

Designing Your Horse's Spring Training Program

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Levels of equine athletic training are becoming more acutely researched, more competitive, and more geared towards the longevity of the athlete's career than ever before. To be ahead of the herd, a horse needs cross training and other varied forms of exercise to achieve the all-around competitive level required in most sports. The components of optimal fitness are cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, flexibility, and ideal weight.

In order to reach optimal levels of cardio-endurance, muscular strength, and flexibility at an ideal weight, workouts need to be calculated, and increased over time. This includes the frequency, intensity, and duration of every exercise. It sounds complicated, but can be easily monitored. By keeping track, you can carefully build on each component which adds gradual strength with less threat of injury. Listening to your horse, your instincts, and how you both feel has a lot to do with each workout. If your instincts tell you not to workout, don't. If you remain conscientious, while sticking to your long term plan, missing a workout won't affect the end result.

The Components

Cardiovascular Endurance is the ability of the heart and lungs to provide oxygen to exercising muscles for a prolonged period of time. This is achieved by long, slow rides, as well as fast, explosive sprints. This type of fitness is required for just about every sport, and should be started slowly to allow the connective tissue of the legs, and the cardio-respiratory system to adapt without stress. A strong foundation and a strong heart is what keeps a horse strong during competitive events. In events lasting several days, this strong foundation can be what separates the healthy winners from the injured drop outs.

In the event that you or your horse are not quite in the mood to do whatever exercise that you have scheduled for a specific day, a long, slow walk is always more beneficial than nothing. This will keep the foundation strong and help to prevent injury in the long run.

Muscular Strength is the maximum amount of force a muscle can overcome during one single contraction. This is achieved by a variety of modes. Up hill training is an excellent way to achieve strength in the limbs and specifically the core muscles of the back and abdominals. Muscular strength is required in just about every sport. Sprints, rollbacks, and resistance training can be incorporated into an effective strength training program. With increased strength adaptation on hills, explosive exercises can be added gradually.

Muscular Endurance is the number of repeated contractions a muscle can perform against a resistance without fatiguing. This is achieved by a combination of cardiovascular and explosive sprint work meant to take the levels of both strength and cardio-fitness to the highest levels. Through aerobic exercise and strength training, muscular endurance will occur naturally. This type of work is added after the foundation work has been done. The foundation work depends on

your horse's starting point, but a couple of weeks of long walks, three times a week is a good start before you start getting more aggressive.

Flexibility describes the range of motion of a joint. Increased flexibility is achieved through various static stretching (stretches held for 30 seconds) exercises done by the rider. Stretching the legs is heavy work for you to perform, but you'll find that your horse will not only enjoy it, but will learn how to stretch himself out in the paddock. Research has recently shown that static stretching not only aids in flexibility, but has shown to add overall strength to the body.

Dynamic Flexibility is like stretching because it helps the horse to be more flexible, but this type of flexibility exercise is done through bending exercises under saddle. Serpentine, circles, figure 8's, and various drills up and down the arena are a perfect example of a dynamic flexibility exercise.

There are a lot of factors that may inhibit flexibility. Sometimes the joint itself has lost mobility, sometimes the muscles have lost elasticity, and worst of all, sometimes fat gets in the way. I like to incorporate dynamic flexibility exercises into the cool down, and also during the rest periods in endurance work. Once the muscles are warm and full of blood, they can achieve great gains in flexibility. Instead of just walking your horse during the little breathers in sprint training, you can ask him to walk in circles to keep his rib cage open and flexible.

Sport Specific Training

Sport Specific Training is specifically performing the sport that you'll be competing in. It is necessary for developing motor skills as they relate to your specific sport, but doesn't include all of the components for a balanced fitness program. By performing the movements used in your sport, timing and balance are developed. This type of training should be focused during the horse's schooling sessions which will be incorporated into the off days of the exercise schedule. Schooling and workouts are two different forms of training and should be practiced separately. Schooling is teaching the horse how to perform specific movements, and workouts are performed for the purpose of gaining strength and fitness. By taking an un-schooled horse into the arena and pushing him or her through a specific sport routine at the maximum levels will never teach him or her to be accurate in their specific sport.

A barrel horse needs to be strong and powerful, but if he isn't schooled in how to turn a barrel properly and with precision, he's not a great barrel horse. He should be taught how to do this separately from his workout.

He needs some added flexibility exercise in order to bend more effectively. If he's too muscular, he'll create excess heat within his body which may lead to early fatigue. A barrel horse needs a good cardio program so that his body efficiently delivers oxygen to the muscles and organs.

He needs a good strength program to accommodate the explosive forward movement and speed, and he needs the flexibility to be able to bend around the barrel tightly. Once that's all done, he needs to cool down and be stretched out so that his muscles aren't stiff and shortened for the next

bout of competition.

