

PROPER CONDITIONING

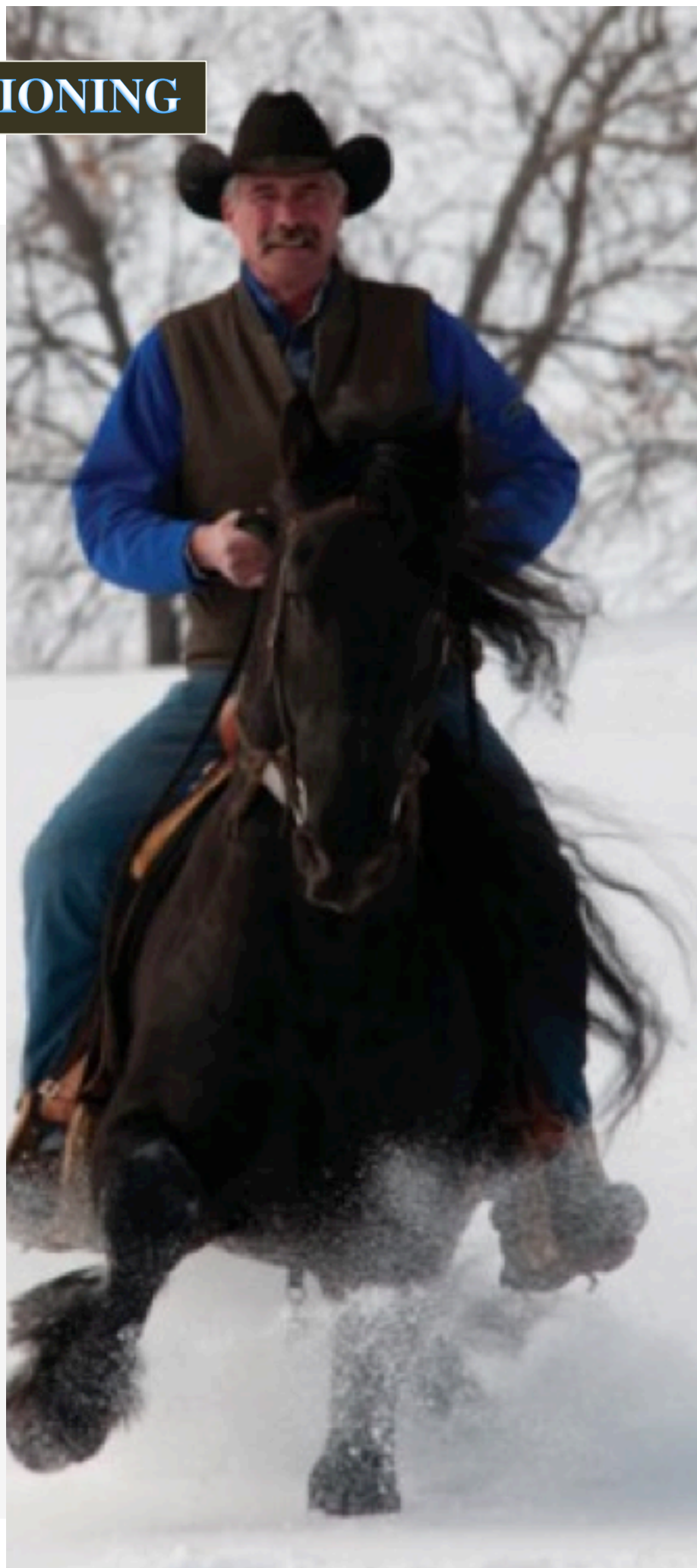
By Dennis Auslam
with Addie O'Neil

It's that time of year again – the transition from winter to spring. The snow will begin to melt and riding outdoors will become easier. During this period there is an important component which many riders overlook. **This is conditioning.** Conditioning your horse is a vital part of horse health, and if done incorrectly can result in serious and possible long-term injury of your horse.

Often, during the conditioning process, we become so concerned with the outside of the horse that we forget to put effort into the inside of the horse. Keep in mind that caring for the internal aspect of the horse is a year round responsibility; however, during the conditioning process it is very crucial. The intestinal tract, various nutrient deficiencies, joints, ligaments, cartilage and bone all rely on what we put into the horse and how they feel as a result. When we take horses out of their natural environment we must take into account what they are lacking. One way to get an idea of what your horse is getting nutrient wise is through hay testing.

Ultimately, we have the responsibility as horse owners to meet all of our horses' individual needs. If your horse is not feeling well or is bothered physically in some way they may act out with bad behavior or will not perform to their full potential. I suggest talking to a horse nutritionist for insight. I use Ralco and am more than pleased with the results I have seen from their products. One joint product, Flexequine, I use not only on my horses but also myself. It is often a myth that it's not important to give a joint supplement until a horse is older. However, that is not the case. Many problems can be bypassed if taken care of early through supplements, proper conditioning and protective leg wraps.

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The conditioning process itself is just that – a *process*. One must start slow and continually build their horse up in a number of ways to get them into peak physical condition. An example can be seen in performance horses such as in the rodeo world. If a rodeo is coming, a person cannot expect to pull their horse out a week or two beforehand, ride them a couple times, and then compete. Their horse will simply not perform at their best and can easily become injured. The best way to start conditioning is simply by walking. Walking results in muscle development. This is due to the fact that during walking the horse spends more time on each limb than in any other gait. This is where riders become impatient.

Trotting and loping will come later, but it's important to do at least two weeks of quality walking at a brisk pace before then. This will result in not only improved physical ability but also mental ability – the physical ultimately works the mental aspect of the horse. Since we are transitioning from the winter months, walking will give us the ability to rebuild our horses' work ethic.

After adequate walking has taken place, the next step in the conditioning process is to trot. Long trotting is a great exercise for building up your horses' cardio which includes the heart and lungs. Gravel roads are great for long trotting exercises if done on softer portions of the road. During this time, set up

your exercises so you are not long trotting back home – this should be the time in which you are walking. Spend two weeks every other day during this step to be fair to your horse. By this point your horse should be in the bridle and attentive to body cues. Now it's time to start loping

Loping should also be done on softer footing. Hard packed gravel roads can be detrimental to a horse's feet and legs. However, if gravel cannot be avoided, make sure to stay on the shoulder where it will be soft. In addition, fields work great for loping if they are safe and free of holes. The first week of this step should be done on flat ground. Hills also work great for conditioning. Personally, I do not like loping up hills for any other reason than conditioning. Horses can get into a habit of running up hills and in the long run this can be dangerous for both horse and rider.

After each workout remember to have a proper cool down. Hand walking is the best way to bring your horse's heart rate down. Wicking sheets and coolers also work great to decrease sweat – especially when the weather is still colder. Older blankets that have wicking power or fleece work well. Additionally, allowing your horse to roll in a safe environment after a workout is important for a few reasons. Rolling allows your horse to readjust his body naturally. Horses will try to roll anyway, so giving them a safe area such as a round pen versus a stall is a good idea.

A last piece of advice has to do with water intake. After a condi-

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tioning workout, water intake needs to be monitored carefully. One habit I have fallen into is allowing my horse to take seven gulps of water and then taking it away. This can be done in intervals over a period of time until the horse is done drinking. The horse should be properly cooled out before they are allowed water. If a horse dives into drinking a vast amount of water immediately after a workout they can become sick.

Take great care in properly conditioning your horse this coming spring and keep in mind that it is a process. If done properly you will have a horse in excellent physical condition – but if rushed and done incorrectly injury can result. Remember to start with the inside of the horse and make sure all of his needs are met.

Dennis Auslam