

Get the 360° treatment



CARL HESTER'S PEARLS OF WISDOM

ON the second day of our training academy, each participant had a lesson with dressage Olympian Carl Hester. Here he helps with two hot topics:

What should your hands be doing?

- ▶ "You need to get to the point where you're doing nothing. Dressage is all about the finished picture. Still hands make for a still neck in a horse that will also be happier in his mouth."
- ▶ "Don't be afraid to let the horse rest a little on your hand in trot, whereas in canter you would want a lighter feeling."
- ▶ "If when you move the hands forward to ask the horse to stretch down he doesn't, don't start pulling his head from side to side, just take the original contact back, then ask again."

Mastering flying changes

- ▶ "Canter around the short side of the arena, then ride a half 10-metre circle back to C and ask for a flying change on the centre line. By keeping the size of the exercise small you'll be able to make little flying changes, which is all you want when teaching them."
- ▶ "Use a lazy aid if the horse gets a bit hot. Give the aid for a change when your horse's legs are on the floor, otherwise he'll have to go up in the air again and back before changing, which is when he might get cross."
- ▶ "If a horse anticipates being asked for a change, lighten the contact so there is less for him to work into."

their ability to ride effectively. The standard of competition is so high these days that riders need to do all they can to ensure they can physically perform to the best of their ability."

THE SPORTS PSYCHOLOGIST: DANIELLE OLDING

"LACK of self-awareness in riders is something I often see," says Danielle (www.fromtheneckup.co.uk). "A number of riders who have no obvious issues may believe they are already riding to the best of their ability and thus fail to be consistent under pressure. This could also be an issue with riders who do have specific problems, but lack the awareness of 'how' they create these in their heads.

"If you are not aware of the mental processes that occur you won't be able to replicate the effective ones to maximum effect, or manage and re-route the ineffective ones.

"Another problem is lack of brain training. Riders often devote hours to improving their horse's way of going or their own technical 'on-horse' skills, but fail to devote any time to training their brain to generate the kind of responses that they take for granted will happen under pressure.

"Some riders think that riding well from a physical or technical viewpoint is enough and that the rest will follow. Sadly, that is rarely the case. If a rider doesn't take the time to train their brain regularly, it doesn't know what to generate when under pressure.

"Lastly, I often see a lack of review in riders. Many don't think to stop and review whether their mental preparation and management strategies are still working as effectively as they used to. They will often continue to operate out of habit, rather than tailoring their thoughts and behaviours to a particular point in time.

"Habit is a 'one-size-fits-all T-shirt' — it does an ok job, but rarely gets the very best out of all situations."

THE FITNESS COACH: CARYS JACKSON

"THE most common problems that I come across are how we use our core, asymmetry and our upper body position," says Carys (www.theactiverider.com).

"As riders, the nature of our sport means we use our back muscles frequently, when



Carys Jackson encourages core strengthening

mucking out for example. Combine this with trying to sit tall on the horse, and we over-recruit our back muscles and fail to effectively fire up our deep abdominals, called transverse abdominals.

"In doing so we can make the back muscles tight and sore, and lock the pelvis movement. By learning to sit up using our core effectively, we can relax the back muscles and allow the pelvis to move with the horse," she adds.

"When it comes to asymmetry, as humans we have a stronger side, but whether you are aware of that and what you do about it is what is important.

"If one side is a lot stronger than the other, your body weight will alter in the saddle, affecting your aids and how the saddle sits. By becoming aware of your asymmetries and correcting them, you will improve your riding and your horse's way of going.

"In terms of our upper [body] position, riders are notorious for using the shoulder blades to control movement and fix through the

Focusing on your riding alone is unlikely to cut it in today's competition world. *H&H* meets the experts who can help you raise your game

THIS autumn, five riders took part in *H&H*'s first training academy, where they benefited from sessions with a sports psychologist, physiotherapist, fitness coach, dietitian, position analyst, equine nutritionist, five-star judge, oh, and Carl Hester. Each found the experience of a 360° look at themselves as athletes invaluable. *H&H* finds out how these experts can give you the edge in your chosen discipline.

THE SPORTS DIETITIAN: JULIA SCOTT-DOUGLAS

"IT may seem like common sense, but not having a balanced diet is a common problem in the riders I see," says Julia (www.ridersrations.com).

"The demands on the time of riders and lack of knowledge about what constitutes a balanced diet are the main causes.



Julia Scott-Douglas: eating a balanced diet is crucial

"I am often asked about sports nutrition, but before a rider even thinks about a diet to improve sporting performance, they need to make sure they are eating well.

"Nearly every rider I meet does not realise how important it is to keep hydrated. They don't recognise the simple signs, even of minor dehydration, which can cause headaches, reduced levels of alertness and a greater difficulty concentrating. They will feel more



Hip tightness is common according to Helen Mathie

tired and as a consequence will not ride to the best of their ability."

