

The wonders of walking and the beauty of black sunflower seeds are among secrets shared by top show jumping, event and dressage riders.

by Kim F. Miller

Walking is pretty easy. Just one hoof in front of the other, right? Yes, and these simple steps are also a great way of getting horses fit and keeping them sound, even for those competing at the highest levels of eventing and show jumping. That piece of wisdom is one of several shared in our second annual look at the nutrition and fitness routines followed by our area's top equestrians, for their horses and for themselves.

We hope you'll find some ideas and inspirations from our chats with World Cup Finals show jumper Vinton Karrasch, Pan Am Games alternate eventer Tamie Smith and up and coming dressage rider Shae Lovazzano.



Vinton Karrasch & Coral Reef Follow Me II

Show jumper Vinton Karrasch has been working for a World Cup Finals berth for some time. After a few stellar seasons, the opportunity arose this year and he and Coral Reef Follow Me II were ready, thanks to simple, yet effective routines. Like eventer Tamie Smith, Vinton is a big believer in walking. It's part of his bigger belief that horses that move more stay sounder longer. Horses in his care at owner Gwendolyn Meyer's Coral Reef Ranch in Rancho Santa Fe go on the walker for twice-daily one-hour stretches. The walks are in addition to schooling six days a week. These typically run 45 to 50 minutes, with an emphasis on flatwork that Vinton believes can provide most of the fitness required for top-level jumping. His horses move around even

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more with daily turn-outs that are another part of their regular routines.

In between shows, Vinton's top horses usually won't jump more than twice per week, and usually not higher than 1.3 meters. He incorporates gymnastic elements into at-home courses with lines that require the various efforts they'll face in competition. "If you're good at setting exercises, you can get all the fitness your horse needs jumping 1.3 meters."

With the April World Cup Finals as their goal early on and good showings throughout the season, Vinton began tailoring Follow Me's fitness for the championship's demanding four-round format, which was new for horse and rider. About two months out, he incorporated progressively longer gallops and shorter rest breaks. The plan paid off. In addition to finishing a very respectable 22nd among the world's best, Vinton felt "Rudy" could have gone another two rounds in Las Vegas. The conditioning carried over nicely to their next stop on the international circuit, Spruce Meadows in Calgary, Canada, where big courses are spread out on big grass fields that entail lots of galloping.

Rudy is a hot-blooded, naturally fit horse but Vinton doesn't worry about getting him too fit. "The only risk of a horse being too fit is losing control, and that's where your flat work comes in," he explains. Conversely, a horse – or any athlete – that's not fit enough for the assigned task is more likely to incur a strain or injury from fatigue or from not being physically capable of the job.

Vinton's string gets occasional chiropractic work from a practitioner who flies in from New Jersey. While there are many bodyworkers available, he's only interested in those who can identify and address a specific issue in a systematic way.

Nutrition-wise, the Coral Reef horses get a vitamin supplement, Optimize, from their veterinarian, John Newcomb DVM, the joint supplement Lubricyn and top-of-the-line Nutrena feeds. "I like to keep things simple," Vinton says. "When it gets complicated, you don't know what's doing what." He's all for specific supplements when there's a demonstrated need. Bloodwork revealed that another of Vinton's Grand Prix mounts, Coral Reef Baloufino, was developing thyroid issues as he got older and Thyro-L has been a big help, the rider relays.

As for his own nutrition, Vinton also keeps it simple and has learned that timing is critical. "If it's a big competition, I'm careful to eat 90 minutes before and a little more right before a jump-off."

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My thinking goes really badly if I let my blood sugar get too low.”

He and his wife Ann have a favorite athletic coach in Steve Morris, whose work addresses posture, movement, breath, nutrition and cognitive abilities. His only drawback for the California couple is that he’s based in Canada, but they work with him via Skype and, this summer, in person during their stay at Spruce Meadows. “We put him on a horse and made him ride, and he’s come up with exercises that actually work for riding. We’d had a hard time finding that in the past.” Vinton’s physical routine is less about general fitness and more about keeping old injury sites healthy and functional, but both he and Ann are grateful for the chance to work with Steve’s well-rounded and effective approach.

