

# 3 Fitness & Nutrition Strategies

*Top horsemen in dressage, jumping and eventing share their strategies for themselves & their horses.*

**D**ifferent strokes for different folks - and their horses -- is the theme of this focus on the nutrition and fitness routines for three top California horse/rider pairs. All agree that a super conscientious approach to both is ideal, but how that manifests for each differs widely.

## **Dressage: Lehua Custer & Ramzes**

Lehua Custer is on a dressage professional's dream trajectory. It started when the now 9-year-old F.J. Ramzes exhibited signs of superstardom. It continued with being invited to train with USEF chef d'équipe Debbie McDonald in Florida, then winning the Dressage Foundation's \$25,000 Carol Lavell Advanced Dressage Prize in January to make that possible. Being named to the USEF's Dressage Development program this April is the latest wave of the dream.

Realizing Ramzes' potential jump-started Lehua's fitness priorities. "I realized I had to step up my game." Her training program at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center was flourishing, which meant 12 to 13 hours a day without any time beyond saddle time for her own fitness.

Where there's a will there's a way, and Lehua found it through Mari Inouye, a personal trainer willing to meet at LAEC before Lehua began giving lessons at 7:15 a.m. Mari's own experience as a vaulter informed a program geared toward building strength while maintaining the limberness needed for riding. When Lehua was named to the USET Developing Dressage rider program, Mari was happy to confer with Stephanie Seheult, who is now a team physical therapist. "They collaborated on exercises, stretches and techniques based on what they saw in my riding Ramzes," Lehua says. "It was fabulous."

She worked with Mari for six to eight months, three to four days a week, before going to train with Debbie for the winter circuit in Florida. Isometric exercises dominated the work-outs, using bands and other props, plus some cardio.

Better body balance is a clear benefit of the work. Most people are one-hand dominate, with resulting imbalance in muscle strength and flexibility. Sitting crooked, tilted or twisted in the saddle are typical results, along with using one rein more than other -- all without knowing it. "Increased body awareness and control has been a huge benefit," Lehua explains.

After the winter circuit, Lehua and Ramzes moved to Ohio at the invitation of their Florida hosts. With far fewer horses to ride and care for, Lehua invests the extra time in hands-on care for all of Ramzes' needs. Done mindfully, hand walking, stall mucking and other barn chores can be fitness enhancers. "I try not to take any shortcuts. I get my steps in while hand-walking, taking an extra five minutes that benefits me and my horse." Along with that physical labor, stretching comprises the bulk of Lehua's current work-out, typically 20 to 30 minutes a day, four or five days a week.

Running is sometimes part of her fitness plan, but she's learned to limit that to what provides some cardio without causing stiffness in her hips. A short run three days a week is her norm.

Nutrition wise, Lehua goes for moderation over strictness. She loves salads and other forms of roughage, but isn't crazy about meat as a protein source. Almonds and cheese are preferred sources, but she'll eat chicken and red meat when necessary to get enough protein. She reins in her sweet tooth, ideally to a treat every other day, and cuts way down on carbs going into a big competition. "They make me feel weighed down and kind of slow." Balance is her biggest priority. "I also want to enjoy my life."

## **Ramzes**

At 17.2 hands and about 1,500 pounds, Ramzes is a big boy. He's also an "anomaly" in his "energizer bunny" nature, Lehua says of the horse owned by client and friend Wendy Sasser, and bred by Cornell University. Temperament-wise, he's hot, sensitive and always eager for a new adventure: getting on



the trailer, visiting a new venue. That goes along with "a constant worry about ulcers," Lehua shares.

A Porta-Grazer has been a huge help in enabling Ramzes to have food in front of him most of the day, while restricting the pace of consumption. Having a little hay in his stomach at all times reduces acid accumulation that leads to ulcers. Unlike a hay net, the Porta-Grazer allows the horse to eat in a natural, head-down position. "It also mimics the way they'd have to pull grass while grazing," Lehua explains. "So they salivate enough that the hay does not arrive as a dry ball in their stomach."

Hydration is critical for colic prevention, digestive function and maintaining all systems. Ramzes has a bucket of fresh water next to his Porta-Grazer and dunks most of his meal in it, getting more water in his diet.

After a particularly hard work-out, Ramzes gets a dose of BC2A, a paste of branch chain amino acids that he enjoys so much he "sucks it out of the tube." Hygain grain is shipped from California because Lehua trusts it to fulfill nutrient requirements that might not be met with hay alone. She wants the majority of Ramzes' nutrients to come from hay, but that varies by hay type, source and season. Daily feed includes Hygain's Balance and he gets Hygain's TruGain, with higher fat content, when preparing for a competition to compensate for the typical few pounds lost during the stress and excitement

of showing. He also gets Grand Meadows Grand Premium Plus.

