

Are you fit to ride?

Words and photography by Fiona Rafferty, additional photography by Stephen Bartholomew

Jon Pitts, the Sports Scientist behind Fit to Ride officially launched the Fit to Ride Programme at Littleton Manor Equestrian in Reigate at the end of July. Here we look a bit closer at the key elements of the Programme, Performance, Safety and Confidence and how all three affect your ability to achieve the best results possible with your own horse.



Jon Pitts started his career in football. He played professional football as a teenager, after which he read Sports Science at Brunel, later continuing his studies to complete a Masters in Sports Science. He worked as a Sports Scientist at several professional football clubs, before beginning work with National Hunt jockeys. Over the last 12 years Jon has worked with jockeys leading research into what happens to the body with the PJA, BHA and IJF (injured jockeys fund) to make racing safer. He has done this in two ways. Firstly teaching them to fall correctly, to minimise injury to their body on impact with the ground (a jockey falls on average once in every 12 rides he has) and secondly to help them understand the affect any shift in their weight has on the horse.

British Chef d'equipe, Yogi Breisner, noticed the results of Jon's work with jockeys and for the last ten years he has been working with the British Olympic riders as well as other top riders in this country.

Jon also works with a number of different athletes including cricketers, golfers and footballers. However, it was his work with Champion Freedivers that made him realise how closely the physiological and psychological interact when humans are under pressure. This led to Jon studying for a second degree in Neuroscience and some of his work in this area is currently being recorded for scientific research.

Over the last two years Jon has been working increasingly closely with the Australian Equestrian Team and has recently been appointed as their Human Performance Coach. This role will see Jon working with them on their performance in all disciplines in the build up to 2012 and beyond. As well as travelling to European based events with the team he is also making two to three trips to the Australian training camp in Sydney to work with team riders of all ages (right through from Juniors) and in all three major disciplines including the para equestrians.

Find out for yourself

Reading the introduction about Jon and the work he has done with Olympic athletes, who include William Fox-Pitt, Mary King, Carl Hester and Laura Bechtolsheimer, it is easy to feel intimidated and perhaps think Fit To Ride isn't for you. I must admit if I hadn't been invited to a taster session I might have thought the same too. I can guarantee that everyone who rides a horse will benefit from Fit To Ride.

Video Analysis

The aim of Fit To Ride is to make the rider much more aware of their body and the influence it has on their horse. Video is used extensively during training so that the rider can see what he is doing rather than just "feeling". It is amazing how many riders feel like they are sitting in perfect balance when in fact they aren't. The brain is very complex and is capable of lying to us, making us feel that we have even pressure in each stirrup, when in fact all of us have a dominant leg and whilst 70% of the population is right-handed a similar number



Jon asks Kate Lukas to ride some movements, including shoulder-in, so that he can watch the way her body weight changes on each rein



The work in the school is videoed so that Jon can show the rider any dominance they may have in their body, which in turn affect the horse's performance

have left leg dominance. Do you find it easy to do half pass one way, but not the other? This is because your brain doesn't want to go in the weaker, less dominant direction.

At the high end of competition it was noted that all the team horses had irregular muscle building up on their backs and with the use of pressure plates it was determined that this was occurring as a direct result of the dominance of one side of the rider to the other. When big competitions can be lost or won by a single penalty or hundredth of a second it is important that both horse and rider are able to perform at their best.

The Physical Properties of Riding

In order to ride and perform to the best of your ability you will need to understand and be aware of the following:

Fight or Flight mechanism – if you are feeling nervous or anxious whether at a competition or just out hacking your horse will know and he too might become anxious

Body dominances – we all have a dominant side

Pelvic Function – our pelvis is our foundation with the saddle. Riding continually with stirrups has made us lazy and in turn makes our pelvis lazy. Doing simple exercise on a fitness ball and riding when possible without stirrups will increase the movement of your pelvis.

Respiratory / Heart Rate – at rest an athlete's heart rate beats at approximately 35 bpm, however, during competition, such as riding around Badminton or for dressage riders competing at Grand Prix this could increase up to 195 bpm. How many of you have been asked "are you breathing?" That was probably in a training environment, but if you don't focus on your breathing during a competition, you may find that mistakes begin to creep in. At 170 bpm your body will be racing to send oxygen to your heart and brain and it is important that your brain stays alert in order to maintain your balance, co-ordination and maintain your ability to make decisions.

Suppleness – this is a German word meaning your ability to absorb forces against the body. In other words your ability to soften and work with the horse in whichever direction it is going. Lack of suppleness can result in a beginner rider bouncing off.

Flexibility – is the range of movement in our muscles. Compared with some sports our muscles don't really do a lot when we ride, hence they sometimes become tight and one of the most common ailments of horse riders is back pain. This is normally

the result of the ham-string being tight, and once again exercises on the fitness ball can help to improve the flexibility of this muscle.

