



Horse&Rider **MONTHLY**

DECEMBER 2024

In this issue...

HORSE&RIDER'S
TRAINER
OF THE YEAR:
ERIC PRIEST

HOW TO
RIDE SMART

THINGS
TAKE **TIME**

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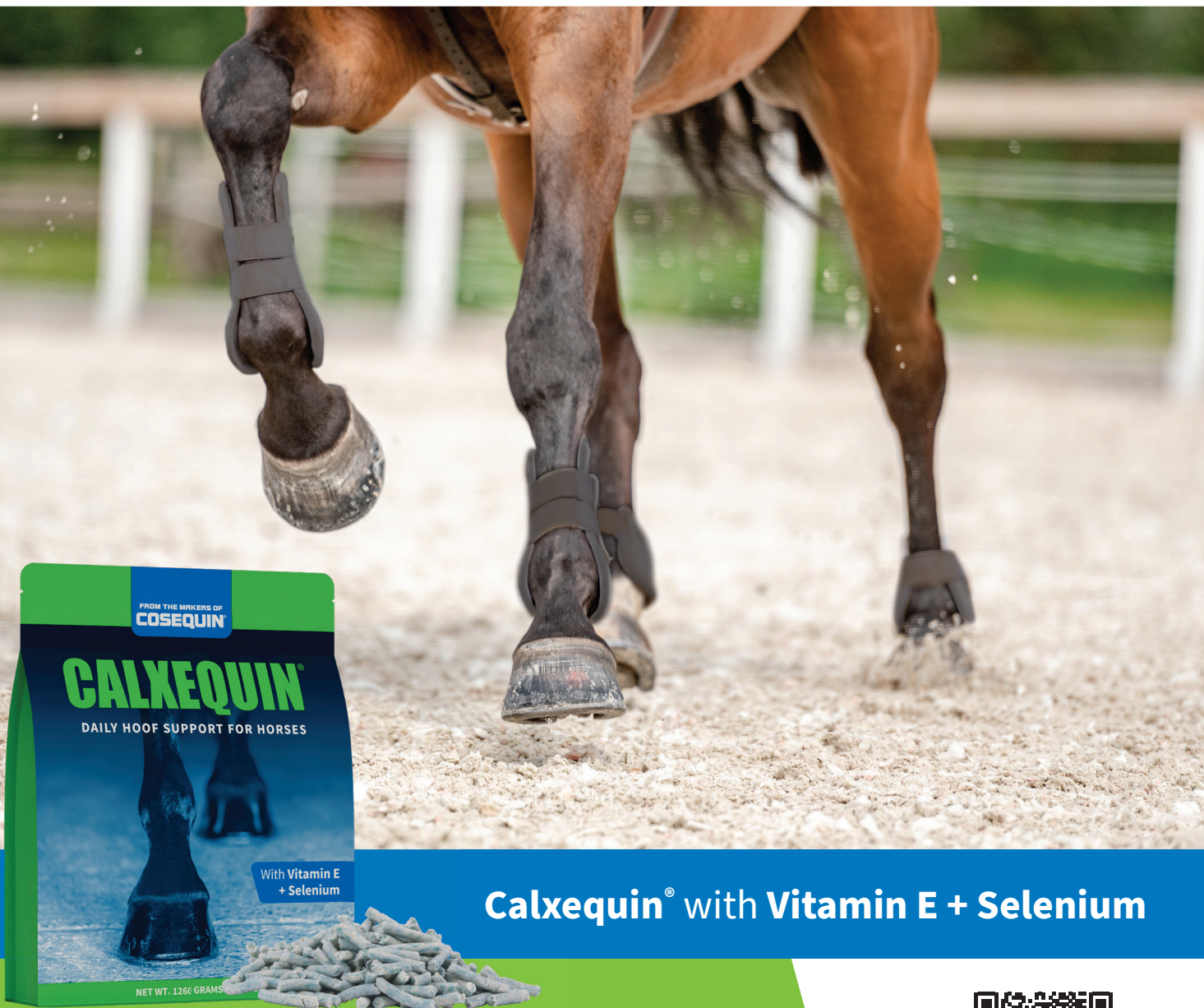
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Horse Life



TRAIN / HEALTH

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TRAIN

2024 Horse&Rider Trainer of the Year

★ *Horse&Rider* is thrilled to announce that Eric Priest, owner of Priest Performance Horses in Belle Center, Ohio, is the winner of the 2024 *Horse&Rider* Trainer of the Year program with prizes provided by Nutramax Laboratories Veterinary Sciences, Inc., makers of Cosequin.

