



Conditioning and Strengthening Exercises for Horses

The benefits of warm-up period are three-fold. The horse's body temperature is raised and blood flow is increased to working muscles. As a result, the muscles and tendons are loosened which increases the range of motion and helps avoid pulling or tearing of tendons and ligaments. In addition, the muscles are warmed up allowing them to accommodate harder work by more adequately relaxing and contracting. Finally, a moderate warm-up will better prepare the horse to dissipate heat during intense exercise. A successful warm-up routine consists of walking the horse for five minutes and then trotting for five minutes before moving on to more demanding work.

Just as important as the warm-up is the cool down. This is light work that will gradually bring the horse back to a resting state. Generally this is accomplished by simply reversing the order of the warm-up (five minutes of trotting followed by five minutes of walking). The importance of the cool-down period is that the slower work helps the blood remove lactic acid from the horse's muscles. Quarter horses tend to build up more lactic acid than other equine athletes. This is necessary to minimize stiffness and soreness in the horse day after it's workout.

Begin by riding them three days a week for at least a half hour each day. This time will be increased to one hour each day the next week an hour and a half the third week and leveling off at to two hours the fourth week. A general rule of thumb that I have used is that by the end of the conditioning period, a daily ride of about half the distance of an average day on the trail is sufficient. In other words, if your average ride on the trail is four hours in the saddle, the conditioning period should be composed of two hours. Each session is begun lightly on the lunge line and then progressing under saddle at a walk, then with sustained trotting first at :05, :10, :15, and :20 intervals. After each interval of trotting then will slow to a walk to allow your horse's heartbeat to slowly come down to normal. To adequately work all muscle groups, I will alternate the lead the horse is on. Rarely canter your horse during these conditioning workouts, as I believe his cardiovascular workout is best heightened at the trot. Each session is ended at a walk with the horse's heart rate close to a resting normal. Over time the joints can be maximized by the same exercises done on an incline. This will strengthen and condition the muscles that are synergistic to the range of motion for the affected joints. Over time, you will have compensated for loss of use atrophy, and over strengthened the necessary muscles for use. Lots of work for the horse owner and easy for me to say as a veterinarian, but will show positive results in the end.

Now in order to maximize and target the strap muscles of the neck and the para spinal muscles in the neck and back, you must lengthen the stride both directions at a trot. This is accomplished by hill exercises 15 minutes a day 3 days a week for ten days, then doubling the time days 10-20, then increasing to 5 days a week from day 20 -30. Find a nice slow incline in a good dry part of the pasture. Jog uphill in a straight line, then zig zag back down if you are riding the horse (This is usually day 10-20). You may also lunge the horse in a 30' diameter circle on the side of a hill in both directions for symmetrical results. After the horse has reached maximum strengthening you may put support bandages on the horse's legs then wet them with water before exercising. This will act as leg weights. Similar work outs may be done in deep sand to provide maximum effort.

If lameness worsens over the time period, the horse should discontinue exercises, then evaluated by your veterinarian.