

Learning to Ride

Horse riding has become increasingly popular in recent years, as more people want to experience the thrill of this exciting sport. A recent survey by the British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) indicated that 4.3 million people – seven percent of the British population - enjoy horse riding. Around 2.8 million households contain at least one rider, and 43 percent of the British population have an interest in some aspect of equestrianism.

If you want to learn to ride, how and where do you start?

BHS Approved Riding Schools

It is important that any beginner, whatever their age, learns to ride on a suitable horse and is taught by a qualified instructor in a well-managed, safe environment. So the best place to start is a reputable riding school.



For more than 40 years The British Horse Society (BHS) has been running a scheme for the approval of riding schools and other equine establishments throughout the UK and there are now almost 1,000 BHS approved establishments across the country.

Riding schools and centres on the Approved list are regularly inspected by a highly experienced BHS representative, who will look carefully at the level of instruction and customer care available to clients, the on-site facilities and equipment, and the standards of safety, horse care and management.

A riding centre will not be approved by the BHS unless it has a riding establishment licence issued by the Local Authority. If you do not choose a BHS approved establishment always be sure to check that the centre you select holds a Local Authority Licence. Without this licence the riding school is illegal.

For more information on the BHS Approval scheme and a list of BHS approved riding establishments call **01926 707700**. The BHS website has a simple interactive map which enables visitors to search for approved centres by region. Go to www.bhs.org.uk and click on approved centres.

The Pony Club

Joining the Pony Club is a great way for children to learn and improve their riding and this is now becoming more widely available through the Centre Membership Scheme of the Pony Club, which was introduced in 1998 so that children and young people without their own pony could join and take part in Pony Club activities.

Riding schools around the country become linked to the Pony Club, and through this link, can offer the Pony Club tests and badges to their clients. There are currently over 500 Pony Club Linked Centres in the UK and over 15,000 non-pony owning young riders taking part in Pony Club activities. For more information visit www.pcuk.org/centres.

British Riding Clubs

The British Riding Clubs movement offers something for all types of horse and rider from the dedicated competitor to the happy hacker. Made up of more than 430 Affiliated Clubs and 21 Riding Centres stretching from the Orkneys to the Channel Islands, the body has in excess of 34,000 members. It offers a whole range of support and encouragement for riders, including national competitions, qualifications and social events.

For more information please contact Samantha Wong on **01926 707855** or email brcmembership@bhs.org.uk

Riding Holidays

The establishments approved by the BHS offer a wide variety of activities. This may include riding holidays and the opportunity to learn more about horses. Riding courses give riders the chance for more rapid learning, with the opportunity to ride more than one day under the skilful eye of a qualified instructor.

If you would like to enjoy an afternoon's hacking, riding or trekking in beautiful countryside or along the coastline there are BHS approved centres as far apart as the North of Scotland on the shores of Loch Ness, to the picturesque Cornish coast or the Welsh hilltops.

Whether you want to ride across moors, down dales, through forest or on spectacular beaches, you can be sure to find a suitable establishment through the BHS 'Where to Ride' database. This facility allows you to search for approved centres through a simple interactive map. Visit the BHS website, www.bhs.org.uk and click on approved centres.

Riding Safety

The BHS Riding and Road Safety Test is taken by more than 4,000 candidates each year and helps to educate riders in road safety in order to minimise the risk involved when riding on the roads. Training is available to all riders from 12 years of age and the test is supported by the Department for Transport (DfT). It is not essential to own a horse in order to take the test as many riding schools and centres organize them for their pupils. It is the only test that any rider will undertake that has the potential to save not only their own life but that of their horse and other road users as well.

For further information please contact Di Parkinson on **01926 707782**.

What you will need

You want to make sure that riding is a sport you intend to pursue before buying expensive equipment, but there are a few essential items that you will need to be safe and comfortable for the first few lessons when you start riding.

- An approved standard hat **MUST** be worn – current standards are ASTM F1163, PAS 015, SNELL E2001, BSEN1384 or EN1384, preferably with a quality assurance mark such as the British Standard Kitemark, or SEI marking.
- The hat must fit properly. Many riding schools will have hats you can hire or borrow.
- Jodhpurs are useful but as a beginner you may not be sure if you are going to continue this sport. A pair of strong trousers without a seam on the inside of the leg is sufficient. A seam can pinch and cut into your skin as your leg is next to the saddle.
- Riding/jodhpur boots – or a strong pair of boots or shoes that have a smooth sole and heel. Fashion boots and shoes are unsuitable. The heel is necessary to prevent the foot slipping through the stirrup iron. Trainers and Wellington boots are definitely not suitable, they offer little protection and can easily become stuck in the stirrup.
- Gloves – a pair of gloves are advisable. These can help protect the fingers from inclement weather.
- A long sleeved shirt, a properly fastened jacket that is not flapping or a sweatshirt, are recommended.

