

Getting your horse competition ready after winter.

Making a training plan for your horse's summer body!

The wet cold winter evenings are becoming a thing of the past and even if you are someone who manages to ride and train through the winter, most of us manage to ride more, or for longer through the summer months. So, it's time to think about getting our horses competition ready!



When the clocks suddenly change, and we gain that precious extra hour of light of an evening, it is important to build on your horses workload slowly. It goes without saying, that this year has been an odd one. Our normal winter routines may have been changed, so now more than ever we need to consider our training schedule for spring / summer.

When increasing your horse's workload, you need to consider their muscles as you would your own. Just the same as how you wouldn't suddenly reach for the heaviest of weights after a long layoff; you should increase your horse's workload slowly to enable their muscles to build appropriately. The body repairs damaged muscle fibres by joining on new muscle fibres. This in turn creates thicker, larger muscles. It is important that we don't allow the rate at which the muscles are damaged to outweigh the rate at which

they are rebuilt, in order to allow for successful growth.

We also need to consider changes other than exercise when we increase workload. Turnout and feeding are perfect examples. It's likely, come Spring, that our horses will be getting more turnout - this in itself is more exercise. With an increase in workload, we need to ensure that they are receiving the right amount of feed to reflect this. By receiving the correct amount of protein, our horses will be able to build muscle effectively.

One thing we must be aware of when increasing workload - is fatigue. Each horse is individual, and some may show more obvious signs of this than others. Subtle signs to watch out for are: grumpiness (such as ears back), tense eyes, wrinkling of the nose, moving away, ignoring aids, spookiness or distraction. More obvious signs may include: tripping or missteps, slowing down or refusing to go forward, tail swishing or bucking.

Clearly, if we are building our horses' fitness, there are going to be occasions when we need to push them into the fatigue zone. We just need to make sure this is done carefully to avoid injury. Dipping into the fatigue zone and completely tiring your horse out are different things. To avoid the latter, make sure to include enough breaks in your horse's work. As a maximum, we really should only be working our horses for three days in a row before giving them a 'day off'. This will allow time for their muscles to recover. Now obviously, if you're only currently riding once a week, don't jump straight into doing three days on, one day off - build to this gradually. For a hot horse, who doesn't cope without being exercised, a "day off" could be a light lunge or light hack day.

Training session	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Activity	Schooling	Hack	Jumping	OFF	Hack	Pole work	OFF
	Minutes						
Walk x1	15	30	15		40	15	
Trot x2	15 (30)	10 (20)	10 (20)		15 (30)	20 (40)	
Canter x3	5 (15)	5 (15)	5 (15)			5 (15)	
Jumping x4			15 (60)				
Total	60	65	110		70	70	

The training grid (Example)

Each gait is assigned a certain number of points. The number of minutes spent in this gate is multiplied by the points assigned. For example, canter is x3 so if 10 minutes is spent in canter, $10 \times 3 = 30$ points. *Adapted from a grid shared by Gillian Tabor Physiotherapist

From experience, I know how easy it can be to get carried away, if your horse is working particularly well – especially on a beautiful Summers evening. One method you could use to ensure we don't overdo it, is to make a training plan.

Something along the lines of the grid above allows you to calculate workload in more depth than say, 30 min schooling, 45 min jumping etc. This will set you up for more successful training.

Looking at the example grid - an average session for the horse resulted in around 60 -70 points. If this was our starting point, then the next week we could increase the average number of points per session to 70-80 etc. These gradual build ups would continue until we reach the level we wish to remain at. If workload over the winter has been significantly low, I would recommend at least an 8-week plan, in order to get them back up to speed. You could also keep a photo diary of your horses' body, alongside your training grid, so you can monitor how effective the plan has been.

A change of season training plan can mean stronger muscles are built for longer term endurance and the chance of injury from overworking is reduced. Remember that all horses are different, so keep an eye out for any signs of fatigue as well as considering your horses' age and previous injuries. Contact your vet if you are unsure on the workload your horse should be undertaking.



A photo diary showing the changes in the horses muscles over a training period of 6 weeks.

Try putting a plan like this in place in the weeks before your next big show and see how it improves your performance. Let the competitions commence!

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