

A close-up photograph of a woman in a black cap and shirt smiling warmly as she hugs a white horse. The horse is wearing a dark leather halter with gold-colored hardware. They are in a stable with dark metal bars in the background.

'Look Good,
Feel Good,
Jump Good'

Conditioning Horses for Show Ring Success
with Elizabeth Gingras

There's a saying that if one looks good, they feel good, and if they feel good, they 'do good.' While the expression may be slightly lacking in grammatical correctness, it is not lacking in accuracy. In fact, the philosophy has proven itself to be correct, not only in humans, but in horses.

For horses competing at any level, and in any discipline, performing their best requires feeling their best, and that includes not only their general health but also their level of conditioning, fitness, and readiness to confidently complete the job at hand. For Canadian Show Jumping Team rider Elizabeth Gingras, those elements of keeping her horses feeling good form the backbone of her entire program.

Gingras's top FEI groom, Jessica Dooley, shared some valuable insight into what that program looks like and how they are keeping horses looking good, feeling good, and 'jumping good!'

JUMPING FITNESS STARTS WITH FLATWORK

While having horses that perform well over fences is the ultimate goal for riders like Gingras, 35, that is not possible without first building their fitness on the flat.

For Gingras's mounts – Captain, Coup de Chance, Daylight VDL, Ima van d'Abdijhoeve, and Zilversprings – days spent at home between shows generally involve 45 minutes to an hour of flatwork. Gingras rides each of her horses herself and starts each flatwork session with 15-20 minutes of walking to allow their muscles to loosen up.

"Usually she likes to start everything loose and limber, not asking them to collect and package right away, just kind of getting them going," Dooley explained.

As the horses loosen up, Gingras turns the focus to dressage movements and exercises aimed at improving the horse's muscle tone and rideability, all while also keeping the horse's mind engaged. Gingras also spends time each week focused on building her horses' cardiovascular fitness and caters flatwork to each horse's specific needs.

"If it's one of the horses that she finds loses fitness quickly, like Daylight VDL because he's a big horse, she'll do a lot of galloping work," Dooley said of the nine-year-old bay Dutch Warmblood gelding. "We're always just trying to do what each horse wants individually."

PHOTO FAR LEFT: JESSICA DOOLEY AND ZILVERSPRINGS, GINGRAS'S TOP GRAND PRIX MOUNT WHOSE EXERCISE PROGRAM INCLUDES WALKING BACKWARDS UP HILLS TO WORK HIS STIFLES.

THIS PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: HAVING WORKED FOR ELIZABETH GINGRAS FOR THREE YEARS, JESSICA DOOLEY HAS VALUABLE INSIGHT INTO THE 'TEAM LIZZIE' FITNESS AND CONDITIONING PROGRAM.

KEEPING HER HORSES' HEALTH AND FITNESS AT THE CORE OF HER TRAINING PROGRAM ALLOWS GINGRAS, PICTURED HERE REPRESENTING CANADA IN NATIONS' CUP COMPETITION ABOARD COUP DE CHANCE, TO COMPETE SUCCESSFULLY AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF THE SPORT.

JESSICA DOOLEY TAKES DAYLIGHT VDL FOR A HAND-WALK AND GRAZING, BOTH OF WHICH ARE INCLUDED IN THE HORSES' DAILY ROUTINES.

COUP DE CHANCE IN THE HOT WALKER, WHERE THE HORSES SPEND APPROXIMATELY 45 MINUTES PER DAY. PHOTOS © JUMP MEDIA



TAKING IT OUTSIDE

While each horse's program varies slightly for their personal needs, one thing that they all share is just that: variation.

"Lizzie likes to keep it interesting so they're not always in the ring – change it up a bit," Dooley said. "In Florida, she'll go hacking on the trails and go galloping to try to make sure that their cardiovascular fitness is there. We've been really lucky in Belgium too. They've got some trails up a hill and a little path to go out on."

Gingras tries to include an enjoyable cardio day once every week to mix things up, and Dooley and the rest of 'Team Lizzie' also help ensure that the horses are getting plenty of varied exercise outside of the ring through hand walking and turn out, and even through backing up hills – a special part of Zilver's regime!

"We have a bit of a hilly area, so we back Zilver up a hill to work on his stifles," Dooley said. "Every day in the afternoon, he goes out for a hand walk or grass or sometimes a second flat. With him, he gets a bit sour with the flatwork, so you don't want to make him hate his life. If he seems a bit fatigued, instead of a second ride, he'll just go out for a hand walk."

Hand walking or time on the hot walker – usually for about 45 minutes prior to being hacked – is incorporated daily, as is turn out. If a horse is ridden by Gingras in the morning, it will spend the afternoon turned out and vice versa. In Florida, where Gingras spends the winter months, each horse spends several hours in their paddocks, and while in Europe and Canada for the summer months, their turnout time is limited to 30 to 60 minutes because of the richer grass present in both locations.

"Essentially at home, they have three outings each day: the hot walker or a hand walk, a ride, and the paddock," Dooley said in summary of the horses' daily schedules.

INCORPORATING OVER FENCES WORK

With a focus on flatwork and fundamental fitness, Gingras usually incorporates course jumping only once per week while at home, with another day devoted to smaller gymnastics work.

"She'll throw in some exercises here and there like a little gymnastics just to work on their shape, rideability, and jumping fitness," Dooley said.

BACK IN THE BARN

In order to keep up with their carefully planned exercise regimens, the horses are extremely well cared for back in the barn by Dooley and fellow groom Karlene Neuffer.

Dooley and Neuffer incorporate much of what Dooley considers "old school" methodology – keeping things like body clipping and excessive bathing to a minimum and instead allowing the horses to be horses.

"In the summer, they might go from May to August or September without getting body clipped. I like to give a lot of Vetrolin baths and just use that to rinse them off instead of using soap," Dooley said. "At home, they might roll in the paddock, and if they're not grimy and gross, I'll leave them dirty and let them be horses. I think sometimes they need to be left alone. They get so much pampering. Sometimes they just need to remember that they're horses."

But while Dooley does utilize these perhaps more traditional methods of basic horse care, she also incorporates a number of more modern techniques and practices into the care of Gingras's horses, including magnetic blankets, ice boots, massage, stretching, and chiropractic work.

"We try and do a lot of stretches," Dooley said. "I do some stretches before they work, but I try to do a lot more after they work; as athletes, that is when they're cooling down, and you're making sure that you're doing the stretch when they're actually loose."

"We do a lot of carrot stretches through their hips and through their shoulders, front leg stretches – pulling them out like when you put the girth on – and pulling it back because a lot of it is range of motion stretching," Dooley said. "Same with hind legs, I get them underneath themselves and stretch out the back. It's a bit like a farrier stretch, if you're pulling hind leg underneath themselves. It kind of stretches the quad. It's something that they don't usually get to do on their own. Daylight loves those. You can pick up his back leg, and he does it himself now."

In addition to routine stretching, the horses see a chiropractor roughly once a month, and while in Canada for the summer months, the horses will spend time with a massage therapist.

At the end of the day, each of these components of the horses' conditioning and care comes together to achieve the same objective: keeping them looking good, feeling good, and performing at their very best! ■ BY EMILY RIDEN/JUMP MEDIA

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