

# Strengthen Your Seat

by Kit Darrow and Lee Ziegler

First you s-s-s-str-r-r-e-t-c-h, now you build strength!

**THE PREVIOUS ISSUE OF TGH** included the first article in this two-part series, "Improve Your Seat." The focus was on stretching exercises. The focus of this article, "Strengthen Your Seat", is on strengthening exercises. Doing the stretches and exercises described in these two articles will give you a greater degree of trunk strength and balance and ultimately more effective use of your seat while riding.

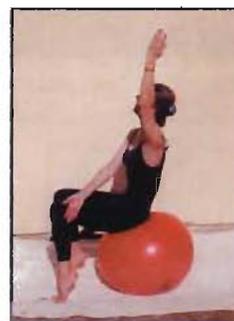
## Pain - No Pain

THE EXERCISES described below can be adapted to suit your current level of trunk strength. As with the stretching exercises, if any of these strengthening exercises are painful to you, stop doing them! Or change them to suit your abilities.

As with the stretching exercises, you perform the strengthening exercises using a large exercise ball. Thus, you can strengthen your trunk muscles before you ride your horse. Exercise balls are available for purchase at many stores, including Wal-Mart and K-mart, and cost about \$15 to \$30.

## Find your exercise ball and let's Strengthen Your Seat!

YOU CAN PERFORM all of the exercises described here in about 10 minutes. For optimal gain, perform these exercises two or three times a week immediately after doing the stretching exercises. It may take a few sessions until you obtain the form demonstrated by our model. You can use a mirror or have a friend "spot" you to make sure you are performing these exercises correctly. If you have already been doing the stretching exercises, you have gained a sense of balance on the ball. With a little persistence, these new exercises will add to your sense of balance.



A-1

## Side Scrunches

SIT STRAIGHT on the ball with your feet about hip width apart on the floor. With your right hand, reach over your left knee and at the same time reach high over your head with your left arm. Concentrate on using your side muscles to do this.

Breathe out as you reach up. Switch to reaching over your right knee with your left hand and overhead with your right arm. Alternate back and forth 10 times each side.



B-1

## Lower Back Strength

LAY FORWARD over the ball with your hands behind your head and your knees under your hips.

Inhale.



B-2

Using your back muscles, lift your upper body while exhaling.

Keep your elbows out. Only lift to the point shown in the picture.

Do not arch or hyper-extend your back.

Lower your body and repeat 10 times.



C-1

## Head to Toe Back Strength

FROM THE POSITION pictured in Photo B1, extend your legs behind you, using your feet and toes for balance. Balance your trunk on the ball, putting your hands on the floor in a push-up position.

Raise your head and arms slowly as shown, breathing out.

Slowly lower your head and arms.

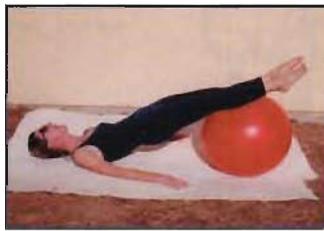
Repeat 10 times.



D-1

## Hip Bridge Strength

LAY ON YOUR BACK on the floor with your knees bent and your legs resting over the ball. Focus on flattening your back to the floor and breathing evenly in and out. Your arms should be at your sides.



D-2

While exhaling, slowly push your hips up towards the ceiling.

Hold the extension for a second, then lower your body one vertebrae at a time from the neck down the spine. Really strive for control and a straight extended body position when doing this exercise.

Repeat 10 times.



E-1

## Stomach Scrunches

LAY ON YOUR BACK on top of the ball with your feet on the floor about shoulder width apart.

Once you get your balance, start reaching towards your knees while exhaling. Keep your chin tucked in towards your chest.

Go up about 6 or 8 inches.

Inhale slowly and roll back down until your back is straight.

Repeat 10 times.

If balance is difficult for you, you may want to try this one sitting on the side or end of your bed before you do it on the ball.

## Hints for Success

AS WITH THE STRETCHING exercises...

**Breathe** in through your nose and out through your mouth while doing these strengthening exercises. Remember to think about breathing so deeply that you use your stomach muscles to push air in and out, like a bellows. Maintain an even breathing pattern and do not hold your breath.

**Relax** Practice just sitting on the ball with your back straight, but in a neutral position. That is, your back should not be arched or braced. Keep your shoulders level, with neither shoulder held lower than the other. If you spread your feet, you can get close to your riding position. Use a mirror to correct your posture.

**Keep it fun.** Put on your favorite music or TV show. Or even watch "How to" riding videos while doing these exercises. If you have a calm horse, you may be able to do some of these exercises while mounted.

## To Harmony

WE HOPE THAT THESE TWO ARTICLES have helped you to stretch and strengthen your seat. You should notice greater harmony between you and your horse. We hope these exercises have made your riding experience more pleasant.

### About the Authors:

*Kit Darrow owns and rides Fox Trotters and is a professor in Human Performance, Sport and Leisure Studies at Metropolitan State College of Denver, Colorado. Kit lives in Evergreen, Colorado. Lec Ziegler, who took all the photos for this article, is a frequent contributor to TGH and teaches riding to gaited horse owners. She is also a judge and does clinics around the country and in Europe. Lee lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado.*

*Thanks to Ms. Katherine Utke for modeling and to Ms. Valerie Gluth, PT, for editing.*