Like Lehua, Ramzes began supplemental fitness work as his international potential became evident. She credits briskly-paced, big step hand-walking alongside a golf cart with building up his fitness without adding wear, tear or concussion. "He did a lot of easy miles that way."

A three-days-on, one day-off schooling schedule suits Ramzes' temperament best. She worried that a more conventional schedule – six days on and one off – would dull him to the work. All riding days include tack walking and hand walking, and proper cool down after rides is always a priority. How long that takes varies with heat and humidity, and Lehua monitors cool-down by watching his breathing and waiting until the sweat on his neck and chest has dried. She wears a heartrate monitor that also tracks time, temperature and humidity and knows her horse well enough to make loose correlations between how conditions affect her and her horse.

Hand-walking on a short, mild slope is another component of their weekly routine and they both enjoy riding on well-footed trails.

Ramzes was purchased as an amateur horse for Wendy and this international path was not part of the original plan. "We always say that Ramzes is taking us to new places," Lehua shares. "These are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities and we just have to be smart how we take advantage of them."

### **Jumping: Hannah Selleck & Elita Toscita DF**

*by Emily Riden for Jump Media*

#### **Elita Toscita DF**

From the moment Elita Toscita DF was born to what the 7-year-old mare ate this morning, Hannah Selleck knows the ins-and-outs of her nutrition and fitness program better than anyone. The accomplished Grand Prix jumping rider is also the mare's breeder and owner and is currently competing Elita to great success in the 7-Year-Old and 1.20M Jumpers.

Elita Toscita DF (Lamarque—Tosca, Casch) was one of the first foals born as part of Hannah's Thousand Oaks-based boutique breeding operation, Descanso Farm. Hannah is committed to developing Elita and all of the Descanso Farm-bred horses in the best way possible.

In between shows, Hannah keeps the jumping to a minimum, once or twice a week, for Elita. On jumping days, they focus on gymnastics and schooling exercises, rather than full courses. The week or two leading up to a show is when Hannah will introduce full coursework.

With six days on and one day off each week, the remainder of Elita's weekly at-home training regime is dedicated to flatwork – in and out of the ring.

Once or twice a week, Hannah incorporates gallop sets into all of her horses' training programs to improve their cardiovascular fitness and help keep them sound.

"It's really nice at El Campeon [where Descanso Farm is based], we have the Grand Prix field that has a nice hill on it," continues Hannah. "You can do trot sets up and down the hills as well as the gallop sets, which are both really useful for fitness. Especially with the young horses, they're always a little weak or one-sided. I think it's really important to get their hind ends and backs strong because then you tend to have less front-end problems."

With a number of mountains and beautiful trails surrounding their home base, Hannah also takes Elita out trail riding, often two or three times a week.

"Elita loves trail riding; she's very brave," says Hannah, who also incorporates the EuroXciser and turn-out into Elita's routine. The mare normally spends 30 minutes twice a day in the horse exerciser and approximately two hours a day outside in her paddock.

"We ask them to do so many unnatural things that they willingly do for us; I think it's great that they can be natural horses with turn-out. The trails are very good for their minds."

Back in the barn, Elita eats a half-scoop of Cavalor's Pianissimo and a half-scoop of Cavalor's Fiber Force, both twice a day. In the evening, she also receives a one-third scoop of Cavalor's Mash & Mix. All three feeds were carefully selected by Hannah and her groom and barn manager, Bo Vaanholt,



to fit Elita's needs, and the amount and ratio of each feed is often adjusted based on whether Elita is at home or showing and competing heavily.

#### **Hannah Selleck**

Fitness and a healthy lifestyle have long been important for 30-year-old Hannah, and she has always enjoyed trying different fitness regimes and routines. Even after breaking her leg at Spruce Meadows in July 2018, she found ways to stay in shape.

"I'm still doing physical therapy about once a week," says Hannah, who started the year of physical therapy as soon as possible following her injury. "Then I have my normal schedule; I do cardio about three times a week. I'm just starting back running a bit, but mostly I'll do spin classes because they're pretty quick, easy, and low-impact. Then I work out with a trainer twice a week."

With the trainer, Hannah incorporates weight training to cross-train and strengthen specific areas of focus, such as her back and core. Outside of the gym, Hannah tries to get bodywork done once a week, and she's been integrating more stretching and foam rolling into her daily routine.