What you should expect from a riding school:

- A warm welcome and friendly staff.
- Correct type of horse or pony – the school needs to have a variety of horses to cater for any age or weight of beginner rider. These horses and ponies need to be steady, stable and experienced.
- Correct equipment – the tack should be in good condition and clean.
- Safe schooling areas for lessons – properly enclosed, surfaced and maintained.
- An approved and good standard of instruction. Enquire about the qualifications of the instructors and which instructor teaches beginner riders.
- Riding Establishment Licence displayed.
- Public Liability Insurance certificates displayed.

Before choosing a riding school go and take a look around. Ask for a tour of the stables, the riding areas, the office, the tack room and look for the standard of facilities. Are the riding areas properly enclosed and safe; are the stables in good condition; do the horses seem sensible? Even if you have no experience of horses you will be able to judge if the horses are nervous, highly-strung, overactive, or are quiet and relaxed. Watching a lesson or two is an excellent guide to the standard of school.



Are you fit to ride?

Horse riding, like any sport, demands a certain level and type of fitness. Riding requires a combination of suppleness, stamina, muscle strength, core stability and flexibility. This allows the rider to move in balance with the horse with free and flexible movements.

Rider fitness

The requirements for rider fitness are:

- Joint suppleness
- Joint flexibility
- Correct type of musculature
- Lower back strength
- Upper body posture
- Mental confidence

Why do riders need to be fit?

Riders need the correct fitness to:

- Ride more safely
- Avoid injuries and pain
- Be effective with their riding
- Control the horse properly
- Develop mental confidence
- Enjoy the experience

How to develop fitness

Beginners tend to ride once a week, which is sufficient for the first few months. The rider will begin to develop the correct muscles and suppleness provided they are taught correctly from the start, which is why it is important to find and ride at an approved riding establishment.

Doing exercises at the gym or jogging will increase general fitness and muscle strength but too much 'gym' fitness creates muscle mass and strength in muscles that eventually hamper riding. For all riders it is important to develop the correct type of fitness, strength in the muscles, but not muscle mass, suppleness and flexibility in the joints and freedom of movement in the lower back and hips.

Ask the trainer at the gym for exercises that build strength in the lower back and the stomach; stretch and make supple the muscles of the thighs and calves, open the chest, flex the joints and develop stamina. Simple daily exercises at home will increase and maintain suppleness and fitness, as will riding more frequently, particularly having lessons on the lunge from a qualified instructor.

Supple and flexible joints

- **The ankle joint** – acts as a shock absorber and needs to be supple and flexible. Keeping the heel down through a supple ankle joint gives the rider stability, particularly important when jumping.
- **Knee joint** – allows free movement of lower leg to give aids whilst keeping the upper leg relaxed against the horse's side. Also acts as a shock absorber when jumping.
- **Hip joints** – probably the most important joint of all, the very centre of all riding. These joints need to be supple and flexible to allow movement of the rider's body both in flatwork and jumping. They also allow the free movement of the horse under the rider. Stiff, unyielding hips will impede movement. The rider uses the hip joints more than any other. Even when mounting the twist of the hip creates strain within the joint.
- **Lower back** – another important area; includes several joints between the vertebrae. The back needs to have strength in the muscles so that the rider can control the horse's movements from the lower back, maintain his own body posture whilst at the same time allowing the free flowing movement of the horse with flexibility, balance and relaxation.
- **Shoulders** – these joints are often forgotten yet they are one of the foundations of 'good hands'. The shoulder joints need strength of muscle combined with flexibility and suppleness.



Mental Fitness

Mental fitness is an important part of horse riding. Beginners may be anxious and nervous and will require a safe, 'bomb-proof' horse or pony for their first lessons. Children, in particular, may be apprehensive, though incredibly eager and excited, at beginning to ride and being around ponies.

Children need to understand that being taught to ride is different from being 'at school'. The instructor may need to shout or raise their voice in a school or manege so that the class can hear. Children should not feel that this is 'shouting at them' and become sensitive about the instruction. Parents do need to be aware that children can be sensitive in this sort of environment and explain to them the reasons for this type of instruction.

More advanced riders need to be mentally aware and focused to control and ride the horse. Mental fitness develops from physical ability. As the rider's confidence grows so the mental confidence will increase. It is important therefore for all riders of all levels to develop and maintain their physical fitness, to avoid injury and pain, to ride safely, to improve their riding ability and to develop mental confidence. Above all rider fitness will increase the rider's and the horse's enjoyment of the sport.