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Management

VOLUME 11

EXTRA

SPRING
CONDITIONING

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Before you fill up your riding calendar with trail rides, clinics, and shows, develop a conditioning plan to slowly bring your horse back into steady work.

Spring Conditioning

Spring is just around the corner. It's time to plan clinics, trail rides, and shows! But hold up—first, ensure your equine athlete is properly conditioned before jumping into warm weather riding.

By Nancy S. Loving, DVM

Winter tends to slow down riding activities and this quiet time gives your horse a chance to rest both physically and mentally after a busy season. With winter ebbing away, you're ready to get back in the saddle and put him into steady work in anticipation of the season ahead. How do you bring your horse back to fitness after a scaled-back winter riding schedule?

Well-Conditioned Last Season?

As you begin to set a plan, ask yourself what your horse's condition was like at the end of last season, before he was turned out for rest and relaxation. For yourself, even a brief few weeks of inactivity may leave you

with uncomfortable effects as you try to get back into physical shape. Your muscles work harder and you're winded with even moderate exertion. Unfortunately, humans lose condition quickly, in just a few short weeks. Thankfully, horses are more resilient, and they don't "detrain" as rapidly. A rest period of 4–6 weeks should still enable a horse to return relatively quickly to a previous level of condition, assuming he was fit to begin with.

However, a horse that has been completely idle for several months experiences a decline in muscle strength and cardiovascular conditioning over time and will need a strategic conditioning plan to prepare him for the upcoming season. In general, after the first month of lay-up, a

horse should be reconditioned for a month for every succeeding month he is rested. A horse turned out to pasture may maintain some degree of muscle tone compared to a paddock or stall-confined horse, and so may progress more quickly.

It is best to err on the side of caution and take the extra time to build fitness back onto your horse. It is important to leg him up methodically as he returns to steady work. This requires commitment on your part, getting your horse out at least 3–5 days per week, initially asking for a steady walk and trot; then after 3–4 weeks, introduce some canter work. Before you raise the demands to jumping or speed endeavors, be sure you've taken sufficient time to rebuild his metabolic and structural



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systems to adequately cope with exercise.

The safest method of conditioning relies on incremental increases in distance or difficulty, but not both at the same time. Every five days, you can slightly increase exercise demands. Days in between increases in demand give your horse's body time to accommodate the new intensity before moving to the next level of effort. Following each workout, palpate and monitor his legs for signs of stress, such as swelling, pain, or lameness. If you have any concerns, consult with your veterinarian for evaluation and advice.

What are the Basic Steps to Legging Up?

Legging up your horse conditions musculoskeletal structures to withstand impact, speed, and duration of work. This foundation is built upon in step-wise fashion, first increasing distance at the walk and trot, then increasing intensity to include the canter/lope and gallop, and/or incline work. The initial exercise demand is referred to as long, slow distance (LSD) training (walk, trot, slow canter) to develop the cardiovascular system and aerobic energy pathways (in the presence of oxygen) to fuel muscles. Training improvements are achieved at heart rates between 130–150 beats per minute (bpm). A heart rate monitor is a useful tool to assess a horse's heart rate in real time to complement a strategic



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For horses with no conditioning base, begin your conditioning program with 15–20 minutes of hand walking each day on level ground with good footing.

conditioning program.

Once your horse has built a foundational base, you may want to integrate strength-training exercises (such as hill work) and interval training (IT) speed work into exercise efforts. IT asks for sprints over a defined distance and/or time. A training effect is achieved by tapping into anaerobic fuel sources, and this occurs when heart rates exceed 165 bpm for periods as short as two minutes.

As a horse develops a more robust respiratory and cardiovascular system, and improves strength in muscles, soft tissues, and bone, his confidence and eagerness to perform soars. Whereas he may have displayed heavy breathing, high heart rates, and sweating during an effort, with sound conditioning principles applied, he'll be able to perform these tasks more easily and without building as much internal heat. The stronger he becomes, the more diminished the risk of injury and the less soreness he'll experience.

A Young or Untrained Horse

Your approach to a younger or untrained horse will necessarily be different since you are starting with an unprepared slate. When developing a conditioning program for a horse with no past conditioning base, you'll want to take the long approach through the process.

