

The health kick

In an age when social media is awash with snaps of green smoothies and people are brandishing their #eatclean lives, where do busy riders fit in? Sue Polley meets the equestrians who've embraced a health kick — and are reaping the rewards

CONSIDER for a moment the amount of time we spend agonising over what to feed our horses, painstakingly measuring out the winning formula that will unleash their potential. And then think about the somewhat different situation in our own feed rooms.

"Riders often go for what is quick and convenient but the sugar content in these foods and drinks actually has the opposite effect to what is required," explains health coach Lauren Barber, who started her business to help people find out what foods work best for them. "These foods don't fill you up and the high sugar and fat content make you feel more sluggish and less focused after an initial 'high'."

"Everyone's body is different but, in general, riders don't drink enough water and don't eat often enough to maintain the balanced body sugar levels required for concentration and quick reactions."

But with equestrian sport getting increasingly professional across the board, is change afoot when it comes to giving our diet some TLC?

'I really started to struggle'

DRESSAGE rider Maria Ellberg is just one of the riders who have reaped the rewards of working with World Class Programme sports dietitian Julia Scott Douglas. "Julia has been helping me to analyse what I do and come up with practical suggestions for improvement," says Maria.

"When I was younger I would be out on the yard early mucking out and would then come in and have a huge bowl of cereal and fruit, which would keep me going for the day," she says. "However, when I started riding more I couldn't do that as it gave me indigestion, so I stopped. I really started to struggle and my parents became concerned that I wasn't eating enough."

"They recently bought me a smoothie machine and it's been great. I make myself a smoothie with banana, egg, milk and whatever other fruit or veg I have and keep it with me all day. It takes two minutes to make and I sip it between rides — it's really filling and keeps me going."

England polo player Mark Tomlinson is another who has realised the need to focus on his own health as his sport has become more professional.

"Most teams have invested in personal trainers and physios, which is important as the game has become much more physical and faster," he explains.

"Riding is a complete sport as far as muscle groups are concerned so I ensure that I do a combination of stretching and Pilates every day to keep my core supple and supplement this with jogging, circuit training, cycling and swimming to keep my



Flora Harris' concentration levels have improved since ditching junk food

cardio fitness levels up. The latter is important to cope with the sheer physical challenge of remaining strong and in control when travelling at speed."

Mark pays equal attention to his diet in his ongoing bid to stay one step ahead of the opposition.

"I'm lucky in that I'm naturally quite scrawny so I can pretty much eat what I want without gaining weight," he admits. "I don't pig out in the evenings or drink alcohol before a game any more though as it affects my sleep and leaves me feeling sluggish. I make a conscious effort to down a couple of pints of water every morning as this just makes me feel better. I'm a fan of electrolyte drinks as they help to stabilise blood sugar and increase tolerance when working hard."

"I also make sure I snack little and often on things like nuts, breakfast bars and dried fruit."

What triggered these changes for Mark?

"I always want to improve my performance and making small changes like this worked for me. When you find something that works it makes you more confident and motivates you to do more," he says.

'The key has been getting organised'

EVENTER Flora Harris also saw the positive results of eating less but more often after gaining weight.

"With the help of Julia Scott Douglas I learnt to make the effort to eat breakfast, which I previously used to skip, and to snack on cereal bars and fruit throughout the day rather than on junk food, which I then supplemented with a huge evening meal," she says. "I also try to run three times a week and I have a rowing machine at home."

She admits that the changes have not all been easy but that results made them worthwhile.

"I feel fitter, stronger and not so tired at the end of the day," she says. "It's also definitely helped my concentration, which is vital on cross-country day."

"The key for me has been getting organised. It's very tempting when on long journeys or at events to snack on sweets and rubbish, so I now do my shopping online and stock up the lorry with healthy food like grapes and cereal bars before I go away, rather than buying rubbish at petrol stations."

Nicola Wilson, part of last month's silver medal-winning team at the eventing European Championships, also takes her own food to events to avoid the temptation of the burger van and does her best to drink enough water. But even Nicola admits that "my wonderful owners do tend to supplement this with delicious cakes..."

In the midst of a competition, the lure of the burger van can at times be overwhelming, but these riders are proving that ditching the junk is worth the investment — however time-strapped we are. **H&H**

6 WAYS TO GIVE YOURSELF A HEALTH KICK

1. Think of yourself as an athlete

Take your own nutrition and exercise as seriously as you take your horses'. After all, you are a 50:50 partnership. Riding and managing horses is tough, physical work and if you want to perform well in your discipline you need to realise your body plays a key role in making this happen.

2. Increase your water intake

Nothing is more crucial to athletic performance than water. Without sufficient water you will become dehydrated, which will affect your ability to think straight and react quickly. Always have a bottle with you to sip from at home and at a competition.

3. Eat little and often

Professional and working riders' busy lifestyles make it tempting to skip regular meals and then reach for high-fat, high-sugar pick-me-ups. To avoid peaks and troughs in your blood sugar levels and the resulting mood swings and fatigue, take a leaf out of your horse's book and try to "graze" on low-fat and low-sugar foods throughout the day.

4. Adopt an exercise routine to meet your needs

Equestrians don't need to be gym fit, they need to be riding fit. Try a few sessions with a physio or personal trainer to identify which areas of your body you need to strengthen to minimise injury and increase strength, endurance and flexibility.

5. Get some sleep

This is easy to say but tricky to do when you're facing a 3.30am start on a competition day and are juggling a full-time job with riding. That said, your mind needs to switch off and your body has to rest, recover and repair itself from the day's hard work. Aim for an average of six to eight hours per night.

6. Avoid processed foods as far as possible

The convenience factor means we're unlikely to avoid ready meals altogether, but cutting down and eating more foods as close to their natural state as possible will give you a boost.



Maria Ellberg sips on a home-made smoothie throughout the day to boost her energy levels

Pictures by Chris Alcock and Jon Streed Media