

Conditioning horses in cold weather Robyn Brown EST

Many of us have our horses' schedules relax during the cold months, making maintaining physical fitness and reaching goals a challenge. During this time it is important to remember the key factors in maintaining and gaining condition without causing injury or sickness. Starting a fitness program after an extended holiday needs to be done with a few things in mind.

The basics of a conditioning program should be centered on your goals as a rider and be specific to your horse. There are many factors to remember when designing your program and many professionals available that can help you with this. Your training program specifics should alter with your horses age, sex, breed, discipline, competition schedule, terrain and weather conditions.

It becomes especially important in the colder months that our program is catered to the weather. Having a proper structure for daily work allows your horse to remain healthy. Regardless of the type of exercise that will be performed, the daily workout should start with a warm up, progress to schooling or conditioning exercises, and end with an active warm down followed by a cooling out period.

The warm up is an important part of every exercise session - it is the gradual increase of exercise that facilitates the body from rest to work. Including simple exercises like ovals, serpentines, and figure eights are parts of an effective warm up that will decrease the chance of injury and help enhance performance.

A proper warm up can delay the onset of fatigue, as it will improve oxygen delivery to the muscles, resulting in less lactic acid production during the workout. Lactic acid is a waste product of energy production that is removed by the blood stream. During high intensity workouts, lactic acid is produced much quicker than it can be removed. Being an acid, the lactate reduces the pH of the muscles' fibers, resulting in slower chemical reactions, which causes fatigue.

Heat is another by-product of energy production. During a typical warm up, muscles will increase in temperature by 1 degree Celsius. This is beneficial to our work because warm muscles contract more powerfully, reducing the chances of tearing fibers and causing injury. The longevity of the warm up should be adapted to the individual horse and their current level of fitness. Horses that are stabled or aged require more walking in their warm up.

The ambient temperature of the riding arena also comes into effect in the warm up, as when the weather is colder it takes considerably longer for muscles to reach optimum working temperature. An exercise blanket or quarter sheet may become very helpful when you are faced with a colder exercise area, to be used for warm up and be removed once the horse is ready. Another option is heating lamps, such as a solarium, to help muscles adapt quicker to working.

Your exercises should become progressively more strenuous leading to the specific type of work that is to follow. Your basic suppling exercises should be included after the first 5-10 minutes of forward movement and shouldn't progress into difficult movements until fully warm. Quite often we find ourselves performing smaller circles and difficult lateral movements in the initial stages of the ride. In doing so, you are risking over-stretching injuries in the muscles, tendons and ligaments.

Excess heat production also becomes an issue if your horse has grown a winter coat. This is especially the case in the areas that cannot lose heat by radiation, like under tack and between the hind legs. When this becomes a problem many riders decide to clip the long winter hair, as it acts as an insulating layer. We must use caution when we decide to clip, as this will compromise your horse's ability to conserve heat as well. In this circumstance, a breathable blanket will help if your horse lives outside

After the schooling or conditioning has taken place, the most important part of the ride begins: the warm down. The object is to return your horse's body to rest, so that the blood flow is gradually redistributed away from the skeletal muscles to the other organs of the body. In doing so you are not only allowing the redistribution of blood, but also enhancing lactate removal from the muscles. Missing this portion of the session drastically increases the time required for lactate removal by up to three hours. Using simple suppling exercises, such as turns, circles, and leg yielding, you are able to release any accumulated muscular tension and reduce post-exercise soreness. Your horse should be encouraged to stretch all parts of their body including their neck and poll, which can be places of tension during a ride.

Once your horse has returned to rest, cooling out can begin. This is the phase that is very dependent upon the weather. The object is to put the horse away cool and dry, but not cold. Returning to the stable promptly to place a blanket on the horse will limit drastic heat loss. Your horse should be returned outside once they are dry, as turn out of a wet horse can cause serious illness. Clipping long winter hair can drastically reduce the cool out time. Alternatively, using coolers and hair dryers on long hair is a great alternative.

The additional time required for cooling out can prove to be an issue in colder months. Ensure that you are not rushed in this phase of your program as it can cause serious side effects to your horse. If time is an issue, consider other training options such as longeing, long-lining or treadmill work as great alternatives to keep your horse fit. Ensuring your horse's health should be your number one concern in your conditioning program, and always involve your trainer or veterinarian when creating your program.