



Equine Fitness

In evaluating your horse's fitness sometimes the workload needs to be increased to achieve better conditioning. Fatigue is one of the most common ways that performance horses incur injuries. Because these magnificent animals appear willing and able to do what we ask, they work without telling us that they can't. Sometimes we find out the hard way that more conditioning was required to support the performance we are striving for. Let's look a little deeper at your program and work to build more tissue to ensure the horse's conditions meets the task.

The fastest way to build tone will involve trading off a cardio-focused day and a strength-focused day. On the cardio day our goal is to get our horse's heart rate and respiration up. In a one-hour ride we would want to give 2-3 long breaks so that our horse can fully catch its breath. We should spend more time in each gait, working exercises that our horse knows well and can accomplish easily. The focus isn't training something new but to increase muscle tone, muscle nutrient and waste exchange enhancement, and to have respiratory function bolstered. The horse's posture should be one they can hold easily, we don't want the horse to fall down on the forehead, just to do the cardio work, we want to be in a correct frame for their level of training. A misnomer to cardio day is the long and low frame, we don't want the horse stretching the entire time. On a higher level horse, this may be a day you practice your lengthening, things that really get your horse's blood pumping, and are level appropriate.

Contrarily, the strength day is a different story. On these days we can work on the next level of our horse's training. The work is more intense, and because of this there will be more frequent breaks. In a one-hour ride we should still take two longer breaks so that our horse can fully catch its breath, but we should also have 6-8 short breaks to allow the horse's tissue to drain. These breaks can be as short as 20-25 seconds. It is imperative that we allow the horse to break before he/she becomes fatigued to allow the tissue to drain otherwise other tissue is used to compensate for the muscle that just can't fire any longer. Even a short break, like the one mentioned above, will allow the horse to regain the ability to use the tissue for a short time in a correct fashion.

A favorite method for increasing fitness level with equine athletes is the '3-1 program': three days on and one day off. This program allows for enough tissue-building time balanced with a repair and recovery day. As we get ready for show season we must ensure our horses are conditioned and fit enough for the job we want them to do. Each ride should be seen as a building block in your program. Every athlete needs the mental relief of an easy day (i.e. a hack day), however that day will not add much to our horse's fitness level. A horse needs to be comfortable with twice the workload at home compared to what we expect at a show. If you are planning to show two days in a row at a competition, we must practice this schedule or greater at home.

****NOTE: Therapy is not a replacement for Veterinary Care.****

