

# Workout

## with Steffen & Shannon Peters

This dressage power couple shows how they stay in shape to keep a winning edge.

*Text and exercise photos by Kelly Sanchez*

**S**teffen Peters may not have won gold at the Olympics in China last summer (he missed individual bronze by the narrowest of margins), but you wouldn't know it by the reaction he gets from regulars at the Paragon Club, a small gym in Rancho Santa Fe, near San Diego, California. Though he doesn't try to call attention to himself, it's hard to fly entirely under the radar when word has gotten out that you're one of the top dressage riders in the United States, with two Olympic Games under your belt. On a bulletin board near the front desk is a photo of him with swimmer Michael Phelps, who won eight gold medals in Beijing. "Who's the guy with Steffen?" someone asks playfully. Steffen merely smiles. His mind is on the workout ahead of him.

It's late afternoon on a Wednesday. His day had started as it usually does, at 4:30 a.m., when he and his wife, FEI rider Shannon Peters, wake up and prepare to ride the eight to 10 horses on their schedules. In between, they see to the other horses boarded at Arroyo Del Mar, their 22-acre facility near San Diego. They will attend to the countless details that are part and parcel of running two training businesses (one apiece) and a boarding business—all while maintaining a serious competition schedule. In addition, Steffen goes to the gym for one of his twice-weekly workouts. His longtime personal trainer, Keith Stumpf of the Paragon Club ([theparagonclub.com](http://theparagonclub.com)), wastes no time in launching into a fast-paced routine, designed to build strength and flexibility while keeping the heart pumping.

Quiet-spoken he may be, but Steffen Peters is fiercely competitive in the dressage arena and extraordinarily disciplined about his fitness routine. Unless he's out of town, he always fits his gym workouts into an already full schedule. "It helps tremendously to be in shape," he explains. "This is an Olympic sport. It's not only the horses that should be athletes. The riders should be, as well."

Likewise, Shannon Peters ensures that her time off the horse maximizes her time in the saddle. For nearly six years, she has practiced Pilates and takes a one-hour class twice a week specifically tailored to increase her core strength and flex-



**Twice a week, Steffen does a "dynamic fitness" workout. Above, he does a warm-up stretch.**

ibility. "Steffen and I go at it in different ways, but we work on the same things," she says, "and it's the same thing you train in your horses: strength, flexibility and suppleness."

Maintaining an active lifestyle is second nature for the pair, who both



Terri Miller

**Steffen Peters has represented the U.S. at many international competitions, including the 1996 and 2008 Olympic Games. Shannon Peters is also a successful Grand Prix rider and trainer. The couple lives in San Diego, California.**

grew up in athletic families and played a variety of sports over the years. Riding, which Steffen began at the age of 7, was not his only sport. He was also an avid skier and a runner. "I ran the 100-meter in under 12 seconds, though my best discipline was always the 400-meter," he says. "I had a bet once with a friend in Germany who was actively playing soccer and 15 years younger than me: I told him I'd probably still beat him at the 400. I did it on the spur of the moment, and I paid for it over the next couple of days." He pauses. "But I did beat him."

He learned motivation, drive and discipline from his mother and his late father. "They were definitely role models," he says. "Dad used to play active sports—soccer and handball." Now in her 70s, Steffen's mother rides her bike 30 minutes each morning to swim at a

## Back and Shoulders



**Steffen squats using resistance from the bands then jumps off the ground with shoulder flexion. His trainer, Keith Stumpf, makes sure his shoulders stay parallel with the bands.**

# Diagonal Ball Chop



**This is a fast-paced, gross-motor exercise that controls and stabilizes the core. Using a 10-pound medicine ball, Steffen moves between full extensions and full flexions. Keith pushes back at the top of the extension, and Steffen resists through the full range of motion. After 12 repetitions, he works the other side.**

public pool. “She does this from April through October,” he marvels. “That would be a tough chore in California, but in Germany, it’s pretty amazing.”

