Equestrian Training, Health, and Fitness Guide

A quick-start resource for all levels of coaches.

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Partially sourced from: Special Olympics International Golf Coaching Guide
HEALTH and FITNESS TALK

Suggestions for including a focus on year-round health and wellness in your sports practice.

“To be a great athlete, you need to be a healthy athlete.”

These discussions are laid out in balance, order, and accordance with Special Olympics Montana’s 8 weeks – 10 hours practice requirements. An included practice plan, which shows how these discussions can fit in a practice, is included in this same packet.

The goal of Health and Fitness Talk is to support the health, fitness, growth, and success of Special Olympics Montana competitors. It is designed to be used as a part of your practice season. The following discussions will provide competitors with the introductory knowledge to begin thought processes on:

- Identifying nutritious choices
- Balancing nutrition and portions
- Making healthy and balanced snack and meals choices
- The importance of hydration
- Identifying unhealthy beverage choices
- Understanding endurance and strength
- Understanding flexibility and balance
- Understanding the benefits and fun of exercise

If you are interested in a more in-depth Health and Fitness Program, explanations, examples, and lesson plans/guides, reach out to the Special Olympics Montana Senior Director of Innovation at 406-216-5327.

Practice Week #1 Discussion: NUTRITION: Eating right is important to your health and your sports performance. Eating right can be easy and enjoyable because there are many delicious healthy choices.

Your goal is to eat at least 5 total fruits and vegetables every day!

Tell your teammate the names of some Fruits:
- Fresh: Apples, Bananas, Berries, Grapes, Kiwi, Oranges
- Frozen Fruits
- Canned fruits (pick options with no added sugar)
- Dried fruits: Raisins, Bananas, Apricots

Tell your teammate the names of some Vegetables:
- Fresh: Asparagus, Broccoli, Carrots, Cauliflower, Green Beans, Peppers, Squash
- Lettuces and Dark Leafy Greens
- Frozen Vegetables
- Salads
- Canned Vegetables
-What fruits can you have for breakfast? Lunch?
-What vegetables can you have for lunch? Dinner?

You know fruits and vegetables are important for your health, but sometimes it can be difficult to know what other foods you should be eating. Here is a list of the other food groups and some great choices in each group that make up a healthy meal or diet.

**Grains:**
- Brown or Wild, or Unpolished Rice
- Oatmeal
- Whole Grain Bread
- Whole Grain Pasta
- Whole Grain Crackers
- Tortilla
- Flatbread

**Diary:**
- Low-fat or Skim Milk
- Low-fat Cheese
- Low-fat, unsweetened yogurt (watch the sugar!)
- Cottage Cheese

**Meats and Beans (Protein):**
- Lean Meats
- Eggs
- Fish (frozen, fresh or canned)
- Nuts
- Beans

-Tell your partner the Grains you ate yesterday. Dairy?
-Share with a teammate what protein (Meats & Beans) you had last night for dinner.

**Practice Week #2 Discussion:** **BUILDING A HEALTHY PLATE:** From last time, you now know what types of foods to eat. Here is how to build a healthy plate for a meal or for a snack.

- Watch the amounts of food you put on your plate (share/discuss the “Perfect Portions” diagram below).
- Save junk food like desserts, chips and sodas for special occasions.
- Make half of your plate fruits or vegetables (see diagram below).
- Fill the other half with foods like whole grains, dairy, and protein.
- Add more fruits and vegetables to your meals.
- Keep snacks healthy and small.

-Tell your teammate how to build a healthy plate.
-Name the 4 food groups that should make up a healthy meal.
Here is a fun way to remember how much to eat when you have a serving. The size of sports equipment on the left is about the same size as one serving of the foods on the right.

- Baseball = 1 serving of fruit
- Baseball = 1 serving of long pasta
- Baseball = 1 serving of broccoli
- Basketball = 1.5 tablespoons of butter
- Basketball = 1 serving of cheese
- Basketball = 1 serving of yogurt
Practice Week #3 Discussion: **HEALTHY SNACK IDEAS:** Snacking is a great way to make sure you are full of energy. It is important to keep your snacks healthy. Here are a few ideas for tasty snacks that are packed with fruits and vegetables.