To start, focus on controlled exercise in the form of hand walking, starting with 15–20 minutes each day on level ground with good footing. A quiet, well-behaved horse could be ponied at a walk beside a well-mannered horse. Increase walking periods by 5–10 minutes every 3–5 days, working up to at least one hour per day of walking. At this point, if you haven't already done so, tack walking with you in the saddle is possible.



A post-ride stretching session improves your horse's range of motion and improves flexibility.

Now that you've had your horse walking for an hour each outing over 2–3 weeks, slowly introduce some trotting. Every three days, substitute five minutes of walking with trotting, without lengthening the overall duration of exercise. The strategy looks like this to start: For each hour of work, he

walks for 55 minutes and trots for 5 minutes, with the trotting periods interspersed throughout the hour rather than all in one stretch. As time goes on, more trot work is incorporated and sprinkled throughout the exercise period. Eventually the duration of exercise can also be extended.

A Horse Recovering from Injury

A similar slow conditioning philosophy should be applied for a horse that has suffered a musculoskeletal injury and/or has been laid up for a lengthy time. Slow is best when legging up a previously injured horse, especially for tendon or ligament injuries, or joint problems, taking care to avoid reinjury. Muscle is quite forgiving and heals well due to its excellent blood supply. Rely on your veterinarian to counsel you on when you can begin the conditioning process and how to best prevent injury recurrence. Other soft tissues, joints, and feet need time and preparation just as you'd bring along a young or novice horse that has limited, if any, conditioning base.

The Senior Horse

The senior horse is another unique case. Despite the fact that an older horse may have had years of a conditioning base, his tissues no longer respond as easily or as completely as that of a younger horse. So, take more time and care to ensure that he

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doesn't strain himself with the exercise demands. His heart and mind may feel up to the task, but it is possible that his body is not what it once was. Your job is to control his efforts. The appearance of a senior horse can be misleading—his condition may look like a normal adult horse in the prime of life; however, advancing age lessens tissue elasticity and efficiency of the cardiovascular system. In addition, building muscle strength is going to take longer and not reach as robust a level as what your horse may have developed when in his teens.

Warm Up, Cool Down, and Suppling

For any conditioning program, basic warm up principles apply when preparing a horse to go to work. Active walking and trotting serve to warm up your horse's tissues and increase circulation. Soft tissues—tendons, ligaments, and joint capsules—improve their elasticity, muscles become more pliable, and joint lubrication improves. Good blood flow during this period delivers blood and oxygen to working muscles,

facilitates sweat to dissipate heat, and removes metabolic waste products.

Suppling exercises further prepare tissues to work and help to protect a horse from injury. Examples include bending your horse's head and neck toward the stirrup or your foot while mounted, or asking for a long and low (stretching) frame at all gaits. Flexibility of joints, ligaments, and muscles also benefit from lateral movements like leg yield, shoulder-fore, and shoulder-in exercises.

Just as warming up is important, don't forget to cool down your horse with slow trotting and walking to redistribute blood flow away from working muscles to the intestines and internal organs to lessen the risk of colic or digestive upset. Metabolic waste products like lactic acid and heat are also dissipated from muscles during cool down to minimize post-exercise muscle soreness or cramping.

Following exercise, unmounted stretching of the limbs further improves your horse's range of motion in joints and muscles as well as improving spinal flexibility. Discuss joint care strategies—both oral supplementation

and/or systemic medications—with your veterinarian to optimize joint function and to promote musculoskeletal longevity.

A Committed Plan with All the Details

Diligent preparation in all the fine details of horse care ensures a successful season ahead. Check that your saddle and tack fit well after your horse's idle downtime, as muscles change with rest. What might have fit well before may need some tweaking. Also, it's important to attend to all the details of routine preventive management: ensure a quality diet; implement regular deworming, vaccination, and dental schedules; and keep up your horse's foot care on a regular schedule every 5–8 weeks depending on the time of year and your horse's unique rate of hoof growth.

Your horse may have had some nice vacation time while you waited out the winter weather, but strategic conditioning and protection of musculoskeletal structures are critical to performance success and safety once warmer days come around. **SM**



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