Prior to discovering dressage at the age of 20, Shannon rode Arabians and did Western and hunter/jumper. Throughout college, she played tennis

and skied and later competed in aerobics and biathlons. But, Pilates has given her what she needs to effectively ride horses, like one of her current mounts, the 17.3-hand Westfalen gelding Weltino’s Magic. “From a woman’s perspective, it’s hugely important to have core strength, because our limbs will never be as strong

as a man’s,” she explains. Pilates has also alleviated chronic pain from two herniated disks she suffered in a riding accident a decade ago. “Physically, Pilates is the best thing I’ve ever done for my riding,” she says.

For those unaccustomed to seeing equestrians as athletes, Shannon and Steffen’s fitness routines are both daunting and inspiring, and it’s clear they leave little to chance. Dedication to an exercise schedule is something they actively endorse; indeed, most of Shannon’s students do Pilates. The couple also power-walks in the hills around their home for 45 minutes three times a week and use the pool and the tennis court on the property. “Before the Olympics, I was in the pool every other day for at least 20 minutes,” recalls Steffen, who also mountain-biked for further conditioning. “Shannon’s tennis is still pretty exceptional,” he adds. “I enjoy it, but usually she chases me around the court.”

## Steffen’s Routine—New Thinking

Steffen’s gym workout bears little resemblance to the traditional weight-training routines of the past. Rather than isolating specific muscle groups, his trainer has developed a “dynamic movement” routine that conditions the muscles to

# Swiss Ball Push-Up



**“This teaches coordination of balance and strength by working the arms, core, hip flexors and legs,” says Keith. The ball starts out away from Steffen. As he flexes his leg down and forward, he brings the ball forward for 12 to 15 reps.**

work together. "Steffen's not sitting at a machine doing three sets of 10," says Keith. "It's definitely the new way of thinking. We incorporate training rather than body building." The routine might entail a game of catch with a 10-pound medicine ball while seated on a balancing pad or lifting two 15-pound dumbbells while lunging in three directions.

"Riding a Grand Prix test requires very good cardiovascular fitness," Steffen points out. "Keith doesn't just think about the muscle strength. He keeps my heart rate up for at least 45 minutes."

"First, I have Steffen do a dynamic warm-up for 10 to 12 minutes to get the blood flowing," Keith explains. "At that point, I can see if anything's tight on him. If his right hip flexor is tight, we'll do more variations on the stretch. We warm up the complex joints of the shoulders and hips, and then we break it down into the major muscle groups. We want to elongate the muscles, so he does movements with a full range of motion for 12 to 15 reps. We'll work the same muscle group in two different ways."

Steffen completes a phenomenal 70 exercises in 30 minutes. "This type of routine is anaerobic rather than aerobic," notes Keith. "He's using a lot of variations—a quick burst here, a quick

## Dynamic Training: What Is It?

Though it's been around for a couple of decades, dynamic training (also known as functional training) represents a new fitness paradigm for most of us. It's a whole-body approach designed to improve balance, coordination, agility, strength and endurance. The theory goes that working out on a traditional weight machine that isolates only a particular muscle gives you no functional application in the real world. In dynamic training, exercises are performed in a movement routine related to how the body functions in real-life settings, combining multiple muscle and joint activities with upper- and lower-body movements, lifting and twisting. You are retraining your body to better support and control its own weight, utilizing such aids as stability balls, medicine balls, dumbbells and wobble boards that force you to stay balanced while you're in motion, though those new to the technique frequently start using only their own body weight.

Don't think that staying away from weight machines is easier; dynamic training is extremely demanding. Traditional machines may still address specific muscle weaknesses or help to maintain fitness during an injury. As with any fitness training, consult an experienced professional and know what works for you and what feels best for your body.

recovery and then another quick burst." Anaerobic workouts are particularly effective for athletes who need rapid bursts of strength or speed. Anaerobic means "without air," and this type of routine relies on energy stored in the muscles, as opposed to aerobic exercise, which depends on oxygen from breathing. Jumping rope, sprints and intervals are all examples of anaerobic activities.

