stand at the break in that terrain and longe your horse in big circles. This work is usually best done at the trot. You want to have him travel for half the circle on the flat ground where he can maintain good footing and then push up the hill, using the lateral, or outside, quadriceps muscles. Then he will travel down the hill, using the medial, or inside, quadriceps muscles before again reaching flat terrain. By doing this “incline longeing” in both directions, you can effectively target the inside and outside thigh muscles of both legs and help strengthen the stifles tremendously. Insist that your horse stay in balance—maintaining a steady pace without leaning to the inside or outside. Use proper longeing technique to ask for lengthening and shortening of stride and then for gait transitions, all still using the incline for half the circle. If you are not familiar enough with good longeing skills, then get help from a knowledgeable trainer and add this incredible exercise to your strengthening program.

Mounted

■ Concentrate on transitions—walk to trot, trot to canter, walk to canter, and so forth. Always aim to make them smooth and

>>> TIP: Mix strength-training sessions into your regular training routine, which should involve a minimum of three days of exercise per week but preferably four or five.

Strengthen Mounted



Annelise Stone is riding Assassin's Shooter in a good working trot, making sure he is engaged behind and pushing with his hind legs to encourage him to lift his back. This will help build muscle and strengthen the ligaments of the stifle.

Annelise is riding her horse in a canter that has engaged his hind end. This type of canter as well as transitions from trot to canter to trot will help strengthen the stifles and provide stability and balance.

balanced as this builds muscle, tightens ligaments and produces better motion.

■ When riding or doing conditioning work in open pasture or fields, instead of traveling in long, straight lines, make shallow serpentine that require your horse to bend and to use the inside and outside leg muscles—principally the quadriceps.

■ If you have access to deep sand, such as beaches or other soft surfaces, practice riding in it. Strenuous work on surfaces like these can cause other injuries if you do too much too soon. So pay close attention to my advice that follows about building up gradually. As your horse's strength improves, concentrate on motions that also principally use the medial and lateral quadriceps muscles, like circles and spirals.

Riders have a tendency to overdo strength training at first—and to give up on it too early. Whatever exercises you decide to do, it is very important to progress slowly and in a step-by-step manner. Commit to a long-term program, start with short, easy sessions and never increase both intensity and duration of exercise at the same time.

For example, if you start with 15 minutes of longeing on flat ground—including warm-up, cool down and multiple changes

of direction—repeat the same program in your next session. If your horse does that easily, then add three to five minutes in the next session. Continue gradually increasing the duration for seven to 10 sessions until your workout time is 30 minutes or longer. Then you can *reduce* the duration of time for a particular session and add some hill work (*increase intensity*)—doing, for example, 10 minutes of flat longeing and eight minutes of walking up and down hills. If, at any point, your horse seems to be struggling with a workout, you can always simply go back to the lower-level intensity session that you had previously been doing easily and stay there for a while longer before trying to increase intensity again.

Mix these strength-training sessions

into your regular training routine, which should involve a minimum of three days of exercise per week but preferably four or five. Wear a watch and time each session and avoid overworking, especially when a session is going really well. Keep a record of your program and monitor intensity and duration. This will help you chart progress and decide when to push the conditioning and when to back off and allow your horse a bit of training rest—both of which are important when trying to achieve better fitness.

With methodical training, patience and attention to exercises that target the specific muscles and ligaments involved, you can help strengthen your horse's stifles and assure him a happier, healthier athletic career. 🐾

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