Balance – is key to successful riding. As you find out more about the Fit To Ride Programme you will realise that it is your ability to stay in balance with your horse whatever is happening around or underneath you that will give you the confidence to perform safely.

Paul Tapner



Paul Tapner and Inonothing jumping the Hexagon Hedges en route to winning Badminton 2010



Jon Pitts and Paul Tapner

Australian event rider Paul Tapner is best known for winning Badminton 2010 on his athletic thoroughbred, Inonothing. A clear round cross country and in the show jumping saw Paul add just 0.4 of a penalty to his eleventh placed dressage score of 44.5 to lift the Badminton trophy.

Paul has been working with Jon since the build-up to Beijing and now considers him an integral part of his team at big events.



Prior to going cross country Jon will work with riders on the exercise ball. While balanced on the ball in this position he will throw balls of varying sizes at them as well as asking them questions such as mental arithmetic, this all aims to sharpen their brains prior to going cross country.

Jon's work with the riders varies depending on their strengths and weaknesses and for Paul it is the work Jon does on cross country morning that has the biggest influence on his performance. At home he is used to being on the go all the time, if he isn't riding he is doing something around the farm and at one day events he might have up to seven horses to ride. However, at the bigger competitions, where he might only have one ride he likes to work with Jon to warm-up and sharpen up his responses to make him prepared for every eventuality once on the cross country course.

Paul brought along his head-cam footage from his 2011 round on Kilfinnie II and for anyone wanting to see this, it is now available to watch on the Badminton website. Bearing in mind that most spectators at Badminton normally take all day to walk around the course, it is very surprising to realise just how quickly the course is ridden and how quickly the fences come up. At some points Paul didn't have time to verbalise what he was thinking between elements before the next part came up.

Paul explained how he isn't nearly as supple as when he had youth on his side and it was the benefits he saw in his suppleness, that really motivated him in the Fit To Ride Programme. Earlier we discussed heart rate and how it increases during competition. Paul's registered 195 bpm as he jumped through the Hexagon Hedges at Badminton this year. We also discussed the lack of oxygen reaching ones brain at such times and the affect this can have on making the right decision. Jumping round Badminton at between 20-30 mph, Paul said he made two changes of plan. He credits the warm-up exercises he does with Jon prior to going cross country in helping him to stay alert and deal with situations as they arise.

Fit To Ride

Whether you are aiming for your first competition, need help to gain the winning edge or perhaps just enjoy hacking your horse at home, the Fit To Ride Programme will work for you all. Whilst we have primarily focused on the physical properties of riding, some individuals may need more help with planning and organising themselves to arrive in the right place, at the right time. After an initial assessment Jon will work with you to form a plan to help you reach your goals.

Performance – do you always find yourself coming second, just aren't quick enough across country, wish you could score 8s and above in your dressage tests, these are some of the things Jon can help you with.

Confidence – anyone who reads Localrider regularly will know how Jon has helped me regain my confidence at a very basic level, having lost it after a non-fall related injury to my back two years ago. If you have moved up to the next level in your particular discipline and don't feel as confident, then Fit To Ride will help you.

Safety – we already know that jockeys fall once in every 12 rides and the statistic for top event riders is a fall once in every 40 rides. As horse riders we have to be prepared

to fall and part of Fit To Ride is fall training. By going through the process, which basically is a development of the forward roll, our brain will store in its memory the feeling we had during this process and then hopefully if you do ever fall your brain will automatically remind your body of the position to follow as you fall.

Jon Pitts will be holding clinics at Littleton Manor Equestrian in Reigate on Sunday 18th September & Monday 19th September and Sunday 16th October & Monday 17th October. Visit www.lmeq.com to find out more. For more information about Jon Pitts and Fit To Ride visit www.jonpitts.co.uk or www.fittohide.org

Are you interested in becoming a Fit To Ride Trainer?

Jon is currently looking for individuals to become Fit To Ride Trainers. If you are interested in finding out more email david@jonpitts.co.uk attaching your CV.

WIN!

Win a session with Jon Pitts

Jon has kindly offered one reader the chance to bring their own horse to a clinic at LMEQ in Reigate on either Sunday 16th October or Monday 17th October (date to be confirmed and is subject to change).

To enter please send your name, address and telephone number together with a minimum of two pictures (a maximum of six) of you and your horse in various ridden scenarios. Please also provide details of you and your horse, what you have been doing and why you think you will benefit from the Fit To Ride Programme.

Either send your entry by post to: Localrider, 2 Littleworth Cottages, Speldhurst, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN3 0TP or email fiona@localrider.co.uk

Jon may contact entrants prior to making his final decision on who to choose. It is planned that the session will be reproduced in Localrider Magazine at a future date.

The closing date for entries is Friday 16th September 2011.