The Trainer of the Year Program was implemented to recognize horse trainers who have had a positive impact on their clients, or the industry. Nominations for this contest involved both a written essay, and a video outlining the contributions of this trainer. This program is an opportunity to highlight and celebrate a horse trainer who exemplifies what it means to be a good steward of the equine industry. Out of all the trainers nominated, 10 finalists were selected, with one earning the title of Trainer of the Year.

Horse&Rider Magazine is thrilled to announce Eric Priest as the winner of the 2024 Trainer of the Year. Priest, a trainer based out of Belle Center, Ohio, is beloved by all those who work with him. Specializing in performance horses, lessons, colt starting, and sales, Priest is well known for his ability to connect with riders of all levels, and training horses that excel at reining. Known for his attention to detail, positive attitude, and the level of care he bestows upon horse and rider, his clients describe the wonderful experiences they have had with Priest as a trainer and a coach. “Eric has always gone above and beyond to ensure my horses are cared for. He notices every little hair out of place and will take care of it”, says Samantha Calabrese. She goes on to describe the way Priest gives back to the horse community, and cares for riders of every level. “Eric always does 4H clinics. He helps out people at shows who might not be in his program but benefit from him. Eric promotes good sportsmanship by being a good sportsman himself. He always gives positive feedback to his clients no matter the ride.”

Something that all nominees noted was the love that Priest has for the sport and most of all, for the horse. “Eric only does what the horses need to be comfortable and happy”, says Evan Rogers, one of Priest’s riders who nominated the trainer for this award. Calabrese agrees, saying “I believe what drives my trainer is he actually loves the horses and the sport. Eric has made me want to be a more patient rider. He has instilled the importance of having the horse be happy and healthy before anything. He has instilled these traits with being honest with me even when he knew that I wouldn’t be happy about the situation. Eric always puts the horse first! If the horse isn’t cared for properly, they don’t compete. The horse always comes first with Eric.”



PHOTO BY SHANE RUX

Priest is well known for his ability to connect with riders of all levels, and those who nominated him noted his passion and love for the sport, and his inspiring and positive attitude.

And Priest has certainly demonstrated a love and respect for the horse, going so far as to risk his life. When a barn fire broke out in June, at the training facility of Brant Performance Horses and Priest Performance Horses, tragically taking the lives of over 40 horses, Priest ran into the danger, attempting to open gates and save horses. He suffered from second-degree and third-degree burns on his scalp, back, and arms which were the primary reason he was hospitalized for a month. He spent recovery time in the OSU Burn Center, and maintained his trademark positive attitude throughout treatment. Eric Priest demonstrates his love and passion for the sport and the horse in every aspect of his life, and those who nominated him see this in action every day. He is not only a coach, trainer, competitor, and champion, he is a role model to those around him, as noted by Evan Rogers. “I consider Eric to be someone who I want to be when I grow up. A hard-working coach who is passionate about his job and always positive... even when I spin 5 times instead of 4!”

Prizes for the 2024 *Horse&Rider* Trainer of the Year are provided by Nutramax Laboratories Veterinary Sciences, Inc., makers of Cosequin, and include a custom arena banner, a custom silver belt buckle, and an annual subscription to *Horse&Rider* Magazine. Cosequin also generously surprised Priest and his team with a check for \$5,000, to help rebuild after the catastrophic fire that occurred this summer. ★



HEALTH

Learn Which of Your Horse's Legs Is Lame

★ In most cases, pinpointing lameness in your horse's legs isn't difficult if you follow these steps.

Performance horses can be at risk for injury. Careful attention to soreness and pinpointing lameness early on can keep a minor injury from flaring into a long lay-off.

What you're looking for:

Head-bob: Your horse's head bobs UP when a sore forelimb hits the ground. His head bobs DOWN when a sore hindlimb hits the ground. (Tip: A head-bob is easiest to see when your horse is trotted toward you. As a general rule, the more pronounced the bob, the more severe the pain.)

Hip-hike or hip-drop: The hip on one side raises HIGHER and or/sinks LOWER than the other side. (Tip: This is easiest to see when your horse is trotted away from you. Make it more visible by sticking a piece of white adhesive tape on each hip to give your eye a reference point.)

Toe-drag: The toe of the affected hind limb drags the ground on the forward swing.

Shortened stride: The stride on one leg is shorter than the stride on the other legs.

Now, locate the lame leg:

Follow these steps. Call your veterinarian if you observe any sign of injury or lameness in Steps 1, 2 or 3. If you still can't ferret out the lameness, call your vet for help.

Step 1. Examine your horse's legs and feet for external evidence of injury.

