

Getting Back in the Saddle – Adapting your Physical Activities to your Arthritis

By: Alex Klemm

Just over a year ago, I was diagnosed with an inflammatory arthritis. Before the onset of inflammatory arthritis, I was a competitive athlete in equestrian show jumping for 20 years. Horseback riding was a huge part of my life, and I trained with the attitude “*no pain, no gain.*”

When I started the arthritis medications, I thought I would be able to quickly return to my previous, active life. In fact, one of the first things on my mind when I started the medication process was, “*This medication will be the miracle that will allow me to fully resume my sports activities.*” Unfortunately, this hopeful “bubble” quickly burst. So I was driven to find a way to do what I love - ride my horse.

After a lot of hard work and discussions with different health professionals, I was able to find a way to get back in the saddle (literally) without severely worsening my arthritis flares. It was about finding a balance and knowing my body’s limitations. In fact, the hardest part was identifying those new limitations. At first, with the help of a fitness-tracking device, I used a trial and error approach to see how much I could ride without a decline in my regular daily activities.

As a result, I now ride one day a week for 45 minutes or less instead of five days a week for two hours, like I did before my arthritis diagnosis. On the days when I am not feeling well enough for a full ride, I have my trainer warm up my horse so that I am not overdoing it. It is extremely important for anyone with arthritis to recognize when to ask for help!

For those of you who are struggling, remember that to be able to continue doing what you love after an arthritis diagnosis, you may have to find ways to adapt to your new circumstances. This may mean thinking ‘outside of the box’ and trying something new. For instance, I learned to ride sidesaddle in order to continue riding when my joints hurt too much to ride astride.

There are days when I cannot do as much as I used to do. On those days I sometimes feel like I’m losing ground, but as long as I am still able to ride my horse, my mental health is positively affected in a way that keeps me moving forward. And, in the end, the “*no pain, no gain*” philosophy that I lived by my entire life, has now become “*Listen to the pain or you’ll have no gain!*”