Judges have remarked on the three extraordinary gaits of Steffen's Olympic partner, the Dutch Warmblood gelding Ravel. "That doesn't make him very easy to sit on," Steffen remarks. "When you have a big-moving horse like Ravel, you try first of all to be effective, but you must also make it look effortless, and that's impossible without the proper body and core strength. As a dressage

## Balance-Pad Work



**Sitting on an unstable surface, Steffen decelerates to catch a 10-pound ball. He throws it back to Keith by exploding upward in multiple directions, while keeping knees flexed and feet off the floor. This promotes balance using his seat.**

## Climber



## Diagonal PushPull



**LEFT:** Steffen hangs from a bar and swings one leg up and across to a point on the opposite side of the apparatus. This works his core and hand grip. **RIGHT:** This is another whole-body exercise that primarily targets chest and back muscles using a Nautilus™ machine. Steffen pulls on cables to lift a stack of weights, keeping handles and cables in line with his body. His legs and hips stabilize his body so that one arm can pull while the other pushes.

rider, you want to be momentarily strong to give a correction. But, the idea is not to ride consistently with so much strength. We still have to teach the horse to work with us and to cooperate.”

There are times when Steffen has to work out alone. He says, “I can do a lot of the exercises on my own, but it becomes much harder to get motivated to do it by myself. On your own, you might think you couldn’t do another pull-up or push-

up, but the trainer knows there’s another one or two in there. Keith gave me some homework to do in Hong Kong.”

“I made drawings with stick figures to remind him of the exercises,” Keith says, laughing. “But it worked.”

“Steffen’s very dedicated to his sessions,” says Keith. “He’s constantly giving me feedback and input about how an exercise translates to his riding. But, we also have fun. If we’re not having fun,

it gets mundane.”

### Shannon’s Routine

If there were a walking advertisement for Pilates, Shannon could be it. She’s 5 feet 8 inches tall with long, lean muscles that any dressage rider would envy. But, her trainer, Julian Littleford, in nearby Del Mar emphasizes that Pilates can benefit equestrians of all levels and body types. A former principal dancer with

## Suspended Planks



**Another exercise for core strength:** Steffen stabilizes his body between two benches. Using his free hand, he rotates a 15-pound dumbbell under his body and then up. “The key is to emphasize quality over quantity,” says Keith.

# Scapular Stabilization Reverse Knee Stretch



**“When she’s on a horse, she must know where her rib cage is in relation to her pelvis, where her arms are in relation to her torso and where her knees are in relation to her hips,” explains her instructor, Julian Littleford. LEFT: Shannon uses springs for resistance as she stabilizes her scapula and shoulders while increasing her awareness of her spine, rib cage, pelvis and knees. RIGHT: Using The Reformer, she strengthens her abdominal wall while tilting her pelvis.**

the Martha Graham Dance Company in New York City, where he worked with ballet legends Mikhail Baryshnikov and the late Rudolf Nureyev, Julian founded J.L. Body Conditioning near San Diego in 1990 ([jlbodconditioning.com](http://jlbodconditioning.com)). He is passionate about what Pilates can do for the dancer and the athlete as well as for the ordinary fitness enthusiast. “Pilates,” he explains, “is a therapeutic exercise program that rebalances and reharmonizes your body.”

When Shannon came to Julian, he knew nothing about riding horses. “But, I could see where the strengths and weakness were within her body,” he remembers. “After years of sitting in the saddle, her body didn’t know what basic alignment was. We had to lengthen a few areas and strengthen a few areas. We had to rebalance and harmonize the whole leg—the adductors, abductors, hamstrings and quadriceps—as well as give her feet correct alignment to allow her heels to be in line with the center of her hip. Then, it was a matter of getting her pelvis stabilized in relation to her rib cage. It all sounds very technical,” he

says with a laugh, “but it isn’t.”

Shannon’s typical workout begins on the Reformer (a versatile apparatus featuring a sliding carriage on a rectan-

gular platform equipped with pulleys and springs that regulate resistance). She then moves to mat exercises, using her own body for resistance. Then, it’s

