

GETTING A HEAD START; CONDITIONING FOR YOUR UPCOMING SHOW SEASON

The show season is just about here! Some people still have a white landscape and others are standing in puddles of mud. Regardless of your current weather, that first show is just around the corner and it's time to get ready.

The challenge at the beginning of each show season is to get our trained performance horse back into shape so he can be competitive as well as injury free. Most people do not have the indoor arena or round pen so what to do?

A treadmill can be a quick and easy conditioning tool but it has its drawbacks. It is hard to supple your driving horse because he can't wear his harness and bend while on the treadmill. The treadmill will not get our horses' cardio conditioning to quite the level that he will need to do his performance classes. Don't throw out your treadmill though, just realize it is only part of your horses conditioning program.

For working outdoors in these last soggy days of winter there are a few things you can do. Set up a round pen or an area that you can lunge your horse in. Your round pen needs to be at least 40 feet in diameter. This keeps the horse from having to workout in too tight of a circle. If your horse has to work in too small of an area then he has a greater chance to slip and fall. It is also harder to keep him going at a good gallop. Your footing in your round pen or lunging area is imperative. It must be firm yet have a good layer of cushion. Since we are talking about an outside area, your footing needs to reflect your local (wet) weather. There are several very cost-conscious ways to achieve good safe footing. Talk to someone in your local area who is experienced in outdoor arena. Since we are working in a relatively small area, your investment should be minor.

Once you have your round pen or lunging area safe, it's time to get the program started. You might want to purchase a good rain slicker for yourself because you cannot wait for just the nice days to do the conditioning program.

I suggest using an old harness when possible. Put the harness on without the traces or martingale. Then put on the bridle with the cavesson. You will need a side rein. I personally prefer a non-elastic side rein. This prevents the horse from learning to bounce or lean on the bit. Attach the side rein from the bit to the harness saddle to the ring under the turret (the turret is the ring on the saddle that your rein goes through). Try not to attach to the turret as if this breaks, it is difficult to fix.

When starting this conditioning program, start with your side rein only tight enough to keep your horse from being able to straighten his head out. You want his head turned slightly to the inside of your circle. As you progress, you can tighten the side rein to about 45 degrees. The side rein part of this is to help your horse regain his suppleness in driving. If you are working with a lunge line, attach the lunge line to the bit also. Another option when working this setup with a lunge line is to get a large halter and put

over your bridle and attach your lunge line to the halter. Still use your side rein the same as in a round pen.

What condition your horse is in to begin with will determine how long and hard to start his workouts. I like to start at five to six minutes at a good hard gallop. Don't worry about your harness horse galloping in the harness; he will still trot for you. You are not teaching him any bad habits. What you will discover is that your horse works much harder while wearing the harness.

Another thing you can do is work multiple horses at the same time. This really makes the horses work hard as they challenge each other. When you do this, you need to make sure your round pen is larger.

Don't work your horses when the weather is below 30 degrees. This can hurt your horses' lungs and respiratory system.

To achieve your conditioning goals, you need to be realistic about how many days per week to work your horse. If you can get in five days per week and get your horse up to 12 to 15 minutes each time at a hard gallop, you will have a well conditioned horse. If you can only work three or four times per week, then it will take a bit longer.

In six to eight weeks you will have a nicely conditioned horse. Consistency is the key! You may not be able to put your horse in every class you would like to at the first show, but you will be able to increase the number classes as your horse gets in better condition.

When possible, you can clip your horses head and neck to make it easier to work him. If this is not possible, clip under his chin so the bridle fits better. When you're done with a work session, be sure to towel dry your horse and put coolers or a blanket on him so he does not get a chill. You can take these off after he is completely dry. Make sure to check through your horses' hair often for dry spots or fungus. When your horse sweats, it does leave him vulnerable for skin problems. Good feed and careful cooling will help prevent these potential problems.

Your veterinarian is not just around for emergencies and shots. Make an appointment to meet with your veterinarian to go over your feed program. Explain your goals and how much you're working your horse and your upcoming show schedule. He should be able to help you create a good nutritional feed program to fit your horses' needs and goals.

Your performance at the show is only as good as the homework you put into it. Set up a realistic schedule that you and your horse will be able to do consistently.

You will find those ribbons you win will be worth all of the preliminary work you have been doing. Make your workouts fun for you and your horse.

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