



THE PROFILE ECLECTIC

Intriguing people working in horsemanship today

By Katrina Hays

The mission of *Eclectic Horseman Communications* is to be a conduit for the best quality horsemanship instruction, and to facilitate learning and access to the most qualified and compassionate resources we are able to connect you with.

To that end, periodically *Eclectic Horseman Magazine* finds people working in the horse world who are doing things a bit differently—and their viewpoints, methods, and insights point the way toward greater relatedness both for horses and people and for people and people.

These short profiles will introduce you to some of the people in the eclectic fold—the ones who might think a little outside the box and offer us good food for thought as we work with and love our equines.

JEC ARISTOTLE BALLOU

Equine conditioning expert

A prima ballerina spends years doing endless barre work and a zillion pliés before exploding across a dance floor in a powerful grand jeté in "Swan Lake." By the time a football wide receiver swaggers onto an NFL playing field, he has done thousands of hours of strength work and cross-training to develop his glutei maximi sufficiently so he does not get broken the first time he gets tackled.

Horses, like humans, need specific training and exercise to keep their joints and bodies sound, and this is where Jec Ballou—trainer and author of several books on equine conditioning—comes in.

"Every horse needs to be an athlete first, and only then can he comfortably and willingly work with you toward your riding and performance goals," she says.

Jec, 47, grew up in Vermont as part of a family that rode and trained horses. She studied dressage throughout Europe, and eventually settled in California. About 15 years ago, she began to realize that a lot of the struggle and strife people had when riding or working with horses came from the fact that the horses were not strong enough, balanced enough and fit enough to do the work that was being asked of them.

"I started to realize we needed more information about how to make horses really fit. And that started me studying equine fitness and physiology. I took the equine exercise and physiology course at the University of Guelph. Gerd Heuschmann is my



mentor. And I started putting together books and programs to help people condition their horses correctly."

With a range of titles as diverse as *101 Western Dressage Exercises*, *55 Corrective Exercises for Horses*, and the recently-released *33 Strength and Fitness Workouts for Horses*, Jec's books, courses, and equine fitness plans are potent resources for people who want to improve their horses' bodies.

THE VALUE OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDY

Back in the day, there was very little specialization for the general family equine. The horse that pulled a cart also was a riding horse. The kids jumped it and showed at the county fair in the summer, and it was used for livestock work in the spring and fall. Today, most horses are purpose-driven from birth, and Jec observes that this comes with a real cost to equine longevity and soundness.

"I think what we've lost in the horse world is the value of a horse just being a generally trained all-around athlete for years before you decide to specialize in something. I was raised in a horse-training family and that was our reality. We trained all the horses in our barn exactly the same way. You know, we'd ride them out on the trail two days a week. We had a cavaletti day, and we'd do a couple of dressage arena sessions. Each horse did the same program, no matter what his intended competition.

I look at the stuff we grapple with in today's world, with the chronic back soreness and the laminitis and all kissing spine and all the things, and we just never had those issues. I think it's because we're just specializing the horses too early. You cannot do that and expect them to stay sound."

FITNESS IS PROTECTIVE

When we get a bad back, or sprain an ankle, or injure an elbow, we go to a physical therapist. The PT give us a series of exercises and we say, "Hey! I feel better! I have improved range of motion and my (back, ankle, shoulder, etc.) doesn't hurt any more!"

Horses are the same way, but the ideal is to actually prevent the kissing spines, the suspensory injury, the bicipital bursitis from happening in the first place. Getting a horse truly fit is the key, but how?

"Fitness is protective, but you have to go about it the right way," says Jec. "People talk about how it's important to do a warm up, but we need to be clear about what we're doing in the warm up. Most of us don't really realize there is a difference between postural muscles and gymnastic muscles."

For those of us who may not exactly know the difference between postural and gymnastic muscles, as a general rule, "postural muscles" are deep muscles and the muscles close to joints. They are responsible for support and stabilization of the horse's body. "Gymnastic muscles" are the large, exterior muscles involved in locomotion.

"The goal is to activate the postural muscles first, because when they are doing their job, which is to stabilize and organize the body, then the gymnastic muscles can do their role really well, which is propulsion and movement. Without joint and postural stability, an equine athlete cannot develop strength and power correctly."

Equine-specific exercises, like the ones found in Jec's books and exercise routines, allow people to develop horses correctly, working both from the ground and under saddle.

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS DO THE SAME THING EVERY DAY

Horses are amazing athletes. They have an astounding ability to adapt and improve their fitness. But just because they

FROM PATRICK KING ...

Patrick King is a trainer passionate about dressage and using the classical principles of training to help horses become the best athletes they can be. He spoke with Eclectic Horseman about the importance of Jec's work for horses and humans.

EH: Why is Jec's work important for horse folks to know?