## Pilates: What Is It?

With its emphasis on proper alignment of the spine and pelvis, correct breathing and controlled, fluid movements, Pilates (pi-LA-teez) is a whole-body, non-impact exercise method that’s a natural fit for precision-loving dressage riders. Developed by German-born Joseph Pilates to rehabilitate hospital patients during World War I, the approach became popular with dancers from the New York City Ballet when he immigrated to the United States in 1926. Pilates exercises, which are performed on specially designed apparatus, balls and a mat, all start from a strong core, or “powerhouse,” which enables the user to employ the deep muscles of the abdomen and lower back to maintain stability and flexibility while in motion. Pilates elongates and strengthens the muscles and boosts muscle elasticity and joint mobility. Why is this important for equestrians? A strong, flexible body is less likely to be injured. Also, Pilates practitioners have greater control over their bodies and are better able to isolate muscles for specific movements. Some studios teach classical Pilates; others incorporate newer techniques and movements. If you’re looking for an instructor, here are some suggestions from Shannon Peters’s instructor, Julian Littleford: “Not all studios are created equally, and not all teachers are created equally. It might be fashionable to do Pilates and, technically, it should get you the results you want. But, if it doesn’t, you’re going to the wrong person. An experienced instructor is able to customize to suit the client.” (Go to [unitedstatespilatesassociation.com](http://unitedstatespilatesassociation.com).)

# Short Spine The Swan



# Russian Splits



**Julian says that “conventional gym work is set up to strengthen one or two muscle groups at a time. Pilates works the body as a whole.” LEFT: Shannon shows a portion of the “short spine massage.” This articulates the spinal column and stretches glutes and hamstrings. CENTER: On a box on the Reformer, she does a backward extension that stabilizes her scapula and stretches her abdominals. RIGHT: She keeps her pelvis stable, while primarily working the hamstrings.**

on to other pieces of specialized Pilates equipment, including the Wunda Chair, the Ladder Barrel and the Cadillac (or Trapeze Table). Each enables the user to work a number of muscles simultaneously, all while increasing strength, flexibility and coordination.

After working with Shannon, Julian also put together a program for some of her students. “Nine out of 10 of her clients have said that, now, when they get on the horse, he walks straight forward, whereas before he pulled to the left or to the right, because the horse wasn’t balanced,” he says. Riders “are able to feel where their true spine is and get into the correct position. Very often, they have to change the length of their stirrups. They’re seeing their marks go a lot higher with very little correction now.”

Pilates can also alleviate the physical stress that results from traveling, which Shannon does regularly for weekend clinics or competitions. “If she’s just gotten off a plane,” explains Julian, “we’ll de-stress her back—decompressing the lumbar spine and allowing the cervical spine to come back into natural alignment. Then, we hope, she can go back to work without pain. Nureyev used to say that you have to dance from your bones when you’re tired,” Julian adds. “Your

muscles don’t have the strength or the stamina to do it. When you’re sitting on a horse, it’s your bones that are on the horse; your muscles are going to hold them there.”

## A Disciplined Lifestyle

Where food is concerned, “everything in moderation” is pretty much the rule in the Peters household. “We both just try to eat healthy,” says Shannon. “For breakfast, we’ll have oatmeal with nuts or muesli and yogurt—something balanced with some protein. Our staple at lunch is a salad with chicken or steak. Dinner is usually comfort food, like pasta. But during the day it’s pretty light—we can’t eat a lot and ride. We don’t go overboard with anything. But, I still can’t give up my one cup of coffee in the morning.”

Steffen forgoes the coffee and drinks watered-down Gatorade during the day to stay hydrated. Keeping up his energy is essential. He says that by noon it’s definitely time for a meal. He’s also the grill master of the family. “On Monday nights, I’ll put something on the barbecue to eat for the rest of the week. But Shannon’s a great cook.” They do allow themselves the occasional treat: a glass of wine with dinner or ice cream—though, as Steffen

points out, “it’s low-fat.”

If he’s not on or near a horse, Steffen can most often be found on a boat or an all-terrain vehicle. “I take my time off very seriously,” he says. “Whenever I’m out on the water or in the desert, even for half a day, it just recharges me mentally.”

“Relaxation is not my strong suit, because I’m always on the go,” Shannon admits. “But, we do go for hikes or relax by the pool. Steffen and I both like to entertain and, in the summer, we have great volleyball and croquet parties at the house.” But, most weeknights, they’re asleep before 9 p.m.—a necessity when you wake up before dawn. “This sport is so much about discipline—discipline in what you eat, how you treat your body, how physically fit you are and how physically fit your horses are. To really expect the best out of your horses, you have to expect the best out of yourself,” she says.

Notes Steffen, “At the end of the day, discipline is the bridge between dreams and accomplishment.” 🐾

**NOTE:** If you are new to exercise, consult a health professional before engaging in any high-intensity activity.