

Interview with Ian King
For the book 'Winning Horsemanship', by Jo Verikios
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1. Ian, please tell us about your professional journey, experience and expertise.

I started out in 1980 looking for the answer to the question 'What is the best way to train?' The question was for myself, to simply answer a question that had been nagging me since I was a kid. I grew up in a play based culture and was impacted by my involvement during the 1969 South Pacific Games. For me that was an Olympic like experience!

As I grew up I realized that no one I knew really knew the answer to my question, and I chose to keep searching. When I started in formal higher education in 1980 I again realized that none of my lecturers had the answers, so I searched through informal study and practical experience.

I didn't set out with an occupational or professional service intent, however very quickly athletes were attracted to my search, and asked me to help answer the same questions for their own goals.

By 1982 I had moved from training young and amateur athletes to helping elite athletes, and by 1986, with over 100 national level elite athletes in my care, I decided I needed to formalize what I was doing even if only for tax purposes and registered a business!

So for the last 35 years I've been continuously helping athletes and coaches find answers to the simple question 'what is the best way to train'. Along the way society has created a few more roles and job descriptions and now it's a formal career path, however I'm underwhelmed at the results this has created, and in many cases the athletes are not being served in their highest and best interests.

2. You have worked with many elite athletes from different disciplines over the years. What are your key messages with regard to preparing athletes for competition and keeping them on the field?

If I had to limit it to one key I would say trust your intuition. We are

conditioned in our societal upbringings and education to suppress our intuition. We've moved from a culture that whose thinking was shaped by the power of 'the bible says' to a society where thinking is shaped by 'the research says'.

By the time mainstream research acknowledges certain possibilities, a lifetime of opportunity could be lost.

Let me give you an example. When I was a young man I suffered an injury to the knee. I trust my highly qualified and respected physical therapists and did certain things to rehabilitate the joint. You see these training paradigms were the dominant trend in 'science' at the time. This blind trust caused me long-term degenerative changes that I carry for life. With the wisdom of hindsight I learnt that I should have been more objective in my personal analysis of the decisions, and asked for intuitive guidance.

When I teach the concept to people to this day some think I am crazy, some find it intellectually interesting and some apply the teachings practically. I encourage the latter.

This means you need to be willing to be non-conformist when your best interests are being threatened.

Don't assume that all those in your circle of influence have your best interests at heart. Sadly, ego, dogma and the desire to be in control sometimes results in influences that are not in your best interests. Team sport athletes are more likely to fall for this conformity, and I find it tough to watch when they knowingly concede what they know is best for them to appease a person with power or perceived power in their support team.

3.Does the same hold true for recreational athletes and weekend warriors?

Definitely. The amateur, young and weekend athlete are potentially even more influenced by the desire to confirm and model.

Two key areas shape their behavior and its rarely for the best.

The first is trends. Trends I suggest are commercially driven. So they are not there because they are optimal, they are not dominating because they are in the best interests of the end user – they dominate because people with adequate financial resources have driven the paradigm for their commercial benefit.

The second area of influence is what they see higher level athletes do, or what is written about what they allegedly do. Guess what – what elite athletes do these days is mostly trend driven also! The only difference is the trend driven behavior is from their physical training consultants. This then reinforces the trend, and everyone wants to follow it.

Stop! Think about it! Be willing to objectively analysis what's best for you. The majority of conforming humans/athletes will tell you to stop 'challenging' the truth, or to stop being 'crazy'. You are being neither – you are simply pausing to reflect, to use the innate natural gift of intuition, before dedicating the value of your time and energy and your future health and performance to the paradigms of the masses.

4. Turning specifically to people who ride horses, what fundamentals would you recommend in terms of flexibility and strength training?

The first principle I want to stress is that no training in sport helps you as much with your sport as playing the sport. Now I haven't seen it yet in the equestrian sports, but what has happened in too many other sports further down the road with their physical preparation training (or strength and conditioning, a term that I don't support but is very popular these days) is that they are being led to believe that their physical preparation training can solve more challenges in their sports performance that I suggest is optimal.

So firstly, if you lack technical skills, get the on the horse. If you lack riding fitness, get them on the horse.

Now there are a few things that you will need to do off the horse, and specifically what they are will be influenced by how advanced a rider you are and what you specific needs are.

So I've raised the principles of qualification and individualization. Qualification refers to your level of advancement as a rider, and the implication is that you may need more advanced off the horse training as you advance on the horse. Individualization means planning training based on your individual needs. You know everyone is different, and despite the concept of individualization making its way into training theory books since the 1980s, it's one skill in professional service that has not advanced at all, in my opinion. The majority to this day get most of their training done in group training sessions, which by nature cannot provide individualization.

So if you are a low level rider you don't need as much off horse training and can get by with lower level professional advice on physical training. However as you advance as a rider, and you believe that physical training is an area that you would benefit from improving in, seek higher-level professional advice.