- Apple slices dipped in peanut butter
- Low-fat unsweetened yogurt with berries
- Low-fat cottage cheese with tomatoes
- Carrots or peppers dipped in hummus
- Celery topped with peanut butter and raisins

-What snacks do you like the most? Are these healthy snacks or junk food snacks?
-Tell your partner a healthy snack you could make for yourself.
-Are these healthy snacks (thumbs up) or junk food snacks (thumbs down)?

- Doritos
- Banana with peanut butter
- Snickers candy bar
- A half cup of nuts
- Carrot sticks
- A cookie

**HEALTHY MEALS:** Add more fruits and vegetables to your meals. You can make any meal more nutritious with these simple suggestions.

**Breakfast**

- Have a piece of fruit with your meal.
- Vegetables like spinach, tomatoes, onions, and peppers make great toppings on omelettes.
- Dried or cut fruit make great toppings on cereal and oatmeal as well.

**Dinner**

- Add vegetables like broccoli, squash, or peppers to pastas.
- Make a stir-fry with brown rice, your favorite lean meat or seafood, and vegetables.
- Add a side of steamed vegetables or a salad to any meal.
- Have some fruit as a healthy dessert.

**Lunch**

- Top sandwiches with plenty of vegetables like lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, and sprouts.
- Try apples, carrots, or celery for a crunchy side.
- Add leftover or canned vegetables like peas and carrots to soups.
- Make a salad with your choice of meat, cheese, lots of vegetables, and an oil-based dressing.
-What healthy items can you add to a salad (carrots, tomatoes, sunflower seeds, etc.)?
-Do you like oatmeal? What can add to oatmeal (banana, blueberries, etc.)
-Tell your partner how are you doing with the goal of having half your plate be fruits and vegetables.

**Practice Week #4 Discussion: HYDRATION:** Water is another important fuel for sports and for life. Drinking the right amount of water is important for your health and can also help your athletic performance.

**Your goal is to drink 5 bottles of water every day!** Your water bottle should be 16-20oz or 500-600ml. Drink out of a sports water bottle to track your water intake. Sports bottles are refillable and can hold 16-20oz or 500-600ml of water.

-Do you have a water bottle? Do you take it with you when you go places? Do you bring it with you to practice?
-Are you drinking water with your meals?

**SIGNS OF DEHYDRATION:** Water helps to keep your body working properly. You lose water when you go to the bathroom, sweat, exercise or even breathe. If you lose too much water without drinking more, your body won’t work as well. This is called dehydration.
Signs of Dehydration:
- You feel thirsty
- You are tired or sluggish
- You have a headache
- Your mouth is dry
- Your urine is dark yellow or brown

-Tell your teammate two of the signs of dehydration.
-Have you ever been dehydrated? How did you know? How did you feel?

Practice Week #5 Discussion: HEALTHY BEVERAGE CHOICES: There are many beverage options available, but some of them are healthier choices than others. This guide can help you make the best choices to stay hydrated and perform your best.

-What is your favorite thing to drink? How often do you drink it (most days, sometimes, special occasions)?
-What is the best thing to drink (water)? Why (no sugar)?

Sodas, energy drinks, and sports drinks are NOT good beverage choices.
Sodas, energy drinks, and sports drinks have extra sugar and can make you gain weight. Energy drinks and many sodas also have caffeine. Caffeine does not help you stay hydrated.

Moderate amounts of low-fat milk and 100% juice are also good choices in small amounts.
Low-fat milk and 100% fruit juice are good choices with meals. Keep serving sizes small. No more than 3 cups of milk and 1 cup of juice per day.

Water is the best choice for a beverage!
Drink water every day! If you like flavored drinks, try sparkling water or add a few pieces of fruit into your water bottle.
You might consider bringing in some beverages and having your athletes look at the number of grams of sugar in each one. The athletes could count out the number of sugar cubes represented in each drink.

