

Your
competition
health &
wellbeing

BE THE BEST YOU CAN BE

WORDS Laura Stenberg



LEE-ANNE WANN
Health & Fitness Consultant,
Performance Nutritionist

Lee-Anne is one of the most trusted and respected health and fitness experts in the country. She is a nutritionist to several New Zealand's elite sports people, including the Warriors rugby league team, musicians and television celebrities. She is a regular fitness and health commentator on nzherald.co.nz, on television and has written three books in the past 10 years. Lee-Anne also runs a private nutrition practice focusing on individuals' health and weight goals and is the ambassador for Men's Health Trust New Zealand & September for Cerebral Palsy New Zealand.



SARAH CRUICKSHANK
Veterinary
Physiotherapist

Sarah owns and runs Vetphysio, a physiotherapy business for horses, riders and small animals. She has a Bachelor of Health Science in Physiotherapy from Auckland University of Technology. Sarah first qualified as a human physiotherapist in 2003 before completing Master of Science in Veterinary Physiotherapy from the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) of London. She has attended two Olympic Games as physiotherapist for horse and rider.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

IN OUR LAST ISSUE WE COVERED OPTIMAL HORSE MANAGEMENT AT AN EVENT, GOING THROUGH EVERYTHING A RIDER NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT GETTING THEIR HORSE THROUGH TRAVEL AND COMPETITION IN THE BEST HEALTH POSSIBLE. THIS TIME WE TURN THE ATTENTION TO YOU, THE RIDER. COMPETITIONS ARE ALWAYS BUSY AND RIDERS WILL OFTEN PLACE HUGE DEMANDS ON THEMSELVES, BOTH PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY. AGAIN WE SPEAK TO THE EXPERTS FOR THEIR BEST ADVICE AND GUIDANCE TO HELP YOU PUSH TO THE LIMIT AT A COMPETITION AND STILL FINISH UP FEELING GREAT AND READY TO TACKLE THE NEXT ONE.

Preparation is key

To ensure you have the stamina and strength to get through a competition in good health, many riders who are deskbound five days a week will need to do a little extra exercise to supplement their riding. "Riding one or two horses a day will unfortunately not always be enough to get competition fit," says Sarah. "I see a lot of clients with neck, shoulder and lower back musculoskeletal issues which are often exacerbated with increased tension at a competition that they might not be used to, so alternative exercise to prepare your body can certainly help."

Having trained numerous elite athletes, health and fitness consultant Lee-Anne knows how to get a body conditioned for the job at hand. "A quick circuit focusing on both form and speed of 15 press ups, 15 high knees and 15 squats will help you up your cardiovascular fitness and covers your resistance and balancing work all at the same time," she says. "Boxing is a great option if you have time because it's an incredible cardio workout and requires phenomenal core strength, two of the most important focus areas for a rider."

Try out Lee-Anne's top exercises for building a strong core over on page 151.



Fill up before you leave

When it comes to competitive riders, Lee-Anne would apply the same principles of nutrition as she would to any other elite athlete or team she's working with. "People underestimate how much muscle activation is required for riding but it's huge. You want optimal energy, focus and endurance, so you need to fuel up in advance."

She recommends increasing your intake of natural carbohydrates like kumara, pumpkin and potatoes in the days leading up to a competition to load muscle stores. "Increasing these carbs at night will release serotonin to help you sleep and prepare you for the next day."

Possibly the most important thing is increasing water intake in the days leading up to a competition as well. "It only takes 2% dehydration to affect your focus and muscle activation, so you don't want to be heading off already dehydrated as it's hard to catch up. Good old water is the best thing for you, but you can also try adding chia seeds to your glass or bottle, or even mix them into your food too. They absorb up to nine times their weight in water so can assist in maintaining hydration as well as improving energy and endurance."

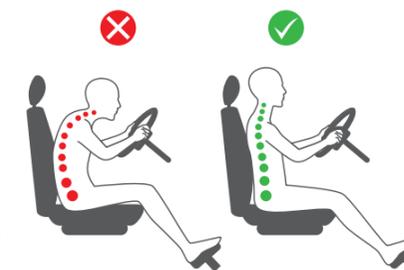
Travel smart

Arriving sore, achy and tired won't set you up for a great competition, so consider your seating position in your vehicle before you head off. If you're driving, take a good look at your position – are you slumped over the wheel? Do you need to reach for the pedals or the steering wheel? Is your lower back supported?

