

Is your horse #CBR- Competition Body Ready?

With the State Showjumping and One Day Event being held over the same weekend in July, it is essential that your horse is adequately prepared and at peak fitness levels, especially if you plan on competing across both disciplines. Rachel Ratini runs through a basic fitness plan to help you arrive at Denman ready to tackle the weekend!

Horse fitness is essential for all equestrian disciplines- from racing to showjumping to dressage, and everything in between. What discipline you choose to undertake will depend on the type and level of fitness required. It takes around 12-16 weeks to build a horse up to peak fitness levels and it is not ideal to have the horse at peak fitness for too long, as it is thought this leads to behavioural problems such as becoming “sour” as well as putting the horse under large amounts of physical and mental stress.



Think of your horses fitness program as a triangle. The top represents 100% fitness. The higher you want the top to be, the wider the base gets. So, the fitter you want your horse to be at the end of your program depends on how much preparation you do at the beginning of the program. The base of the triangle represents low intensity work (long slow distance work) and the top represents high intensity work. Therefore, it is also implied that as you increase intensity in work, the volume should decrease (as the triangle gets narrower).

Horses maintain aerobic capacity for several weeks after a break (much better than humans do!). For every two weeks your horse is on a break, allow one week of work to get back to the previous fitness level. For example, if you give the horse 4 months off, it will take 8 weeks to achieve the previous fitness level.

Things to do before you start

- Obtain a stopwatch (or use the timer on your phone).
- Learn how to take your horses vital signs and start recording their baseline measurements before you commence your program. This way you will know when something is “off”.
- As your horses energy needs increase and change, it is a good idea to have an equine nutritionist formulate a diet for your horse. Ranvet’s equine nutritionists offer this as a complementary service, so get in touch with them.
- Ensure your horse is sound and healthy. Make sure his teeth have been checked by a qualified veterinary dentist, he is recently shod, he has been wormed. If coming back from a long break, it is a good idea to have your veterinarian give him a check over before commencing work.

Normal Vital Signs

Respiratory: 10-24 breaths per minute

Temperature: 37-38.5 degrees Celsius

Heart Rate: 28-44 beats per minute

Long Slow Distance Work

Let’s start at your low intensity work, approximately 12 weeks out from your competition. Low intensity work increases the horses aerobic fitness, and increases their cardiovascular capacity, which is essential for any type of athletic work.



Some ideas include:

- Trail rides
- Road rides
- Beach rides (hard/wet sand only)
- Arena Work

Start your rides at a 20 minute duration and build them up over the course of a month to one hour in duration , firstly walking, then trotting, then eventually cantering. By two weeks you should be able to slowly trot for 30 mins duration, and by the end of the month, you should be cantering for 20-30 mins duration. You can vary the terrain but remember to slowly increase the intensity- don't start off by cantering uphill for 20 mins in the first week! Whilst you are doing this long slow work, you can still work on things like leg yield and transitions to ensure your horse stays supple and on the aids. Only increase the intensity OR the duration in one session, not both.

Tip: Wear a watch or keep a timer on your phone so you can keep track of your increases in duration. Keep a diary (it can be as simple as the notes in your phone!) to keep track of what duration and intensity you are up to.

Strength Work

Around one month into your fitness program, you can start introducing strength work, which will help to build the horses muscular strength. If you are introducing jumps, keep them small, as at this stage it is not about the height, it is about getting your horses muscles strong without putting excess strain on them. Remember to still incorporate your LSD work around 3 times a week now.

Ideas include:

- Pole work
- Gymnastic jumping/ Grids
- Hill work
- Lateral work
- Jumping
- Swimming or Walking in Water

Tip: No matter that type of work you are doing, remember to adequately warm up and cool down your horse!



Fast Work

Fast work is required really only for disciplines that require the horse to gallop: Eventing; Sporting; Endurance and similar disciplines. This type of work comes with increased risk, so if you do not have access to a suitable surface, you can increase the horses workload and heartrate by working on a gradient, or going against a resistance (ie. wind). Fast work should be guided by an experienced coach or rider to prevent injury to your horse. Fast work should not be undertaken more than twice a week for any horse, even top level eventers. This is due to glycogen stores being depleted in fast work which take up to 72 hours to be replenished through the horses diet. Remember that this includes the competition day!

There are two types of fast work: Continuous, or Interval Training

Continuous Training

Continuous Training is where you would carry out fast work of longer duration but lower speeds, or shorter duration of higher speeds in a continuous manner. For example, you may gallop for one minute at 700 m/m, and then canter for 7 minutes at 500m/m.

The drawback to continuous training is that not many of us are lucky enough to have a gallop track in the back yard! There is where interval training comes in handy.



Interval Training

This is where you will subject the horse to short sharp bursts of high intensity efforts, before a short period of walking to recover.

Your interval training sessions should vary depending on:

- Speed
- Distance
- Time of Work
- Duration of rest periods
- Number of repetitions

Tip: If you are serious about getting your horse in peak fitness, a heart rate monitor is a sound investment. After one interval, your horses heart rate should be below 100 beats/min within 1-2 minutes of finishing an interval, and back to normal (warm up) within 5-8 minutes.

Putting it all together

First, work back from your event goal date to determine how much time you have got. Depending on your horses current fitness levels will depend on how much LSD work you do. Your horse needs at least 1-2 days off per week, and you need to take into consideration any events you attend will count as “work days”.

Your week may look something like this:

- 1-2 days fast work
- 3 LSD days
- 1 skill day
- 1 day off

Disclaimer: This advice is a general guide and does not take into consideration injuries, current fitness level, or individual needs. If in doubt, ask your veterinarian or coach for advice. Fitness is subjective.

References

Lonnell, C. 2017. Sport Horse Soundness and Performance. Kenilworth Press.

Marlin, D., Nankervis, K. 2002 Equine Exercise Physiology. Blackwell Publishing.



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