

Getting (or keeping) your horse in show shape

If your horse is boarded outside or you don't have regular access to an indoor arena, keeping your horse in shape over the winter has most likely been a difficult, if not impossible, task. While we've had our share of warm days this past winter, there's been a good share of snowy/icy days and frigid temperatures, giving anyone with only an outdoor arena a good excuse to stay away. If you're looking to get your horse in shape this spring, either for show season or just summer riding, there are several steps you can take to ensure that your horse is fit enough for competition or more frequent rides.

Develop An Exercise Program

If your horse has spent most of the winter munching hay and roaming the fields, there is a lot of work to be done. The best way to approach a horse that is very out of shape is to start out slowly and well in advance of a show or event.

The best way to start is by tak-

ing your horse for long walks to build up his stamina again. The key is to walk a lot, not trot, at first. Going for trail rides is a fun way to pass the time at a walk, especially in early spring. If you're able, try to incorporate some riding up and down small hills, since this a great way to build up your horse's rear muscles.

Another thing to remember is not to over-do it. If your horse hasn't been ridden all winter, don't take him for a two-hour trail ride his first time out. Start with a 15-minute ride, then 30 minutes, and slowly work your way up. If you're able, ride your horse two or three times a week at short intervals at first, then gradually work up to more time and more days. The most important thing is not

to jump on your horse's back and think that he's instantly ready for long, hard workouts. It's going to take many weeks of gradual training to get your horse in shape again.

After some time, once your horse is back in the routine of regular rides, start trotting. At this time, it's key to pay attention to how your horse is acting. If your horse appears winded, it's time to slow down and do more walking. You can try trotting again, but give him some time to catch his breath. Again, before you even thinking of cantering, it's important to build up your horse's stamina, first with long walks, then with steady trotting. Once the horse is in better condition, you can turn your focus to cantering.

If you've been able to walk up and down hills with your horse, this really comes into play now, as the horse will need to use his hindquarters more for cantering. As before, if your horse appears winded during or after a canter, don't push him to canter again right away. Give the horse more time at a walk, then continue to build up endurance at a trot. Once the horse seems to be breathing properly and building up stamina

trotting, you can slowly introduce cantering.

If your horse is a jumper, the same rules apply. Start light jumping once your horse is comfortable trotting and work your way up to cantering over jumps. It's good to start at lower heights until you're sure your horse is in adequate shape to take on the higher rails.

The biggest mistake riders can make during this time is to rush the process. It can take a good deal of time and commitment on your

part to get your horse in shape, without overdoing it. The best way to approach this is to write down a weekly plan of your horse's exercise, making notes as to how he felt after every ride. This way, you'll keep yourself in check by knowing what days will involve what level of workout and, if need be, it's always best to air on the side of caution and slow down the training, rather than speeding up the process. Trying to rush things will only increase your horse's likelihood for injury or breathing problems.

Feed Right

Once your horse is back under saddle, you will need to start adjusting your feeding amounts. Your grain especially will need to be gradually increased, proportionate to the amount of work you're doing. If you're unsure of the right way to do this, it's best to consult both your veterinarian

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Penny Haesloop, who boards her horse at Pleasant Meadow Farm in Readington Township, soars over a jump with her horse Bedbug.

and a reputable trainer.

It's extremely important to wait to feed your horse until at least an hour after you're done riding. This will greatly decrease the risk of colic. You'll also want to cool your horse out after any workout; be sure to walk your horse out for a few minutes, either under saddle or in hand. Feel your horse's chest to see how warm he is and adjust your cool down time accordingly; when you're done, the chest should feel much cooler, but keep the horse walking as long as you need to notice the difference. As temperatures warm up in the summer, it's not a bad idea to bathe your horse after a long workout, but you'll still need to walk your horse out first to completely cool their body down. The longer your workout, the more time you need to spend cooling your horse down.

As always, make sure your horse also has plenty of access to water in their stall or field, but only after they are fully cooled out.

Stay In Shape

If you have access to an indoor arena year-round, it's been much easier to keep your horse in shape over the winter months. However, with less access to trails, many riders find that monotonous ring work wears on them during the winter, making them want to ride less (and of course, air temperatures can make even the best indoors a little chilly).

To keep winter riding fun, Joanne Pelosi of Pleasant Meadow Farm in Readington Township offers a unique way for her boarders to stay motivated. "What we do at Pleasant Meadow Farm to encourage everyone to keep their horses fresh is have a 'game' night," Pelosi said. "Riders from various backgrounds — hunters, dressage, eventing, western — all get in the ring together and do relay races, the equine versions of musical chairs, broomstick polo and more. These games keep both human and equine tuned in and tuned up for other things. "It's fun and we follow it up with a potluck dinner. I think the horses love it as much as we do.

"I have always kept my horses in work over the winter," Pelosi continued. "Prior to building my own indoor arena, I used to board at other local stables to keep my horses fit. I believe that regardless of a horse's age or discipline, working under saddle helps keep their minds and bodies young. If you give an older horse too much time off over the winter, they can lose muscle and become stiff, even with ample turnout. It can take many months to build that muscle back. On the opposite end of the spec-

trum, the young equine needs to work regularly to help keep their focus. It doesn't have to be long or hard work; it just has to be enough work to keep them supple and mentally engaged," Pelosi said.

Reward Your Horse

Just like humans, most horses would rather be relaxing than exercising. Try to make riding as fun for your horse as it is for you. A

great way to achieve this is to balance ring work with trail riding as much as possible. Most horses enjoy the break from the repetitive training and the trails still provide a great workout.

It's also important to praise your horse for good behavior with plenty of positive reinforcement. Giving your horse pats and verbal encouragement, and of course treats, are a great way for your horse to

feel rewarded during and after a workout.

For more information on how to get your horse back in shape, consult a reputable trainer and veterinarian.

Contact Us

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