



Training for Equestrian

By Denise Foley

She laughs about it, but it's clear that seventeen-year-old Katelyn Hess gets a little put out when people don't quite understand her sport. "Whenever I tell someone new that I ride, I hear the same thing, 'Riding, that's not a sport! The horse does all the work.'"

Katelyn Hess wants everyone to know the truth. "There's a lot more to it than just sitting there," she says. In fact, for the tall, slim Abington High School senior, the equestrian life is a whirlwind of lessons, traveling, competing, and stall-mucking. Because her sport is also show jumping, she controls a nearly 2,000-pound animal on a tortuous course where every few seconds they both become airborne. This is not for the faint of heart or the weak of muscle, especially if you're riding at a "future Olympian" level.

Katelyn is the youngest child of Barry and Loretta Hess of Glenside. She is the protégé of Irish Olympic equestrian Kevin Babington, a five-time Grand Prix winner. Babington runs a state-of-the-art training facility at Kindle Hill, the 128-acre Gwynedd Valley farm owned by Montgomery County horsewoman and financial advisor Sally Glassman. Babington says that, "Katelyn has got what it takes to go all the way!" "She's the most dedicated of all the students I have," comments Babington. "She listens and watches closely, and she's not afraid to put in the hours it takes to be a good rider. She has the personality for it and she's a fighter."

In fact, at a competition in New Jersey last summer, Katelyn's horse, a Hanoverian mare named Dricah (called Rene), spooked at the first jump and reared, slamming her head into Katelyn's chin, slashing open a gash below her mouth. An ambulance took Katelyn to a local hospital where it took sixteen stitches to patch her up. This didn't slow her down however and she was quickly back on the show grounds and up on Rene to give it one more try.

That's the kind of spirit, along with skill, that earned her two blue ribbons last summer at the highly competitive HITS (Horse Shows in the Sun) on the Hudson show in Saugerties, NY. Katelyn began riding at the age of five, which was also the year she started working out with the Germantown Academy football team.

"My dad was a coach for the GA team and I used to go with him," she explains with a grin. "So every day from 4 to 6 pm I was in the weight room with the team." Barry, an engineer, picks up the story. "The guys would have her lie down on the slant board and do sit-ups," he says, laughing. "They would challenge her by saying, 'Ok, Katelyn, in the next half hour, see if you can do two hundred sit-ups.'"

These days, the sit-ups have given way to medicine ball crunches. Riding is a workout, requiring strong legs and abs to control the ton of high-strung animal underneath you. But, like most athletes, Katelyn is so accustomed to it that she can work on her skills but not up her

fitness levels on horseback. Just riding (even for six hours a day) isn't enough to keep her in shape for the show circuit, which will include twenty days of competition in Florida this winter. Katelyn tries to counteract this by putting in an extra workout by building up her cardio on the treadmill and stationary bike, and working on her upper body and abs with floor exercises, a medicine ball, and dumbbells.

"I usually do a slow jog on the treadmill for one to five miles while I listen to music," she explains. "I have a recumbent bike that has different programs and resistance levels and I'll go through one of the programs. I also do medicine ball crunches because in riding the abs are really important."

In fact, riders "talk" to their mounts through their abs and legs, not just the hands and heels. While, on its own, the horse has the strength, grace, and skill to sail over fences, bars, and oxers-up to 5'6" high in Grand Prix competition-it's the rider who provides the strategy for approaching and taking the jumps. "When you want your horse to collect and shorten his stride, you squeeze your abdominal muscles," Katelyn explains. "When you want him to open and lengthen his stride, you relax them. When you're jumping, it's more subtle than kicking." On the stadium course, that physical communication between rider and horse serves two purposes. "When you have the horse in balance, traveling straight with all four legs carrying evenly and a nice arc in his neck, you get a good jump," says Katelyn. "If the horse takes off crooked, he could potentially hurt himself. He can't clear a fence because he can't take off with full power."



Katelyn's "other" workout is at the barn, where her fitness gear includes "a wheelbarrow and a horse." Stalls have to be cleaned and, occasionally, horses need to be helped up. "When a horse is cast (when they lie down against the side of the stall and can't get themselves up), you have to grab them and pull them as hard as you can to get them on their feet," explains Katelyn. "Believe me, that is plenty of labor."

Occasionally, she practices a little mounted yoga too, a relatively recent entry to the equestrian workout, popularized by Californians Linda Benedik, a rider and trainer who runs the Harmony with Horses Balanced Riding Program, and Veronica Wirth, founder of Integrated Yoga, in their book, *Yoga for Equestrians*. She doesn't do anything like Downward Facing Dog or the Lotus; that would be too much like circus riding. The stretches-in-a-saddle are far simpler. "At a walk, I'll lift my arm all the way up which stretches my body and gives me better posture and better balance on the horse," she explains.

Finally, while Katelyn is working out, so are the horses. Like other athletes, they need to stay in top shape, and sometimes just riding isn't enough for them either. Babington's barn is equipped with horse-size treadmills to give the competitive mounts a more demanding routine. "For a horse, it can be dangerous if they're not fit," explained Katelyn. And, like her, the animals like a little music while they jog. "Sometimes it's Latin music, sometimes it's rap, and other times, Kevin puts his Irish stuff on," she says laughing. "The horses seem to like it all."

Denise Foley is a freelance writer and an editor at www.irishphiladelphia.com, an online guide to Irish music, food, and culture in the region. Contact her at dfoley@phillyfitmagazine.com.