"Optimal seating position is ankles flexed but relaxed on the pedals, hips at 90 degrees, shoulders slightly back and relaxed, elbows relaxed with slight flexion and the spine vertical with head centred over it," says Sarah. "A lumbar support (half roll) or a rolled towel can assist with this. It's amazing how support through your lumbar spine (lower back) can have a knock on effect to your upper back as well."

During the trip, focusing on diaphragmatic breathing and intermittently pushing the back of your skull straight back into the headrest while continuing to look ahead (retracting your chin) for 10 seconds at a time can help reset your neck or cervical alignment.

Also, just as they're good for your horses, rests every 3-4 hours on the trip will do wonders for you as well. "When you stop, get out and walk around. Do some shoulder rolls and stretches in the opposite direction to the posture you have been in when sitting in your vehicle."



Off to a good start

With horses to feed, stables to clean and classes to prepare for, breakfast is often forgotten on a busy competition morning and everyone's habits are different. Some people are big on breakfast and others can't stomach it.

Lee-Anne says no one formula is best and if what you're doing works, then stick with it, but if you feel you could improve, then try something new. "If you're not used to eating in the morning but feel doing so would improve your performance, then try something small. Coconut shavings, a green tea with a teaspoon of coconut oil, raw nuts, they're all great choices that help improve focus and concentration, and just eating something will help to keep stress-causing cortisol levels down."

If you're just not eating because of a lack of time, then

being organised and having some really quick options with you is ideal. "Coconut yoghurt mixed with chia seeds, cherry tomatoes, a bit of cheese, boiled eggs – these are all great as quick snacks before you have time for something more."

For those that do like a decent breakfast, Lee-Anne suggests lots of green vegetables and protein-rich foods to help you power through. "Try scrambled eggs, silverbeet, and asparagus, and don't feel like you have to eat traditional breakfast foods. If you feel like a leftover chicken drumstick or piece of steak, go for it. Carbs can make many people feel sleepy, so save them for later."

Whatever you decide with food, it's vital to get water on board as soon as possible. "You should be drinking water within 5 – 10 minutes of waking up and ideally eating within 30 minutes."



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Keep powering all day

As you go through the day, keep thinking about consistently fuelling your mind and body at the right times to help you perform at your best. Avoid eating heavy foods that are higher in fat and take longer to digest, such as red meats, creamy rich sauces and cheesy items. "If we're digesting food, blood is in the gut which means there's less of it helping our muscles to work, so try to eat foods during the day that digest quickly if you're constantly on the go," says Lee-Anne. "Eggs are brilliant as they digest fast. You'll want to opt for something like chicken rather than salmon, or you might want something more liquid, like a smoothie or protein shake."

While you are on the go and sweating, particularly on a hot day, you'll lose vital nutrients through sweat, so Lee-Anne recommends plenty of water, cooled green tea, coconut water and snacking on foods with a high

water content (like cucumber and watermelon) to stay hydrated. "Water is underrated and while I'm not against sports drinks, I don't like the added sugars. If you need something more than water, there are great natural alternatives like coconut water and green tea."

Moving on from nutrition, Sarah explains that being aware of your posture and position and aiming to consciously align your body correctly in and out of the saddle will help to prevent muscle tension and pain catching up with you at the end of the day.

We might not feel it, but a lot of us lean towards having a protracted chin that sticks forward, and having your skull (which weighs a couple of kilograms) centred over your spine can make a huge difference to your riding position, balance and your horse's performance.

"Think of your head like a bowling ball placed on a tower of blocks. If the blocks gradually slope forward as they get higher, not only will your support structures (muscles and ligaments) have to work harder, but your head will naturally fall forward and you will want to look down, putting even more stress on your soft tissue to hold the weight of your head up," says Sarah. "If your head is centred over your spine, then the soft tissue doesn't have to work as hard and your balance will improve."

Rest and replenish

At the end of the day when the horses are tucked away and happy, it's time to turn the attention to helping yourself heal, recover and repair for the next day.

"In the evening, get back into those carbohydrates to refuel, and don't be afraid to eat more than you normally would," says Lee-Anne. "Your goal at a competition is not to lose weight or build muscle, it's to perform and to do that you need to put back what you use. If your body's workload has increased, your food intake should reflect that. A piece of steak, kumara mash, fried eggs, baked potato (with butter!), lots of green vegetable options and other clean nutrient-dense foods that combine a mix of carbohydrates, protein and natural fats is the way to go."