"I think bodywork is really important to prevent injuries and to stay limber and loose. As riders we get really tight, and most of us, including myself, don't stretch enough. You look at (Canadian multi-Olympian) Ian Millar, who's worked at it his whole life. He has always been all about stretching and fitness, and I think stretching for sure has helped him stay fit."

With so many facets to her fitness routine, coupled with horse show travel, Hannah admits it can be tough to find the time for exercise, but she makes the effort because she knows what a difference it makes.

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"I do find it challenging to fit it all in with a full day of riding." She likes to book her workout classes and personal training sessions at the beginning of each week to keep herself accountable. "It does take commitment and work. That's the hardest part I think for anyone, including myself."

A simple nutrition plan works best for Hannah, generally eating controlled portions of healthy foods but not following any specific diet plan or restrictions.

"I'm all about snacking, so I'll have turkey or beef sticks and protein bars or almond butter in my ring bag. When you have several horses in a class or you're stuck at the ring all day, you don't have a lot of time to eat." She also likes to drink plenty of Gatorade at shows for extra sugar and electrolytes when she is feeling depleted.

Hannah will keep fitness and nutrition as priorities while also enjoying the process. "My goal right now is to enjoy each moment. We are goal-oriented as athletes, but you're also constantly thinking about future plans, where you want to be, and 'I need to do x, y, and z in order to get this result.' Right now, I want to focus on not only having the goals, but also being more present. You want to enjoy that moment that you're in — whether it's in the show ring or training the young horses at home — because we are so lucky to work with these animals every day."

### Eventing: Andrea Baxter & Indy 500

Completing this April's Land Rover Kentucky Three Day in the top 20 marked the fifth 5\* competition for this pair based at the Baxter family's Twin Rivers Ranch in Paso Robles.

Andrea has a problem many would love: she easily gets too thin. Riding seven to 10 horses a day and being "a bit of a picky eater," she often skips lunch in order to fit everything in. In the past, she'd paid the price in low energy and stamina. Adding three fresh fried eggs in the morning made an "enormous difference," she says. The protein keeps her going most of the day and avoids the need for lunch that would sit too heavy in her stomach while riding the rest of the day's horses.

Preparing for a big event like Kentucky, Andrea packs on 5 to 7 pounds. She's a naturally healthy eater, so it's a matter of eating consistently in the weeks preceding the competition. "With the stress and extra activity, I always come out weighing less than I went in. I found in the last few years that I ride better when I'm even a bit bulkier."

She advocates cross-training and enjoyed the cardio benefits of running in the past, but is currently going without due to time constraints.

Indy, too, excels without much extra conditioning work. The 14-year-old mare is a never-raced Thoroughbred "who kind of lives at the level



Andrea Baxter & Indy 500.  
PHOTO: SHERBY STEWART

of fitness required for our sport." And that's a good thing. She's always been a remarkably sound, sturdy horse, except for some "stupid" injuries that have regularly interrupted her conditioning schedule of late: minor cuts or springing a shoe. "She has such a baseline of fitness after not missing a beat all these years, that it's not that big of a deal if she misses some work. We joke that if she was a Warmblood, there's no way she'd be doing a 5\* with the amount of days she's had off."

Twin Rivers is located on a flat river plain, so Andrea hauls Indy to friend Liza Horan's facility in Lompoc for hill work. "She could canter around most flat tracks without exerting herself very much, but the hill work actually makes her use her lungs and get her heart rate higher." Ideally, Indy gets two or three such work-outs before a big event, first about three months out as "insurance," and another one or two in the month to six weeks before.

Barring injuries, Indy is ridden six days a week, walked half an hour before and after the rides to stretch muscles and ligaments, and she always gets a month off after a big event. She lives in a 14' by 14' stall, with a very large run that she takes full advantage of.

The mare is a bit trickier when it comes to nutrition because tying-up incidents were a problem in the past. Knowing Indy for 10 years now, Andrea believes the causes were more environmental than nutritional, but she's also tweaked Indy's diet. A Vitamin E supplement, Regumate, and Nutrena's high-fat, controlled starch ProForce Fuel are diet staples. "There may be feeds out there that are marketed for tying-up, but she's been doing well on this diet."

Indy has a healthy appetite and enjoys the pre-big event routine when Andrea tries to bulk her up with bigger meals. She eats the same things, but about double the amount in the six weeks

preceding a major competition. The goal is a few more pounds while the extra work ensures she doesn't gain too much.

Andrea and Indy's next outing is the CCI4\*-L Rebecca Farm in Montana later this month.



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