Stand him squarely on solid, level ground, then visually examine each leg and coronary band for bumps, swellings, wounds, discharges or other such problems.

Feel each hoof for excess heat, then check the strength of your horse's digital pulse (using the thumb and middle fingers of your right hand, feel behind and on either side of his lower fetlock—above the sesamoid area—with your palm on the front and fingers rapped toward the back until you feel a faint pulse.)

Pick up, clean and examine each foot for nails, cracks, bruises or other abnormalities. Note any resistance, which could indicate pain in another foot, hence his reluctance to increase the load there.

Step 2. Watch your horse trot a straight line. Lameness that's barely perceptible at the walk can become more evident at the trot.

Find a flat, smooth surface with solid footing.

Recruit a helper. Give her a crop or whip, if necessary, to help get your horse trotting in-hand.

Have your helper trot the horse on a straight line



Be sure to pick up, clean and examine each foot for nails, cracks, bruises, or other abnormalities.

PHOTO BY VALERIE VATEL/STOCK ADOBE.COM

away from you, for about 50 feet, loosely holding the lead so as not to inhibit a head-bob. Then have the pair trot toward you, then past you, so you can view the horse from the front and side.

Repeat the exercise two to three times. If you still can't identify the lame leg(s), one of three things could be happening:

1. Your horse may be too lame, fresh, or uncomfortable to cooperate.
2. The lameness is bilateral or too subtle to show up on a straight line.
3. There is no lameness.

Step 3. Longe your horse.

Have your helper longe the horse in both directions, gradually tightening the circle. Or have your helper trot him in circles in-hand. As a general rule, the tighter the circle, the more pronounced the lameness. Still can't see the problem's origin? Call your vet.

This article is excerpted from the book *Hands-On Senior Horse Care* by Karen Hayes, DVM, MS, and Sue Copeland. ★

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RIDE SMART

A world champion shares her core training secrets. An H&R exclusive adapted from Sandy Collier's new book, *Reining Essentials: How to Excel in Western's Hottest Sport*.

Training horses is not supposed to be mortal combat. We're supposed to be using our much bigger brains to make learning seem doable and non-threatening to our equine partners. Preferably one who has experience working with novice riders on equally inexperienced horses.

Knowing exactly how to do that, however, isn't always obvious. In fact, I've spent the last 25 years figuring it all out. In particular, I've analyzed the basic philosophy of Tom and Bill Dorrance (making the right thing easy, the wrong thing difficult) to see how it applies to day-to-day training. In this adaptation from my new book, I'm going to share some key strategies with you. Whether you're a rookie or well advanced in your horsemanship, these concepts will enable you to become a better rider—and wind up with a better-broke horse.

So, without further delay, here are the rules of thumb for "riding smart" that I've accumulated over the years:

Maximize every moment. Whenever you're with your horse, you're either training or untraining him. If you're picking out his feet and he's leaning on you or dancing around, don't let him get away with it—that's setting an "I'm the boss" precedent in his mind.

Instead, take the time to set his priorities straight by insisting that he stand obediently when you need him to. If you're riding him through a gate and he won't move laterally off your leg, school him until he does. If you're going down the trail on a pleasant morning and he's pulling on the bit, don't think, "Oh, it doesn't matter now." It does. All these random moments add up to a lot of good training; don't waste them.

Set him up to succeed. Your horse must understand and accept an idea before it can become his own, and only then can you train him *how* you want him to do what you're asking. Another way to think of this is that you must *show him* until he understands and accepts a maneuver, and only then *train him* on it.

This means you must use your aids in a way that enables your horse to "find" what you want, rather than forcing him to do your bidding. Yes, hauling on the reins is one way to get a horse stopped. But how much better to lope him until he's a bit tired, so that when you pick up your reins he *wants* to stop. Help him figure it out, and give him time to do so,

for guidance when the going gets rough.

Be a contrarian. This goes along with training every moment. If your horse is wanting to do one thing, make him do the opposite. Is he leaning in one direction? Make him go the other way. Is he amped up and wanting to lope? Make him stand still for a moment. Does he want to stand? Make him lope. Is he



Solve—don't create—problems. If, for example, your horse gets strong at the lope, as mine is, don't jerk on the reins or stop him abruptly. Find a better way to slow him so you can reward him for being good, rather than punish him for being bad.

then reward him when he does the right thing.

Once he's figured out the what, only then can you start teaching him the how. Using our stopping example, that would mean getting his hind end up under him as he stops, staying off the bit, and so on.