After his immersion in the World Cup milieu of top international show jumping, Vinton observes that beyond-riding fitness is becoming a part of more riders’ lives. “It’s gotten to the place where riders have to do more than just jog.” Younger riders are leading the way in a pattern that Vinton likens to what Tiger Woods has triggered on the professional golf circuit. “Tiger Woods is killing everybody and he’s in a major fitness routine. His competitors are starting to be fitter if they want to catch up.”



Tamie Smith & Mai Baum

Walking is a big part of the conditioning routine for horses in Tamie Smith’s eventing program. Though it might seem surprising given how physically demanding the sport is, 45 minutes of brisk daily walking has helped her top horses be fit enough to compete successfully on the sport’s biggest and most grueling stages. Daily walks on a Eurociser or under saddle on long hacks are in addition to regular work for top horses. This includes Mai Baum, Tamie’s partner at this year’s Jersey Fresh Two Star, the test ride at Rolex Kentucky Four Star and in being named on the Pan Am Games U.S. team alternate list. “Shockingly, walking is similar to cantering or galloping from a fitness standpoint,” Tamie explains. And it’s low impact, which fits with her horse management priority on longevity.

Regular hill work is another key to her horses' fitness. At Tamie's homebase at Tucalota Creek Ranch in Temecula, Mai Baum typically does hill work every four days during the show season. It's a hill approximately 1.4 miles in length, done in a round-frame, show jumping-paced canter, and preceded and followed by a 30-minute hack, at an energetic walk, to and from the hill. Tamie has found that three times up the hill, every four or five days, depending on the horse, is sufficient preparation for the six to 11 minutes of hilly terrain typically found on upper level cross-country courses. Another of Tamie's top mounts, Twisted Syster, is a naturally fit and hot horse best maintained by once-a-week hill treks.

Hill work is done instead of regular schooling in the arena that day. At press time, Mai Baum was staying in shape for a final Pan Am qualifier at David O'Connor's training facility in The Plains, VA. There, he was working on a relatively steep, 1.8-mile hill to stay fit for the Great Meadow International, also in The Plains, June 19-21.

Like all the horses in Tamie's program, Mai Baum gets six weeks off every year. The break starts after November events with days spent in the ranch's many turn-outs, mostly on their own or with a friend when both parties are amenable. "We just let them be horses," Tamie says. In mid-December, they start with hacks, then flat work in early January and jumping by the middle of that month. Tamie incorporates the first few competitions of the season into each horse's conditioning plan. "Our horses' longevity is super important and to get that, you can't go fast and hard at every show. For the first two or three shows, we just cruise. We're not going for time or trying to win."

Tamie's horses get good quality hay and a few supplements. Everyone is on Grand Meadows Premium Plus. "It has everything," Tamie notes. "Joint, gut, hoof, etc." A few horses prone to ulcers also get Grand Meadows Grand Digest. All top level horses get Adequan and Legend treatments early in the week before an event, in keeping with Tamie's conviction that prevention is the best medicine. Thorough veterinary check-ups after and before each season have been critical in catching problems when they are small and treatable.

Horses travelling a lot also receive Auburn Laboratories' Advanced Protection Formula to bolster their immune system. Tamie likes APF so much, she takes it herself and credits it with keeping her cold-free during a hectic season of criss-crossing the country in the Pan Am pursuit.

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Emily Sandler, DVM, and farrier Lyn Clarke are key players in the extensive team that Tamie credits as a huge part of her success, for herself and the horses and riders in her program.

At an apex of the wild rollercoaster ride begun when she went all-in for an international eventing career 11 years ago, Tamie says she is pretty good, but not perfect, about her own fitness and nutrition. Because a U.S. Olympic berth rides on the Pan Am Games results, this year's qualifying process has been the most competitive on record. The mental ups and downs that go with that have been challenging, Tamie admits. They've justified a Tootsie Roll or two along the way, but otherwise a relatively healthy, protein heavy diet has helped her maintain peak performance and stamina. Carbo-loading – preferably – anything Italian – in the evening before cross-country and show jumping is her norm. KIND bars, made of “hunger satisfying protein and fiber,” (per the manufacturer) and lots of water are go-tos through long, strenuous show days.