In the absence of a long warm bath, Sarah suggests using a natural liniment like 'All Black 'n Blue' to help with recovery of sore, tired muscles and joints. "Most riders have something like this in the tack box, so borrow it! You can tape over it, and either leave the skin exposed for it to cool naturally, or cover it up and it will gently warm."



Sleep easy

Both of our experts can't stress enough the importance of getting decent sleep while you're away competing. "It's one of best things you can do to aid physical and mental recovery after a big day in the ring, but it's not always easy to get while staying in the truck or float," says Sarah. "To start with, make sure your mattress is comfortable for you. Everyone is different - some people need firm support while others need a softer mattress - your body will tell you."

If you're waking up feeling stiff and sore while you're away, modifying your mattress with memory foam underlays, or using toppers to soften a hard mattress can help. If you've got a good pillow at home, take it with you or get one just for going away. "Don't use cheap pillows that you're not used to or don't find comfortable, as aligning your neck and shoulders will make a huge difference to how you feel the next day," says Sarah. "If you're a side sleeper, you want to have your spine from your head to your tailbone in a reasonably straight line, so using a rolled towel at your waist if your mattress is saggy and a folded towel or pillow between your knees can help take the strain off your lumbar spine."

Limit the drink

While away at a competition, many of us enjoy unwinding at the end of the day and catching up with friends over a cold drink, and studies have shown that 1-2 alcoholic drinks, depending on your size and tolerance, won't have any adverse effect on athletic performance the next day. Lee-Anne says that drinking is not ideal, but "it's not a biggie, and won't cause too much noticeable harm to performance. One or two is fine, but once you go over that you run a high risk of dehydrating yourself which will carry over to the following day, give you a 'foggy brain' and result in potentially poor decision making."

Our hormones are also affected by alcohol, and a couple of drinks can spike your cortisol levels which will likely cause you to feel more stressed for the following 24 hours. "Drinking green tea will help to combat alcohol-related side effects, as it helps the liver to process and accelerates the metabolism of alcohol, but it's definitely a case of moderation and not overdoing it if you want to be on your game the next day."

Stretch it out

Taking time throughout your competition to stretch your chest, neck, shoulders, upper and lower back, and hip flexors will make a difference to how you pull up at the end of a competition. "Keep stretching as often as you can - ideally when you arrive and as you get off each horse," says Sarah. "A spiky ball or foam roller in the truck will help to get deep into any knots in the muscles."



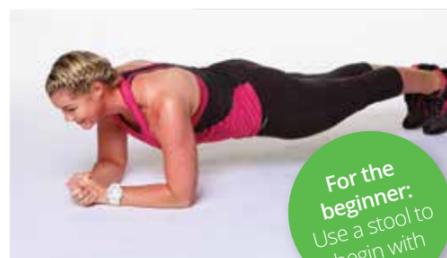
Back home

When you're home and unpacked, fill up on a protein-rich meal of things like vegetables, rice, meat and fish, run a nice warm bath with a good handful of Epsom salts and try to get a full eight hours of sleep that night. If you've done your best to prepare and look after yourself throughout the competition, you'll be well on the way to feeling great the next morning and can get straight into thinking about the next!

You can follow both of our experts on Facebook for further advice and tips: www.facebook.com/leeannewannhealth and www.facebook.com/Vetphysio-Limited



Lee-Anne's top exercises for building a strong core



For the beginner: Use a stool to begin with

Plank

1. Start on the ground on all fours before taking your feet out straight behind you and resting on your elbows.
2. Drop your hips down so you are nice and straight.
3. Belly button in, keep breathing and hold for the specified time.

Side plank

1. Lie on your side on the ground with legs out straight and resting on your elbow.
2. Lift your hips up off the ground and hold that position.
3. Lift your top leg and staying in that position, lower your hip slowly to the ground and then back up again without resting at the bottom on the ground.
4. Repeat for specified number and then switch sides.



For the beginner: keep your knees on the ground



For the beginner: Keep both hands on the ground

Modified Superman

1. Kneel on all fours, then extend your left leg out behind your body, kneeling on the right leg.
2. At the same time, take your right arm across your body and rest it on the upper part of your left arm.
3. Lower your leg and arm back to the ground and repeat up to 10 times.
4. Repeat this exercise with the right leg/left arm.

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