



Stronger Bodies ~ Healthier Living



US Equestrian Federation Human Sports Science Medicine Program: Equestrian Athlete Performance Program comes to the Northeast!

The US Equestrian Federation is in its second year of developing their Human Sports Science Medicine (HSSM) Program, including training and developing a network of physical therapists here in the US, trained specifically by British based physiotherapist, Team Great Britain and USA physiotherapist Andy Thomas. The USEF HSSM program was started in 2015, in order to help better prepare the US Equestrian Team for the Rio Olympic Games. Thomas has developed a well-respected program, with elite equestrian athletes in mind, that includes working with horse and rider to identify rider asymmetries, weakness and imbalance, all which affect performance. Thomas has identified specific causes of imbalance which impact rider performance, the rider's ability to be coached, the horse's movement, and the combination's performance in the arena.

The US Equestrian Federation was fortunate to have Andy Thomas come to the US to teach his course, "Management, Treatment and Rehabilitation of the Human Equestrian Athlete" to ten selected therapists at USET Headquarters in Gladstone, NJ in May of 2017. Eight therapists from the US completed the May certification course and process, earning the status of a USEF Certified Human Sports Science Medicine Practitioner, to help elevate the performance of our US equestrian athletes. I was fortunate to be selected for this program, and complete the certification with Andy in May.

As a physical therapist practicing for the last 22 years in sports medicine, I can tell you the biomechanics of movement are crucial for any sport, whether it be running, soccer, baseball, golf or tennis. As a former rider myself, I can say the same is true for equestrian athletes: rider position is crucial to horse performance. We look at saddle fit all the time, but do you as a rider consider how YOU are sitting in that saddle? Consider your position: do you lean to one side? Fix on one rein? Sit deeper into one seat bone? Is your horse resistant to one rein? Fall out to one side? Always run out to one side? What is your coach constantly telling you ("drop your left shoulder!")? IF you can fix these things, you are more symmetric, and so is your horse; BOTH of you would perform better. But what if the fact that your left shoulder is up, is due to the fact that your right hip is imbalanced? How would you know...?

As a USEF Certified HSSM practitioner, I have the knowledge and skill to identify these musculoskeletal imbalances in riders, using on the horse, and off the horse assessments. Working hand in hand with coaches and trainers is also important to identify these asymmetries. Rider assessments are performed to assess the rider in the saddle for these performance inhibiting imbalances, and treatment is performed ringside, to offset and correct these imbalances. Treatment may include evidence based manual therapy, corrective exercise, and the development of a comprehensive individualized rehabilitation program (including home program), to optimize performance in the saddle, and in the arena. The more symmetric you are as a rider, the more symmetric your horse will

perform. In the dressage arena, it can make the difference between scoring a 6 versus an 8 on a specific movement; in showjumping, it can mean seconds off a showjumping round. On the cross country course, a balanced rider means a balanced horse, and getting thru a course safe and clear.

So how do we assess these asymmetries and imbalances? Sometimes it's as easy as tuning into your own body as an athlete and rider. You may feel these imbalances in the saddle—one hip feels tighter, or you have a more difficult time getting one leg on. Other times you may feel these imbalances OUT of the saddle—more difficulty standing on one leg versus the other, tightness in one hip when you cross your legs. Physical therapists are trained to assess asymmetries and imbalances in a clinical setting, asking a client to move thru functional movement patterns; assessing mobility, strength, flexibility, posture, kinesthetic sense/balance, and sources of pain.

Using Andy's method of assessment, USEF certified practitioners are now able to assess and treat rider biomechanics and asymmetries on site, at the farm or competition. Riders are first assessed in the saddle, at the walk, trot and canter, in both directions. Once asymmetries are identified, the rider is then assessed ringside on a treatment table, further investigating these imbalances (strength testing, mobility testing, kinesthetic sense and motor control, and a functional movement screen). Direct treatment is then performed on the rider, to normalize these imbalances, and ready the rider (athlete) for performance. After corrective treatment (manual therapy and facilitative exercise), the rider (athlete) is then asked to continue on with her ride, noting improvements in symmetry, muscle activation and mobility. Most riders feel immediate positive changes in their position and effectiveness in the saddle. Those changes may last for that day, or longer, depending upon the magnitude of the imbalance/asymmetry. Most riders (athletes) require follow up intervention, in order to make lasting change in their performance.

I have been fortunate to have been able to travel around the state of Maine over the last 8 months, discussing and teaching rider biomechanics; and, using Andy's method of assessment, helping riders improve their performance in the saddle. Riders are athletes, and we must start treating ourselves as such. We are very quick to call the chiro or massage therapist for our equine partners, treating them as the athletes they are. Rider asymmetries and imbalances significantly impact our horse's performance; working on rider imbalances out of the saddle for as little as 20 minutes a week can make a significant difference in performance of both horse and rider. Riding is very unique in that there are TWO athletes involved—horse and rider. The fitness and symmetry of both athletes must be taken into consideration and addressed when looking to improve performance in the arena.

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