4 grams of sugar = 1 sugar cube

-How does it make you feel knowing that there are 10 teaspoons of sugar in a can of Coke?
-Do sports drinks like Gatorade have sugar in them? TV ads don’t tell you that, do they?
Practice Week #6 Discussion: **EXERCISE - Endurance & Strength:** You can become a better athlete by enjoying physical activity outside of your sports practice. There are many ways to be physically active. Certain exercises can help you improve the skills needed for your sport. **Your goal is to do at least 5 days of exercise every week!**

*Types of Exercise: ENDURANCE STRENGTH FLEXIBILITY BALANCE*

**Endurance** is the ability of your body to keep moving for long periods of time. Endurance can help you run farther distances without stopping and practice longer with fewer breaks.

**Try your favorite endurance exercise for 30 minutes, 5 days each week.**

- Running
- Biking
- Dancing
- Brisk Walking
- Aerobics Classes
- Swimming
**Strength**

*Strength is the ability of your body to do work.* Strength gives you the ability to jump higher, throw farther, and sprint faster.

**Try to complete a workout for the entire body, 2-3 days each week.**

-Is dancing exercise? (Yes, endurance.)
-Running, biking, and swimming are examples of what type of exercise? (Endurance)
-Push-ups and sit-ups are what kind of exercise? (Strength)
-What exercise do you do for endurance? Strength?

**Practice Week #7 Discussion: EXERCISE- Flexibility & Balance:**

**Flexibility** is the ability of your body to move easily in all directions. Being flexible makes it easier to do sports skills and helps prevent injuries to your muscles and joints!

**Balance** is the ability of your body to stay upright or stay in control of your movements. Balance helps you to stay in control when you are playing sports and helps you to avoid falls.
Flexibility is the ability of your body to move easily in all directions. Being flexible makes it easier to do sports skills and helps prevent injuries to your muscles and joints!

Try to complete a stretch for all body parts, 2-3 days each week!

Balance is the ability of your body to stay upright or stay in control of your movements. Balance helps you to stay in control when you are playing sports and helps you to avoid falls.

Try to complete a full body balance workout, 2-3 days each week!

Note: Dynamic stretching should be done as part of your warm up. Static stretching should be done as part of a cool down.
Practice Week #8 Discussion: **EXERCISE IS FUN!**

**Exercise is Fun!**

It is easy to get in the right amount of exercise if you make it fun. Here are some tips to help you stay motivated to reach your Fit 5 goal.

- Exercise with a friend or group!
  - Go on a walk, run, or bike ride with a friend or family member.
  - Join a group exercise class.
  - Do strength training with a teammate.

- Take the lead at practice!
  - Ask your coach if you can lead some flexibility or strength exercises.
  - Teach a friend a new sport.

- Try something new!
  - Try a new group exercise class.
  - Walk or run a different route than you normally do.
  - Learn a new strength or flexibility exercise.

- Track your improvements!
  - Write a goal on a piece of paper. Post the goal on your wall.
  - Keep a log of your exercises so you can see your progress.

Doing exercise together is a fun way to socialize with friends and family.

- **How many of you could walk with a friend after school or work?** Attend an exercise or fitness class? Bike on a trail? Take a walk with your mom or dad?
- **What is a new exercise you would like to try?**
- **Share your exercise goal with a partner.**

The diagrams in this document are from the Special Olympics Fit 5 Guide.

Other resources:

- **NCHPAD.org** This website has lots of health resources for people with disabilities. They have articles, videos, and even workout plans.
- **ChooseMyPlate.org** This website has it all! Learn how many servings of each food group you need, track your eating to see if you are eating healthy, and even find links to healthy recipes.
- **EatRight.org** This website also has loads of nutrition information, healthy recipes, and even a section to find a dietitian in your area.
- **Heart.org** (click on the heading, “Getting Healthy”) The American Heart Association has great resources for leading a healthy lifestyle, including a nutrition center with tons of recipes and cooking videos for heart-healthy recipes.
- **Diabetes.org** (click on the heading, “Food & Fitness”) The American Diabetes Association has lots of great articles for people who have diabetes. There are also many diabetes friendly recipes!
**Warm-up**

A warm up period is the first part of every training session, as well as preparation for competition. The importance of a warm up, prior to exercise, cannot be overstressed. Warming up raises the body temperature and prepares the muscles, nervous system, tendons, ligaments, and the cardiovascular system for upcoming stretches and exercises. The chances of injury are greatly reduced by increasing muscle elasticity.