When at home, Tamie usually goes from the barn to the gym two to three days a week, with an emphasis on cardio and weight training. But there hasn't been time for that lately. She and Alexandra Ahearn's Mai Baum had one more qualifier to go before learning where they'd sit on the alternate list and thus whether they'd be travelling to Toronto this month (eventing is July 17-19) to back up teammates Boyd Martin, Phillip Dutton, Marilyn Little and Lauren Kieffer.

Tamie was thrilled to make the alternate list in 2011, but this time it's a “cross between being grateful and feeling disappointed.” She acknowledges that the best and most experienced team has been selected, but feels that she and Mai Baum are “really capable and would be really competitive.” However things pan out this summer, the German Sport Horse is only 9 and sure to have a long career ahead thanks to Tamie's long-term focused management.



Shae Lovazzano & Tracio

With Iberian breeds being at heightened risk of metabolic issues, Shae Lovazzano prioritizes

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prevention in feeding her PRE stallion Tracio and his stable mates at Dancing King Farms in the South Bay Area's Morgan Hill. "Spanish horses can get insulin resistance and pre-diabetic issues, so you really have to stay on top of those things," explains the accomplished young dressage trainer and competitor.

Low sugar and low carbohydrates are guiding principles in a diet that includes a little alfalfa hay for protein, mainly grass hay, and a low carb complete feed like LMF's Stage 1. Because of their high sugar content, carrots, sugar cubes and molasses cookies are not on the meal plan, but homemade beet pulp goodies are. She's also big on probiotics and flax seed with Omega 3 in it, the latter two playing a big part in shiny coats, manes and tails.

"All of our horses come from Spain and their first stop in the States is a 30-day quarantine," Shae explains. They arrive looking "a little ratty" and often have dandruff and dull coats, but their transformation under the Dancing Kings feed program leaves no doubt about its impact. "They're getting all this awesome, correct nutrition and they look 10 times better very soon," she shares. Black sunflower seeds are a big boost to coat quality and color, especially for black horses, Shae adds of a "little secret" she picked up from the Friesian horse community.

Dancing Kings horses are fed relatively small meals four times a day to better approximate the grazing lifestyle their digestive systems are made for.

Building hindquarter strength is a big part of the conditioning routine for these Spanish horses in dressage training and competition. Gait transitions and collections are a great workout for that and they are typically a big part of the dressage training process anyway. Tracio is a big horse and a breeding stallion, so strengthening his hindquarters is especially important for his under saddle work and his job in the breeding shed.

Dancing King horses are ridden five days a week and one of two off days includes in-hand work. Turn-out and ground-based stretching exercises are part of their daily routine. Spanish horses are naturally flexible, Shae notes. She's taught most of hers to bow as part of their stretching process and it's easy for them, in addition to being a fun party trick. Under saddle warm-ups focus on long and low, to counter the Spanish breed's tendency toward high and tight neck carriage.

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For stamina and cardio, Shae incorporates regular gallop work, which most of the horses aren't used to when they arrive. Riding in a light two-point position, she encourages them to really gallop, typically for five-to-six-minute intervals, for a total of about 20 minutes. It's great fitness and it's fun. "It's exciting for them," she says. Doing it on a regular basis means they typically don't get over-excited in a way that could create unnecessary risks. The stable is next to fruit orchards and hay fields and casual canters through their soft footing are another stamina builder that doubles as a refreshing mental break for the horses.

In addition to coaching and riding, Shae is the main caregiver for five horses on the family's three-acre farm and she has no trouble staying fit. Youth helps, but mostly the 21-year-old finds that hoisting hay bales and herking water buckets is the perfect work-out for the strength and stamina riding requires. Hands-on horse keeping is also a great way to monitor her horse's habits and health. Nothing like cleaning a stall regularly to know what's going in and what's coming out.

She credits her mom and fellow horsewoman Tina with raising her to love fresh, organic veggies and the fruits that fulfill her sweet tooth. "I don't eat chips or sodas, but I don't eat a boring diet either," she says. Fruit, nuts, cheese and other proteins are her go-to snacks during busy days at home or at shows.

Shae is a USDF gold, silver and bronze medalist and she and Tracio are preparing for their debut at Intermediare I at this month's Woodside Summer Dressage & Breed Show.