This horse needs a program that's divided up into segments over one week periods, then tied together to make up several months. One trick is to keep the horse from peaking too soon or losing too much weight, while balancing the workouts to include schooling, aerobics, strength, endurance, and flexibility. During this time, the horse's chemical metabolism will be responding to each of your exercises which will affect how much water he should drink, what and how much he should eat, and how much massage and stretching is indicated.

Any animal, any breed, any age, any size, can be brought to their own level of optimum fitness if given reasonable goals. It will be your responsibility to set the goals, and follow through with gradual progression to safely achieve those goals. The overload should be designed so that the body can adapt to a slow progression of increased challenges without causing injury.

Mix It Up

Like humans, a horse's program should include time on the track, the weight room, and whatever strategy that you can implement that includes flexibility training. Of course, you will need to improvise with hill work and explosive work instead of a weight room, but you will become creative as you witness your horse getting stronger.

This should be fun for you and your horse. Of course there are rules, and there are definitely some things that are forbidden, like stretching a cold muscle, but this time together is yours to enjoy, and you should remain open to substitutions and changes as circumstances change.

One of my favorite things to do is ride my horse in an arena with loud music blasting. I love to focus on patterns, and challenges. Fortunately for me, I've always had a horse that enjoys the same thing. Once my horse is strong, I (sort of) let him choose the plan for the day. In my own fitness programs, I've substituted a day of skiing or a long hike for an aerobic class. Why not? As long as you include all of the important components, and maintain the current intensity, your horse will appreciate the variety of trails, hills, and arena work.

Keeping an open mind as you go, you can change things according to weather, illness, injury, or whatever else comes up. Be sure to record the exercises as you normally would, and note when you made substitutions.

Avoiding boredom is one of the main challenges faced during a long term fitness program. Timing is another important factor. Each body part requires specific training strategies. The muscles, including the heart take up to 6 months to reach their peak, connective tissue (tendons and ligaments) take one to two years to develop their maximum strength, and bones take up to 3 years to fully develop. This is why it's recommended that horses not begin intense physical exercise before the age of 4.

Be aware of the types of surfaces in which you are training, and choose grass or wood chips over dirt when possible. Deeper footing adds to intensity, so pay attention to how your horse feels, and make wise choices when possible.

Establish Your Starting Baseline

In order to measure improvements, you need to establish your starting position. You can then set your goals for the future. A veterinary consult is helpful at this point, and you should start recording everything.

Ask the vet about your horse's weight, conformation, and movement as it relates to your fitness plan. The next step is to determine if there are any risk factors that require special attention. Some risk factors would be pregnancy, recent injury or surgery within the past 6 months, diet (how much, special requirements, required supplements), and special needs like shoes and tack.

Voice all of your concerns to the vet during this pre-program vet check. Tell the vet what your goals are. Ask him or her if your goals are realistic. Ask questions about your horse's resting heart rate as opposed to what the vet might estimate the maximum heart rate to be.

If there are any questions about the horse's tack or hooves, be sure to consult with a reputable professional before beginning the program. Having these items analyzed in advance can prevent some painful and expensive issues later in the program.

Keep Records

Height/Weight When you have the vet do the initial consultation, you will have them do the initial height and weight reading for recording. A height and weight tape can be purchased at most feed stores or catalogs for your follow up measurements.

Resting Heart Rate Take resting heart rate for 5 consecutive days the first thing in the morning to determine normal resting heart rate. Again, because of the nature of the beast, size, breed, and fitness level, there isn't an exact average resting heart rate. Each horse will have its own normal. Be sure that you document this morning resting rate because later in the program, you will be monitoring the morning rate. An elevated heart rate in the morning can indicate over training, and this is something to watch closely.

Take Photos You will be really happy to have your success recorded.

Put It Together

This is the fun part. Take the freedom to be creative with this. Start slowly, be sure to warm up properly, and then put it together according to what you and your horse choose. Once the foundation has been laid, you're free to do as you choose. Here are some ideas;

For the first couple of weeks, lay the foundation with walking three times a week

Add one day of schooling. By this, I mean to take one day to slowly take your horse through his specific sport movements in a calculated and organized way at about 60% of his maximum. You are now ready to add some strength work either by getting more aggressive and explosive in

specific sports movements or by adding some hill work. Utilize the cool down time for dynamic flexibility like serpentines and figure 8's.

After the under saddle cool down, while the horse is still somewhat warm, add some stretching to keep the horse flexible and not too bulky and stiff.

As time goes on, you can perform the sport specific exercises more and more aggressively to improve the horse's endurance until you're performing at 100% while still maintaining the precision that was taught during the schooling segments.