For equestrian sports, it is important for the horse and rider both to be properly warmed up. It is the coach’s responsibility to know what type of warm-up is best suited for the horse on any given day. The rider will benefit from mounted and unmounted exercises. The warm-up is a good time for the coach to focus on the rider’s strength, suppleness, and body awareness.

Mounted warm-up exercises give the athlete an opportunity to become acquainted with the horse, without the demands of actually riding. The athlete will gain self confidence as he/she interacts with the horse and learns to move freely while mounted.

**Warming Up:**
- Raises body temperature
- Increases heart and respiratory rate
- Prepares the muscles and nervous system for exercise
- Stretches the muscles to increase the athlete’s range of motion
- Creates an awareness of correct alignment and body position
- Begins the practice session with fun and energy

The warm up may be different for each practice session. On cold days, the rider may need a brisk walk around the arena before mounting the horse. On a hot day, stretching exercises may be more appropriate. The coach should choose exercises which will help the rider achieve an elegant position and an effective seat in the saddle. A warm up period will include the following basic sequence and components.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Time (minimum)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengthening exercises</td>
<td>Develops muscle strength, especially of the core abdominal muscles</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stretching</td>
<td>Increases range of motion</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body awareness</td>
<td>Introduces movements that will later be incorporated into riding</td>
<td>Depends on the needs of the rider</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Strengthening**

In order to maintain a stable position and ride effectively, an athlete must have strength in the core abdominal muscles, the arms, and the legs. Cross-training is helpful, but there are many exercises the rider can do on the horse that will develop strength. Please refer to the Strengthening section for more in depth information.
Special Olympics Equestrian Coaching Guide
Teaching Equestrian Skills

Stretching
Stretching is one of the most critical parts of the warm-up, especially for an athlete who is not naturally supple. Not only are flexible muscles stronger, healthier and less prone to injury, but they allow the athlete to have an elegant position in the saddle. Please refer to the Stretching section for more in depth information.

Body Awareness Exercises
All skills can be broken down into parts, and it is often helpful for a rider to learn new skills on the ground, before trying them on the horse. Many exercises can be done on a stability ball, which will teach the rider to control each part of his/her body independently, while maintaining a stable position. Athletes will have more fun and experience more success if they can learn complex skills in small segments. When practicing riding skills in an unmounted setting, the athlete can focus on learning the skills without having to maintain their balance on a moving horse, or start, stop, or steer the horse. Make each small segment a goal to be accomplished and reward the attempt, whether the athlete accomplishes the complete skill or not.

Warm-Up Activities
Listed below are numerous warm-up activities that will help the athlete:

- Gain confidence moving on and around horses
- Develop core strength and stability
- Increase flexibility
- Become more aware of a correct riding position
- Learn to use independent aids

Many of the exercises are shown both on the stability ball and on the horse. They can also be adapted for the athlete to practice at home sitting on a chair.
**Around the World**

The athlete begins facing forward on the horse, feet out of the stirrups, and then, lifts one leg over the neck of the horse to sit sideways. Next, lifts the other leg over the croup of the horse to sit backwards. The athlete then lifts the first leg over the croup to sit sideways, and finishes by lifting the other leg over the neck to face forward. This exercise should be performed in both directions.

For this exercise, a leader must be in place to keep the horse still, and a spotter in place to assist the athlete.
**Hug and Roll Up**

The athlete rounds forward to hug the horse’s neck, and then, rolls up through the back, one vertebra at a time.

