

## Equine Art by Lynda Sappington



"Harmony"  
Bronze  
S/N Ed of  
18  
Below:  
"Presence"  
Bronze  
S/N Ed of  
10

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15401 Eaton Pike  
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www.TheSculptedHorse.com  
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## FIT TO COMPETE

In the second of a series of six articles, Michele Altemus, a specialized physical therapist for riders, provides some useful tips to help prevent injuries and stay fit so that you can be at your best for your horse.

## Recognizing Muscle Pain

**WHAT IS THE GROIN ANYWAY?** Most people refer to the groin, otherwise known as the abductor muscles, as the group of muscles or area that is located in the inner thigh – where the leg meets the hip. When you close your legs around your horse you are adducting your legs. Jumping requires the inner thigh and calf muscles to be strong. Riders who jump must have flexibility, balance and strength to not only guide the horse around the course, but also to not interfere with him as he takes off, is in the air, and lands.

The deceiving thing about "groin" pain is that the pain can be caused by other problems. Understanding the relationship between the skeleton, muscles and nerves is very important in determining what is wrong and why the problem happened. A pulled muscle is likened to a strain where some of the muscle fibers tear but there is no bleeding just pain when the muscle is stretched or used. A torn muscle is much more serious. There is usually a bruise over the injured area and pain with any activity that requires the muscle to contract or stretch. A ruptured muscle is when the tendon that connects the muscle to the bone is torn away. Sometimes when the muscle tears away a piece of bone comes with it (avulsion). A rupture or tear of a muscle is usually caused by a fall.

So how does an injury occur? Injuries occur from falls – hitting the ground from six feet and higher moves things around. Do you feel it every time you fall? Probably not. The accumulative affect of multiple falls affects the spine. The spine is the support center for the arms and the legs. The inner thigh muscles attach on the pelvis (hip bones) which is attached to the spine via the sacroiliac joint. The relationship between the sacroiliac joint and the lumbar spine (low back) is vital in riders. It is also the most disrupted area and is often out of alignment. Any rider who has uneven stirrups, posts to one side, feels weaker in one leg, or cannot position the legs equally around the horse, most likely has a rotation in the lumbar spine or sacroiliac joint. The most important point is that no rider should ride with pain.

Flexibility to the rider means making sure the spine has three normal curves (neutral). The low back should curve in, the mid-back curve out, and

the neck curve in. All the stretches I give my clients require the spine to be held in "neutral." Muscle balance is vital to the rider who must be symmetrical. I tell my clients I do not care if they can't get the leg at a 90-degree to their hip, but both legs should have equal flexibility. If one hamstring has 60 degrees of motion and the other hamstring has 80 degrees of motion, then there is an uneven pull on the hip bones and the hips and back will rotate to accommodate this. Both heels should go down the same amount and both hips should bend. Problems that interfere with hamstring length, heel position and hip flexibility may have to do with previous injuries such as fractures, sprains, low back pain and scar tissue. Riders and instructors should be aware of old injuries and whether they can be improved or worked around. A rider who fractured her ankle and now has steel plates and screws will not be able to improve the motion in those bones.

Nerves from the low back supply the inner thigh. When a client comes to me with a complaint of groin pain it is my job to determine why the pain is there. I look at back and sacroiliac alignment. If the sacroiliac joint is rotated it will cause one set of adductor muscles to be shorter than the other which can lead to a strain or tear. I test each muscle to see if stretching or contracting the muscle causes pain, and I look for bruising, swelling and heat. Most of the clients who have come to me for groin injuries did not actually have a primary problem with the groin. None of them had fallen off. All of them had felt the pain while jumping. The clients either had a low back malalignment or a pelvis malalignment.

If you believe you have pulled your groin, the first line of defense is the basic RICE formula: rest – ice – compression – elevation. Evaluation by a medical professional is the next step to determine the problem. Performing a daily routine of whole body stretches for the spine and specific stretches for the hips and lower legs is the best way to prevent groin injuries. Just like your horse, flexibility and balance lead to optimal performance and fewer injuries.

More in depth information about the spine and injuries can be found at [www.equestrianpt.com](http://www.equestrianpt.com) under "newsletters."

■ MICHELE LEASURE ALTEMUS, MPT, OCS

