

# CONDITIONING YOUR PERFORMANCE HORSE.....Part I

by Jen Osgood

## About Jen Osgood:

I am the owner and trainer at the Montacre Farms. I have had multiple rodeo placings and 1D/2D wins. I specialize in barrel horses and cutting horses. Also, I hold a diploma in Equine Sciences (nutrition, growth and development, exercise physiology, anatomy, health and disease, and behavior), and I have a certificate in Equine Business from the University of Guelph in Ontario.

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Last month I talked about fueling your performance horse, this month and next month I will be talking about conditioning your performance horse, and keeping them in the best physical shape possible. This will decrease injuries and will help your horse recover from competition at a much faster pace.

In this first part I will discuss the different types of conditioning, and the factors to consider when developing a program specific to each individual horse.

Preparation of a horse for any type of competition involves a combination of conditioning and schooling. Conditioning induces physiological and structural adaptations that maximize performance and maintain soundness. Schooling develops neuromuscular coordination and mental discipline.

Ideally the conditioning program is designed to fulfill the needs of the individual horse and rider in accordance with the competitive objectives. There are three distinct types of conditioning:

- Cardiovascular conditioning enhancing the ability of the respiratory, cardiovascular and muscular systems to produce energy by the appropriate metabolic pathways.
- Strength training is directed toward increasing the power or endurance of the muscle groups that are important for performance of the specific sport
- Suppling exercises increase the range of motion of the joints, which make the horse more athletic, improves the esthetic of the performance and reduces the risk of injury.

The success of a conditioning program depends on the body's response to the stresses imposed by regular exercise. Each workout causes some temporary damage to the tissues, which is repaired over the ensuing hours and days. Through repeated cycles of damage and repair the tissues adapt to the workload

in a more permanent manner. The precise nature of the short term and long term adaptations depends on the type of exercise and the frequency of the workouts. If regular exercise ceases or is reduced in volume the exercise induced changes are reversed. In the horse cardiovascular and muscular systems respond rapidly with significant changes being produced in only a few weeks. This is in contrast to the supporting structures (hoof, bone, cartilage, ligaments, tendons) which adapt much more slowly over a period of many months. The goal of course is to condition all the body systems to withstand the increasing level of exercise without causing any of them to fail.

When designing a conditioning program there are several factors to consider:

Horse: Breed/Type  
Age  
Conditioning history  
Present fitness  
Previous injuries

Rider: Time schedule  
Competitive objectives

cont.....

## Conditioning Your Performance Horse cont....

**Sport:** Type of sport  
Level of competition  
Timing of competitions during the  
Season

**Environment:**  
Weather  
Terrain  
Facilities

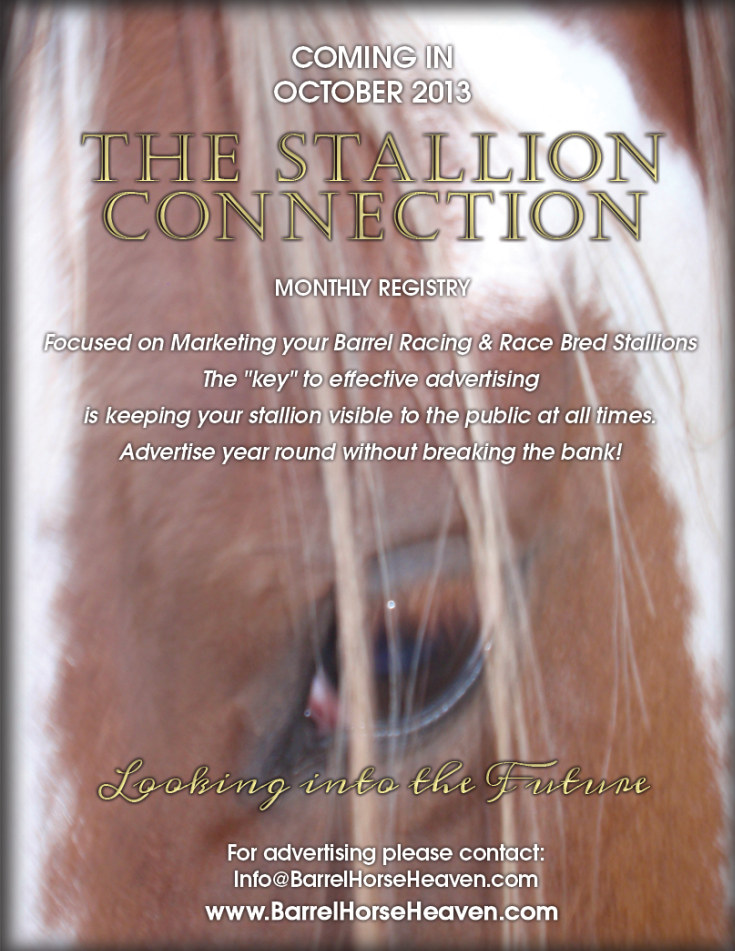
Each horse is an individual and everything must be taken into account before creating a program for example different breeds respond to conditioning differently. For example Warmbloods generally have a lower cardiovascular capacity than thoroughbreds and they require a larger volume of work to reach the same level of fitness. Same thing goes for horses recovering from injuries. Any discomfort or soreness needs to be monitored carefully.

Another big factor is what sport has been chosen. When competing in a sport such as endurance conditioning is geared more towards long distances at a constant speed for longer periods. Such as long trotting or walking for several mile. On the other hand competing in a sport such as barrel racing conditioning using an interval training format using speed play, acceleration sprints, and inertial drills to stimulate the anaerobic energy systems and recruit the fast twitch muscle fibers. Drills that mimic the movements of the sport are used to strengthen the bones, ligaments and tendons in a sport specific manner, this should be done a maximum of 3 times per week with low intensity schooling during the other days.

Contrary to many beliefs long trotting is only beneficial to barrel horses in the early stages of conditioning, or coming back from and injury. Speed drills are most frequently neglected in the barrel horse conditioning program but is one of the more important factors.

Next month I will get into more detail and the difference in anaerobic and aerobic conditioning and teach you how to personalize a conditioning program for each individual horse that you ride.

*Jen*



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