*For this exercise, a leader should be in place to keep the horse still.*

![Hug and Roll Up Image](image-url)
**Stretching & Strengthening Exercises**

Flexibility is especially important for athletes participating in equestrian sports, because a supple rider will not only look better in the saddle, but will also be more effective in influencing the horse. Flexibility is achieved through stretching. As with other parts of the warm-up, stretching exercises can be performed on and off the horse. To achieve the maximum benefit, the athletes must do the stretches with correct body position and alignment.

It is also important to breathe deeply while stretching. As you lean into the stretch, exhale. Once the stretching point is reached, continue to inhale and exhale while holding the stretch. Encourage the athletes to make stretching a part of their daily lives. Regular, daily stretching has been demonstrated to:

1. Increase the length of the muscle-tendon unit
2. Increase joint range of motion
3. Reduce muscle tension
4. Develop body awareness
5. Promote increased circulation
6. Improve self image and overall wellness

Riders must have a strong core in order to sit in the saddle with a correct position. They must have the strength in their arms and legs to influence the horse’s direction, gait, and balance. When doing strengthening exercises, it is important to keep the body in alignment. A few repetitions with good body position are much more beneficial than many repetitions with bad form.

**Neck**

Exercises to warm-up the neck will teach the athlete to use the head in different positions. It is important for the body to remain motionless, in alignment, when the athlete moves his/her head. When riding, the athlete will move the head to look in the direction the horse is travelling. Note –when doing neck exercises never circle the head in a complete rotation or move the head forcefully.

**For these exercises, a leader should be in place to keep the horse still.**
Look Up and Down
When the athlete looks up, it is important not to arch the back and flare the ribs. When the athlete looks down, it is important to keep the back straight, not collapsing.
Look Side to Side

When the athlete looks side to side, it is important to keep the torso still and in alignment.

It is incorrect for the athlete to turn the shoulders when she moves her head.
Arms and Shoulders

To achieve a correct riding position, the athlete must have good shoulder flexibility, which is important for an elegant carriage of the upper body. The rider must learn to use his/her arms independently of the rest of the body. The warm-up exercises will carry over into riding, when the rider must maintain a still upper body while doing arm movements such as saluting in a dressage test or steering the horse. For these exercises, a leader should be in place to keep the horse still.

Arm Circles

The athlete extends the arms to the sides and circles the arms forward and backwards, first small, and then large circles.
Roll Shoulders

The athlete can begin by lifting the shoulders up and down (shoulder shrug). Next, circle the shoulders forward and back. Finally, the athlete can circle one shoulder at a time, keeping the body still and in alignment, with equal weight on both seatbones.
Reach Up
The athlete stretches tall, reaching the arms as high as possible without lifting the shoulders.
**Torso and Back**

In equestrian sports, torso and back flexibility are very important. The rider must have core strength to maintain a secure position, yet have the suppleness to follow the movement of the horse. A supple torso and back will give the athlete the appearance of moving effortlessly and in harmony with the horse.

*For these exercises, a leader should be in place to keep the horse still.*

**Rotation**

**Twist with arms crossed in front**

To begin learning rotation, it is best for the athlete to hold the arms in a “genie” position, with one arm stacked on top of the other in front of the body. In this position, the athlete can learn to rotate the torso, not just swing the arms to the side. It is important to keep the hips still and facing forward as the upper body twists to the side.
Incorrect
**Twist with arms extended to the sides**

Only when the athlete can keep his/her hips still as the torso twists should this exercise be done with the arms extended to the sides. Make sure the rotation comes from the torso and the arms are not just swinging to the side.
Hinge Back

A good exercise for developing core strength is the hinge back. The athlete can practice this exercise on a stability ball as well as on a horse. It is important for the athlete to grow tall through the crown of the head and to keep a straight body, not flaring the ribs or collapsing the torso. The athlete should only lean back as far as he/she can maintain the correct alignment.
Legs and Feet
Strength and flexibility of the legs and feet are of the utmost importance for riders. The athlete must be supple enough to put his/her legs and feet in the proper position, and strong enough to maintain that position and influence the horse. For these exercises, a leader should be in place to keep the horse still.