Something Jec talks about a lot is the importance of understanding the difference between education and fitness. It's one thing for a horse to learn a task. But when it comes to the physical fitness side of things, it's not the same. They can progress in their understanding of a task, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're going to be progressing in their strength and physical ability to sustain that work.

One of the important things about Jec's work that I think is essential for people to understand is she teaches us that just because the horse understands something mentally, it doesn't mean he can maintain it physically.

Often, we get into a situation with a horse where they understand the work, and then maybe we push it a little too far. Now the work has gotten much more difficult. It becomes a physical struggle [for the horse] to keep going. If we don't understand this piece, it can look like resistance, right? When really it's just the body reached a limit.

EH: What are the benefits of Jec's exercises for the horse?

Jec's exercises affect the horse's ability to sustain the work and be sound for longer.

EH: How has Jec's idea of improving equine fitness affected your work and teaching?

It's affected my work because now I know more, right? I know deeper, I understand better where the line is as far as understanding versus physical ability. And that has been really helpful, not only in presenting my ideas to students and to horses I might have in training, but it also helps me to lay out a progressive plan for those students and those horses.

EH: Anything you want to add?

I think it's really important for us as trainers, as clinicians, and as riders to really understand the difference between the horse comprehending what we're asking [them to do] and the horse being physically able to do what we're asking. It's important to understand where the horse's limitations are and if we are taking a movement to excess, which is going to break down the horse's body. I think it's important for us to have fair expectations of our horse.

The information Jec puts out there should be standard information for all trainers and clinicians to know—everyone should understand this about their horses.

MORE INFORMATION ON PATRICK KING:

Web site: pkhorsemanship.com

Patrick King Podcast: "Talking About Horses with Patrick King and Jec Ballou"

don't complain doesn't mean we are doing things correctly for them. One area that Jec says she's on a mission to course-correct with horse folk is the scourge of repetitive movement.

"Stop with the repetitive movements! Stop with the lack of warm ups and cool downs! Stop keeping them in tiny, little enclosures where they can't move freely. I mean, that stuff ages a horse fast," she exclaims, with passion.

Jec recommends working horses on different surfaces, in order to prevent proprioception (body awareness) deficits. She says to train on a range of surfaces at different speeds to keep horses accurate with their feet and nimble in response

"One of the exercises I also use a lot is just speed changes in the trot. It really loosens the loins, and it really gets different muscle activation throughout the body."

She also loves ground pole work.

"Horses can progress faster with ground poles in a few weeks than with months of trying to teach them to rebalance with half halts, in my experience. Poles are sort of magic."

THE POINT IS TO MOVE

Exercise can take many forms. A lot of us can get pretty linear and think the important work we do with our equines as being solely focused on our particular sport or discipline. Around and around the arena we go, doing myriad sliding stops or half-passes along the diagonal or going over endless fence combinations, which leads to overuse injuries and boredom.

Jec says to mix it up for horse health. "I tell people, well, you can put a lead line on and take your horse for a hike up in the hills," she says. "I mean, you get some exercise. A nice two-mile, 40-minute brisk walk is terrific for horses. You can do some mobility drills from the ground and the saddle. You can do a few of my exercises. Keeping the horse's body activated in different ways a lot of times will clear up these weird movement problems that can crop up."

Correct movement is the non-negotiable factor that helps create our best possible riding partner. Jec Ballou's work offers physical fitness practices that make for a happy equine athlete—one that will have health and longevity, which is what we all want from our horses.

MORE INFORMATION:

jecballou.com or watch videos on YouTube @[jecballou/videos](https://www.youtube.com/user/jecballou/videos)

TWO JEC BALLOU EXERCISES:



BACK-UP

I ask Corazon to back up with straight rhythmic steps while also asking him to lower his neck slightly. With the rope and cavesson, I lightly draw his neck out and down while my body language—stepping toward him—tells him to back up. If he becomes crooked as he steps, I ask him to slow down or stoop before proceeding.

Unmounted

1. Many of the fitness routines require you to back your horse up a prescribed number of steps from the ground. Each foreleg stepping back counts as a single step.
2. As you ask for the back-up, aim to keep the horse's neck level with his torso, neither too high nor too low.

Mounted

1. There are many varying cues and preferences amongst riders for backing up a horse from the saddle. In the absence of your own preferences, however, begin at a quiet standstill, adjusting your reins to establish a light feeling of both corners of your horse's mouth.

UP AND OVERS

Corazon approaches the platform with smooth rhythm (A). He steps up and over the platform for the designated number of reps in our workout (B). His neck and topline are visibly relaxed and he is taking big, full steps with his hind legs.

1. Lead or longe your horse calmly at a walk only over a raised platform measuring 8 inches or taller.
2. Maintain a smooth, steady rhythm while approaching the platform.
3. Repeat for prescribed time, changing direction halfway through.

Tip: In the absence of a suitable platform, alternatives that can often be used for this exercise include ramps, berms or dirt piles, or bridges.

