

Out and about with...

Marie Rippingale REVN looks at fitness for the horse and rider

As a keen event rider, I have been out and about competing recently. I am always fascinated by the sheer number of people who turn up for competitions early in the season to face the cold weather and the mud.

This got me thinking; do we take getting and keeping our horses **fit and healthy** over

the winter seriously enough? Could we do more to assist our horses to perform? It is essential that we keep our horses at a level of fitness that is acceptable for the job we ask them to do. Not only is this only fair for them, but also, putting my REVN hat on, is a really good way to prevent the musculoskeletal injuries I see daily in my job.

So what can we do to help our horses? Regular, sustained work for a start, although this can be difficult in the winter, with the bad weather and dark nights. Good, regular foot care in the form of farriery is essential to help to keep your horse sound. Not only this, but taking care of your horse's feet yourself – for example, picking them out twice daily, checking for cracks and applying treatments if required.

Investing time daily in correct warm-up and cool-down regimes for the horses will help in terms of injury prevention. Working the horse in a balanced outline will also help to prevent injuries. If the horse finds this difficult, this may be worth **investigating**. Minor problems can be picked up easily by the vet, who can then enlist the help of the farrier and maybe a chartered physiotherapist to address the problem, and prevent it turning into something more serious.

Having the correct equipment will also help. One of the most important pieces of equipment to get right is the saddle. This should be checked regularly by a qualified saddle fitter who is a member of The Society of Master Saddlers.

The horse's shape will change with season, age and workload so regular checking and altering of the saddle will help to maintain the correct fit, and prevent problems that may affect performance.

I also wonder if, as riders, we pay enough attention to our own fitness. A tired, unbalanced rider is sure to have a deleterious effect on the horse and their own performance. This could put both the horse and rider at a higher risk of injury. Although most horse owners spend all their time and money on keeping their horse healthy and happy (myself included), maybe we should concentrate more on our own health and fitness.

Cross-training – for example, running, cycling, swimming or Pilates a few times a week – could help us to help our horses by being fitter, better-balanced riders. As we are all aware, prevention is always better and more financially viable than cure and with this in mind I am prepared to put the extra effort in to keep my horse sound and healthy. Now, where did I put my swimming costume?