THE HUMAN PHYSIOTHERAPIST: HELEN MATHIE

"THE most common problems I see — apart from trauma that is usually secondary to falls — are apparent leg length differences because of iliopsoas tightness [in the hip]; thoracic and lumbar back pain due to previous trauma, or

the saddle not fitting the rider's shape or seat; and thirdly hip tightness," Helen (www.aegrusequestrian.co.uk) tells *H&H*.

"It is important to rectify these problems or otherwise the rider will become asymmetric, which will have a hugely detrimental impact on the horse's way of going," she adds. "In addition, pain and dysfunction in the rider will prevent absorption of the horse's movement through the seat and spine and compromise



Danielle Olding: 'take the time to train your brain'

Pictures by Storm Johnson and Jon Stroud Media. Words by Madeleine Pitt

Feature **How to get the edge**



Russell Guire emphasises the importance of balance

hands, rather than fix through the shoulder blades and move through the hands. The latter gives a light contact and makes hand aids smoother and more controlled."

THE BIOMECHANICS AND POSITION ANALYST: RUSSELL GUIRE

"THE most common problems I see are riders sitting asymmetrically, in particular collapsing to one side, rounding their shoulders and gripping on with one or both legs," says Russell (www.centaurbiomechanics.co.uk).

"The horse's anatomy is such that it can be influenced by the rider's position.

"The horse does not have a collar bone and its vertebra is suspended between its front limbs by the thoracic sling mechanism.

"The horse is designed to be upright and balanced with a weight distribution of 60% of its body weight on its front limbs and 40% on the hind limbs. When we add a rider this innate balance is adjusted to compensate — and if we have an unbalanced rider the horse will constantly be rebalancing in an attempt to stay upright and balanced. Remember, horses can feel a fly, so they can definitely feel if a rider is leaning to one side."

THE FIVE-STAR DRESSAGE JUDGE: ISOBEL WESSELS

"ONE of the main problems I see is [dressage] riders becoming tight and nervous the minute the bell rings," says Isobel.

"Riders who have this problem need to compete on a regular basis and become more at ease in the test situation. Try riding at venues where the horse tends to be relaxed and goes well, and do not attempt a level or test that is too difficult. It is better to get mileage at a friendly venue and enter tests that are familiar, so that it is not necessary to have a caller," she adds.

"Another problem I often see is the rider presenting the horse at breakneck speed and cutting corners with no preparation for the movements in the test. The way of going — which is under scrutiny throughout the test — is totally lost and the horse has little chance to be shown at his best. The rider must be



Isobel Wessels offers advice from a judge's viewpoint

confident enough to take time, use the corners, make good use of the half-halt and ensure that the horse is in the right balance to show off his training — not his lack of it."

THE EQUINE NUTRITIONIST: LIZZIE DRURY

"THE most common problems that I see in competition horses are not enough forage/fibre intake, digestive issues such as gastric ulcers or hindgut acidosis and excitable or temperamental behaviour," Lizzie (www.saracenhorsefeeds.com) tells *H&H*.

"There is still the perception that forage and fibre is merely a 'filler', and one that creates unnecessary ballast that the horse then has to carry around.

"Not meeting optimum fibre requirements leads to an increased risk of digestive issues, which can then lead to horses expressing any discomfort or frustration as difficult behaviour, or in difficulty maintaining 'fighting' competition weight.

"Meeting fibre requirements is always my first concern before I even think about what goes into the horse's feed bucket.

"If these [nutrition] issues are not addressed, a horse is unlikely to reach his full potential or may not even finish a season. It can make the difference between winning or losing." *H&H*



6 ways to enhance your performance

1 Focus on fuel — "The most important fuel for sporting performance is carbohydrate, as it is the primary fuel for muscle contraction. A source should be included at every meal," says sports dietitian Julia Scott-Douglas.

2 Practise emotional reactions — "Decide what physical and emotional reactions you would like your brain to generate for you under pressure, and rehearse these responses in a typical context until your brain creates a blueprint for them," suggests sports psychologist Danielle Olding.

3 Get balanced — "To balance out the left and right try step-ups," says fitness coach Carys Jackson. "Put your foot on a mounting block or up two stairs. Bend the leg that is on the floor, and lean forward slightly. Now try and stand up without pushing off the back leg at all, and keeping the hips level and ensuring the knee does not drop in. Do 12-15 on each side and repeat for two to three sets."

4 Set realistic targets — "I think many riders feel they have to go to the higher profile shows and sometimes, if the combination is not secure at the level, this can lead to bitter disappointment and a big gash in confidence," says five-star dressage judge Isobel Wessels.

5 Be aware of saddle slippage — "If riders imagine they are sitting on a chair with two short legs on one side and are asked to sit straight they would be crooked. This is the same as what happens when riding with saddle slippage — riders would try and be straight but their saddle would be opposing this," explains position and gait analyst Russell Guire.

6 Focus on forage — "Weigh forage before you feed it at night, and any that is left in the morning, for a couple of days to get an approximate idea of average intake. If it is insufficient you need to address it by looking at other ways to increase fibre intake to ensure that it does not fall below 1% of body weight, and is ideally at least 1.5% of body weight," says equine nutritionist Lizzie Drury.