To get specific, at the fundamental level and depending on the discipline and individual involved, the goal may be to gain the strength and flexibility to achieve or maintain certain body positions on the horse. At the more advanced level, and again depending on the discipline and individual involved, the goals may be more about tolerating the forces involved be they short term impact or longer duration durability.

5. In some equestrian sports, it is not possible to get fit enough for peak performance simply by riding. What compatible activities could people do to improve their endurance and cardio-vascular fitness?

As I spoke of above, the best way to prepare and succeed as a rider is to ride. There are a small number of fundamental reasons I advocate for off-horse training when appropriate, and this may include:

- to support posture on the horse
- to reduce injuries typical to horse riding including lower back strain
- to improve flexibility as it relate to both points above
- to enhance the ability to tolerate forces and durations on the horse as it relates to improved performance and reduced injury

In a nutshell, my first priority for riders in their off-horse training is to do the things that may contribute to avoiding injury, and my second priority is to do things off-horse that have the potential to improve on-horse performance. However, riding is and will always be the most important training you can do!

Now let me give you a crash course on what off-horse training will potentially do for horse riding:

- Endurance training – Australia is a land renowned for its pride in endurance and many sports in our country have a long tradition of say running and similar to enhance their sports. The challenge with this is that endurance is, in my opinion (and as reflected in a concept I have published that I call the ‘Specificity Continuum’) of all the of-horse training modalities, the one that needs to be done the most specifically to transfer to riding.

Now there is one over riding variable and that is level of competency or level of qualification in riding. If you are a relative beginner, non-specific running or other endurance type activities may transfer. However as you advance in ability on the horse, the transfer and benefits from non-specific endurance training is reduced, and therefore of less value for you.

This is due to specific demands placed on what some call ‘peripheral’ endurance – the things that are happening at the cellular level in the joints and muscles doing the work.

When we do non-specific endurance training it can significantly improve our heart and lung or ‘Central’ endurance, however as we improve in our riding ability, this factor potentially is reduced in importance relative to our ‘Peripheral’ fitness.

So lower level riders may receive more benefits from non-specific endurance than advanced riders, who will need to get their endurance adaptations from the more specific options – such as riding! Now at this level we begin to introduce on-horse variables to enhance the training effect, such as in some cases longer duration riding, and in some cases shorter duration but more intense riding drills and activities.

- Strength training – the popularity of strength training has been on a fast upward trajectory since about 1990, so you would probably have been exposed to this form of training in some regard. The challenge for all sports in the early days of applying strength training has been to work out how to make it transfer to their sport.

Now few sports have solved this challenge, but in the meantime another challenge has arisen that for the moment few even acknowledge, although I suggest they are in denial if they don't. And that is the increased incidence of injury in sports that have introduced more intense strength training programs.

Now this is my theory for why this is occurring. Strength training is one of the most potent forms of training, causing the most significant changes. Athletes and coaches get confused between improved strength – which can occur quickly – and improved performance from the increased strength. They are spurred on by the quick gains in strength and pursue more gains. What is not measured or questioned is how the additional strength changes are transferring. The diminished rate of transfer is often overlooked.

Now to compound this is the increased injury potential from developing non-specific muscles and muscle imbalances. So before they know it there are a whole new injury patterns occurring, and no-one knows why. They say the events are tougher now, or other excuses.

Let me compare strength training to this – imagine if you took the biggest, most powerful horse and put a beginning on it. Not in the round yard, but in a big open paddock. Risky? That's what strength training is to all athletes. Now I'm not seeing this trend yet in riding but sadly I fear it will occur.

The bottom line is you need to be prudent in your application of strength training. Endurance training may fail to transfer, but strength training has a far more insidious potential.

- Flexibility training – now for reasons beyond the scope of this text flexibility is the most neglected and suppressed form of training, yet in my opinion (and I have held this position for over three decades) it is the most important form of training you can do.

Remember how I spoke earlier about the primary goal of off-horse training is to reduce injury? Well flexibility training is, in my opinion, the most important and biggest contributor to injury prevention of all training options.

Now horse riding may not be in some disciplines at least as obviously damaging to the body as other sports, however the more you do a physical activity, the more intensely you do a physical activity, and the more years you do a physical activity – the more imbalances you will develop in the body. You are building injury potential! And stretching or flexibility training is a must do in all serious riders program.

6. What are your top tips for developing a stretching regime and sticking to it?

Like all new habits I want to create permanence. Too often humans over-react in the short-term and under-react in the long-term. You see people get excited, get serious for a few weeks or months, and then quit. It doesn't matter what is optimal duration or type – I would rather you undertrain at first to develop and confirm a new, long-term habit.

So here's my suggestion – start with a very short duration low frequency program. Say a ten to twenty minute stretching program one to twice a week. Then I expect within a few weeks you will see the benefits and want to do more. Once you internalize the benefits, commitment comes easier!

To support the success of your program I do expect focus but you can be comfortable. Choose a quiet place, and using a soft surface or mat when lying down, focus on what you are doing. If you prefer music make sure it is calming music, as relaxing is the key to stretching!

