

# June 2019

## Equine Newsletter

### Getting your horse fit



#### How do you start getting your horse fit?

The first thing that is often useful is setting a realistic goal. Life is often incredibly hectic and time is one of the most precious commodities we have so working out a goal helps to ensure you make time to get to that point.

Once you have a goal in mind you can create a plan as to how to achieve it, for example if you were aiming to do a prelim test in 8 weeks on a horse that is currently on its holidays you would be able to work out you need to ride several times a week between now and then. As a rough rule with regular work it is often estimated as 6-8 weeks to get a horse fit for show jumping and similar disciplines and 12 weeks for sports such as endurance. But obviously this is very dependant on the level, how recently they were last fit and the individual horse.

Trying to rush your horse to get fit or not getting your horse fit enough before a big event may put them at risk of soft tissue injury so it is important to have patience and to train appropriately.



#### How long do horses maintain fitness?

This somewhat depends on the horse but as a general rule if the horse is still getting daily turn out they start to noticeably drop fitness at about the 6 weeks mark. As a consequence if for example you were competing at endurance (or just hacking long distances), going for monthly rides of similar distances once the horse has been brought up to the correct fitness level (and the horse has daily turn out) should keep them on a similar fitness level for the season. If the initial time investment into getting the horse's fit hasn't been undertaken this may not hold true.

#### How important is schooling to getting a horse fit?

Horses are designed to travel vast distances each day however they did not evolve to carry riders on their backs. To enable horses to comfortably carry riders they must have correct muscling over their backs, otherwise they become at risk of conditions such as kissing spines. Although hill work and hacking is incredibly important for building muscles, working a horse correctly is also essential. That doesn't mean every ride the horse must be in the perfect outline or that it can't be achieved on a hack but it is of great benefit for a horse in regular work to be schooled correctly weekly.

## **Are there any supplements or feeds you should use to help get a horse fit?**

Most horses do not require more than forage and balancer unless they are a poor doer or doing high levels of work. It is important to make sure your horse is a good weight and in the best possible health when trying to get it fit with regular worming and dentistry. If you are worried about your horse's weight please don't hesitate to ask your vet for advice.

## **Can I over school my horse?**

Absolutely every structure has a limit. Every discipline comes with its own potential problems. For example high level dressage horses often develop osteoarthritis and high level showjumpers often develop

suspensory problems. By pushing a horse in one particular discipline one is putting stress on one particular set of structures. Over schooling does exactly the same, by repeating exercises over and over again one is putting more and more pressure through the same structures.

Eventually harm can be caused. It is a balance between doing enough to get your horse fit and ready to compete and not overdoing it.

Pole work and lunging can also really aid your horse's fitness levels and get them working different muscle group to help them strengthen.

Often when setting rehabilitation programs for our clients we will include a mixture of hacking, pole work, lunging and schooling to build the horse up and strengthen them.

## **How can I try to minimise damage to my horse?**

Cross training is a fantastic way in any discipline to help reduce the overall impact on each anatomical structures. Dressage horses that also hack, show jumpers that also school on the flat, endurance horses and hunters that also turn their hoof to dressage all on average last longer from an orthopaedic point of view before they require any veterinary intervention and before they need to be retired.

## **How fast can I go on the road?**

Unfortunately as much as we wish to avoid it, hacking in the south west generally means at least some road work. Repetitive impact on a hard surface increases your horse's risk of developing conditions such as arthritis, therefore when undertaking roadwork it is advisable not to canter on the road and to minimise the amount of trotting you do. The theory of strengthening your horse's legs on the road by trotting long distances has been disproven in multiple studies which suggest that actually 5-10 minutes of trotting on roads per hack should be the ideal.

This may not always be possible due to time or having no access to an arena, but it is worth bearing in mind.