

Conditioning Your Performance Horse

By Phil Haugen

“One of the Keys of a good conditioning program is Consistency”

This is a subject that applies not only to competition horses, but it also applies to horses that are in the initial stages of training. I try to break it into two very simple categories; 1) toning their muscles, and 2) building their lung capacity for air. I try to break our training sessions or our work sessions into 3 segments--the warm-up, the work session, and the cool down. I think it is extremely important to have a good warm-up session to make sure your horse is loose and flexible and not locked up in any of their 5 body parts. We use our level 1 exercises for our warm-up and evaluation of how our horse feels that day. Then we go into our work session from there. This will vary depending on the day and the stage of training /conditioning we are at with that particular horse. Typically it will involve some or most of the Level 2 & 3 exer-

cises in our 'Foundation to Finish' program. These are all exercises that are done at a walk, trot, and a lope. At the end it is important to walk your horse and let their body cool down and let their mind relax and end the day in a relaxed state of mind and body. How you leave your horse at the end of a session is how they're going to be when you start tomorrow.

One of the keys of a good conditioning program is consistency. It is human nature that we get motivated when we have an event coming up and we really start working our horse harder in anticipation of that event. Many times what happens is that you have a horse that is body sore when you get to that event due to the increased activity level from our anxious anticipation of the event. The results of riding/conditioning your horse 1 hour a day is much better than riding 3 hours every 3rd day!!

Also, make sure your horse is able to move around in its pen and give your horse the opportunity to work out some of its muscle soreness and roll in a pen or arena if possible. I am real big on that. We try to keep our performance horses and horses in training in pens big enough that they can move around a lot and roll if they want to.

It has been my experience through the years that you are going to encounter some body soreness in your horse as you go through this process. Just as great athletes work out every day to work out their soreness, we need to do the same thing with our horses. There will be some days in this conditioning process where we will lighten the work session considerably and basically just go through a nice warm-up and cool down session when I see a horse is body sore. This will help your horse get over that soreness and go back to progressing with their conditioning.

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I also think it is important that once you get your horse in good physical condition you make some simulated competition runs on them at home before you go to the barrel race, roping, or whatever. When you make a hard run your horse uses their muscles a little differently than when they're at a walk, trot, and lope. Angie Meadors and I do some clinics together and this is something Angie always tells our students. Angie tells them to make some runs at home so that they have the confidence to make that run when they go to an event. It's a different feel for your horse too when you're going at an increased speed.

And one final suggestion; when you are at an event/competition, make sure you get your horse out of the stall periodically and do some simple warm-up exercises to help keep your horse's muscles loose and relaxed. You can do this by riding them or simply working them with a lunge line. This is all part of getting your horse's body conditioned and keeping them feeling good. I hope some of these suggestions will increase your success. Best of luck and we'll see you down the road.

Phil



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