7. Do you have a view on the best way to improve the strength, flexibility and conditioning for horses themselves?

The horse industry, especially flat-track racing, has been quite advanced in its training approach. I have long said that most race horses get better trained and more attention than many elite athletes!

Here are some specific comments on your horse's physical training:

- Flexibility training - If we could use a simplistic division of horse stretching into dynamic and static. Dynamic stretching is typically achieved through specific drills to have a horse move in a way or direction that enhances its ability to do so. Static flexibility involves even more human intervention, including you picking up the horse leg and conducting the stretch for/with them.

I have been impressed with the recommendations from the vet and related industries about how and why to statically stretch a horse. It's hard work due to the size of the horse, and does need expert guidance, but the information is there. We all know how dependent a horse is on mobility for life, and therefore stretching of the legs and related joints form a critical part of this program. The next consideration will be the spine. And then there are manual techniques for softening the muscles and other connective tissues. There is so much to be done with those big bodies, but the exciting thing is the possibilities this offers to improve the horse's performance and reduce their injury risk.

- Strength training – the great thing about the horse's strength (and endurance) training is that it will always have a high degree of specificity in that it will involve the horse's natural movements.

The primary way to increase the strength work of a horse is to increase the load on the horse. This may include increasing the vertical displacement of the horse, or changing the angle of the land you ride on, or changing the surface you ride on or in.

However there are implications to all these options, and the same holds true for humans in all sports. The best way to explain this is to ask the question 'What would the impact be on the horses

movement pattern, skills and safety, if I was to do that with the horse?’

And ideally work this question into the paradigms of your coach, because all movement should be conducted in context of the desired performance movement patterns. Training should not be conducted without these considerations – how it may impact specific performance, how it may impact the injury status.

Therefore all these training methods need to be reviewed extensively and used prudently. As they say in carpentry – measure three times, cut once.

Once you confirm the activity will contribute rather than detract from the horses performance, and that there are no contra-indications to the activity in your horse, you need to ensure new methods are introduced in low volume and intensity initially, and built on progressively from this safe starting point.

For example If you change the ground surface make sure the changes are only subtle and you are progressive in your training durations. If you choose hill work start with very small changes in the slope angles as you may be surprised how much training effect can be achieved with the least manipulation of variables, and again too much change too soon will increase injury risk to the horse.

- Endurance training – This option has perhaps the longest history and can be as simple of having the horse do more distance than previously. Now as you can imagine there are diminishing returns to any stimulus, so you need to be more creative than this.

Fortunately humans in other sports are learning that doing more endurance training is not the only way to enhance endurance. Humans studies are showing that strength training can also enhance endurance qualities, and I believe in time it will be confirmed in research that improvement in flexibility also enhance endurance.

So the first key to endurance training options is to be holistic in

your training approach. Rather than doing all long distance work, include some shorter duration higher intensity work. This is typically referred to in human training as interval work. Rather than doing all long distance work, include some basic strength and flexibility work.

- Speed training- now a fourth training component I include with humans is speed work. This component is relevant to the riding disciplines where speed of the horse between two distance is a performance factor. The shorter the distance between points A and B the more critical speed work is.

Speed work with the horse can be as simple as rehearsing the distances relevant in the discipline. You should manipulate and vary the rest periods, sometimes using longer rest periods in training than used in competition between sprints, sometimes using shorter rest periods.

An additional to consider in speed work, and again I refer to my 'Specificity Continuum', is that speed training has a relatively high need for specificity for the training to effectively transfer. This includes distances covered, and it also includes surface used. Humans fall into what I believe is a trap and that is to do their speed work on non-specific surfaces, and find their training fails to fully transfer. They appear ignorant of the specificity needs of surface type in speed work.

8. What do you believe are the essential qualities or personal attributes of a winner?

I'm well positioned to comment on this having been involved with and helping winners from over twenty sports compete and win on the international stage.

The first lesson I want to share is winning comes from within. The only one that determines if the athlete or horse have the ability to win is you and or the horse. As trainers and coaches we provide the 1% that may be missing, but if you add 1% to a mule its not going to win the local derby!

The second lesson I have learnt is that champions and courage comes in all shapes and sizes. Too often I hear criticism that athlete x is too tall, too short, too skinny, too large and so on. It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. Winners come in all shapes and sizes so forget about stereotypes and other people's opinions!

The third point I want to touch upon is ignoring the limiting beliefs about superior backgrounds. Some blame their genetics, some their equipment, some their funding. We can all find excuses. However champions come from positions of adversity also. Its not about the adversity you face. It's about what you are willing to do to rise above your adversities!

9.What one piece of advice would you like to conclude with?

What is the best way to contact you if people want to know more
(website, books, articles etc.)

The most important thing I can share with you is that you can choose to be great, whatever that means for you, and you have the tools to find and answer the questions "What is the best way for me to train/ for me to train my horse? You have your intuition, and you should use that as you search for the answers!

You can find my company offerings at www.kingsports.net or look me up on the web under my name. Thanks!