Touch Opposite Foot
The athlete leans forward and reaches one arm across the horse’s neck to touch the foot on the opposite side. This exercise is a great stretch for the athlete’s whole body. If the athlete is timid, a spotter should be close to give confidence and insure safety.
Point and Flex

With the feet out of the stirrups, the athlete points the toes toward the ground, and then, flexes the feet so the toes point upward. It is important to keep the feet parallel to the horse's side. This exercise will help the athlete develop suppleness in the ankles and also bring an awareness of the correct position of the feet for riding.
Body Awareness
If a rider has difficulty moving body parts independently on the horse, it is helpful to practice on a stability ball, because the ball reacts similarly to the horse when the rider makes a movement that is out of balance. Many riding skills can even be taught first on the ball and later transferred successfully to the horse.

Bounce and Halt
Sitting straight, with the pelvis and back in alignment and arms in the riding position, the athlete bounces on the ball several times and then halts. During the halt, the athlete should sit tall and scoop the seat bones slightly forward.
Independent Hands
The athlete sits on the ball, holding the ends of a stretch band as reins. An assistant holds the center part of the stretch band. As the athlete bounces on the ball, she must try to stabilize her hands and keep an even contact on the “reins”. In order to keep her hands still, the athlete must sit straight and tall, with her core abdominal muscles engaged.
Pulling on the Reins

The athlete sits on the ball, holding the ends of a stretch band as reins. An assistant holds the center part of the stretch band. As the athlete bounces on the ball, the assistant pulls on the stretch band in different directions, trying to pull the athlete out of position. In order to maintain her position, the athlete must engage her core abdominal muscles and keep her shoulders back and down.
Hips Moving Side to Side

While sitting on the ball, the athlete moves her hips side to side. This exercise is good for loosening the hips and lower back, but is not the correct way to ride. On the video, notice how the ball moves from side to side as the rider’s hips move. A horse will react in much the same way.
Arched and Straight Back

Sitting straight and tall on the ball, the athlete arches the lower back, and then returns to a neutral position, which is the correct alignment of the pelvis for riding. Riding with an arched back can put stress on the lower back, causing pain. The athlete must learn to engage her core abdominal muscles in order to keep her pelvis in a neutral position when she rides. Practicing on the stability ball can help the rider develop this strength and give her an awareness pelvic alignment.
Warm-up - Quick Reference Guidelines

Be Systematic
Start at the top of body and work your way down.

Check body position and alignment
Riders must always have the correct body position and alignment. Remember, stretching and strengthening exercises are also training exercises for riding.

Relate warm-up exercises to riding skills
Remind the athletes that the exercises during the warm-up are important for developing strength and suppleness that will make them better riders. In addition, some exercises will be the same motions they will repeat later when they are on the horse.

Emphasize fluidity and suppleness in stretches
Make slow, progressive stretches.
Do not bounce or jerk to stretch farther.
Never force an athlete to stretch farther than is comfortable.

Use Variety
Make warming up fun!
Exercise on and off the horse.

Breathe Naturally
Do not hold your breath.
Use breathing to increase the amount of stretch.

Allow for Individual Differences
Athletes start and progress at different levels.
Reward any attempt to improve strength, flexibility, and body awareness.
Be aware that some athletes need to focus more on stretching, while others may need strengthening.

Work on Strength and Flexibility Regularly
Do strength and stretching exercises during every practice session.
Encourage athletes to practice unmounted exercises at home.
Elements of a safe and successful practice

• Check area for safety hazards
• Warmup
• Stretching
• Skills practice
• Competitive/fun session
• Cool down
• Wrap-up and conclusion
• HYDRATE!!!
• *Elements can be added and subtracted, as desired*

1 hour practice plan example

• 8:30-8:55 – Coach arrives and checks area for safety hazards.
• 8:55-9:00 – Walking or jogging to warm-up muscles.
• 9:00-9:10 – Stretching
• 9:10-9:25 – Skills practice
• 9:25-9:30 – Water break
• 9:30-9:40 – Skill practice
• 9:40-9:50 – Competitive/fun session
• 9:50-9:55 – Cool down
• 9:55-10:00 – Wrap-up and conclusion