This is so important! Think back to your school years...did you learn more from the teacher who rushed you, then bullied and humiliated you for a wrong answer? Or from the teacher who set you up to find the right answer, then told you how clever you were when you got it? If you help your horse—instead of hammer on him—when he's confused, he'll start to think of you as a friend he can look to

eager to be at the front of the line? Put him in the back.

In other words, don't let him train you. If he's a spook, don't forsake trail rides—go on lots of them and get him exposed to all those frightening things. Don't make excuses for him.

By insisting he do what you want rather than what he wants, you're continuously reinforcing that you are the boss, not he. Horses crave leadership, and if you don't provide it, they will.

Rule out physical pain. You can't train a horse that's hurting, so whenever your horse is being stubbornly resistant, make sure it's not because he's in pain. Is he tossing his head? His teeth may need

floating. Refusing to stop? His hocks may be sore. Resisting a turn? His suspensory ligaments (the structures supporting the back of the lower leg) may be sore. Always check with the appropriate expert—a veterinarian, chiropractor, or equine dentist—to rule out physical pain before pushing through in your training.

Train both sides. Whether you know it or not, you own two horses, a right horse and a left horse, and they both need to be trained. Never assume something you've taught your horse to do using one side of his body will translate to the other; it won't. You must train both sides individually.

If he can shut a gate working off your left leg, also teach him to do it off your right. Each side will likely require slightly different approaches, because most horses are a little stiff (resistant to bending) to the left and hollow (bend excessively) to the right—a function of their natural asymmetry. Ultimately, you'll spend about the same amount of time working your horse to each side, striving to make his stiff side more flexible, and his hollow side more evenly (and not overly) bent.

Be precise. A horse's brain is like a computer, so the old "garbage in, garbage out" admonition applies. With a computer, if you enter a command that's just one letter off, the computer won't recognize and perform the command. Similarly, if you want optimal performance from your horse, you must ask for a movement exactly the same way each time.

Sometimes we get frustrated with a horse that's not responding correctly. We think, "You dummy—you did it fine yesterday." But our horse is thinking, "Yes, but you cued it differently today, so now I'm confused." A fully trained horse is often able to fill in for a miscue, but while he's still learning, the more precise and correct you can be, the faster and more reliably he'll learn. Good stuff in, good stuff out.

Develop great timing. Horses learn from the release of pressure, not the application of it. And when you release,

your horse will associate that reward with whatever he was doing *immediately before* the release. So if you're even a split second late releasing, you're confusing your horse and slowing his learning, or even inadvertently "rewarding" something else entirely.

If you're asking for a step backward, for example, the instant he even begins

bly, he'll choose the easier, and in most cases, wrong thing and get himself in trouble. This inconsistency on your part is like lying to your horse, and you *must* be honest to gain his trust.

Similarly, you must never lose your temper. When you do need to make a correction, it must always fit the crime. Never suspect that your horse is trying



I'm using the fence to say, "Slow down." This way, he learns without trauma, so the next time he's loping, he won't think, "Oh, no—I'm going to get hurt," and start worrying and bracing and raising his head.

to think "back," lighten the reins for an instant as a reward, then resume asking.

If you miss that moment, and instead lighten as he's raising his head or opening his mouth, you're rewarding him for what you *don't* want. Timing is everything.

Be consistent and fair. A cue can't mean one thing half the time, and something different the other half—because you don't enforce it. For example, "whoa" should mean stop—not slow down.

If you're inconsistent in your follow-through, you oblige your horse to choose whether you really mean it each time you ask. That gives him only a 50/50 chance of doing the right thing. Inevita-

to be bad on purpose—he isn't. You probably confused him, so take that into consideration in your response.

A scared and intimidated horse isn't going to try for you. But if he understands that you'll always be fair with him, he'll get confident enough to give his all. That said, don't hesitate to "raise your voice" if that's what's needed.

Solve—don't create—problems. Any time your horse doesn't respond the way you want, don't compound the problem (or create a new one) by taking the wrong approach. Let's say, for example, your horse is getting racy instead of staying in the steady lope that you've asked for. You really feel he should be "getting it"

by now, but instead of losing your cool, you simply take all slack out of the reins, then draw him to a trot, then a walk, then a stop, then a back-up—all in about six or so strides. Then you sit for a while and give him a chance to relax, then you try that lope again.

If, instead, you jerk him into the ground and scare him, then the next time he's going fast, he'll start worrying about getting jerked, and the problem will have been compounded.

In other words, when you do it the correct way, he thinks, "Oops, I'm racing along here...now she's picking up the reins to break me down...I guess I'll give her my face and come to her, because I know she'll insist on that, but then at least I get to stop and rest."

But the other way, he thinks, "Oops, she's picking up the reins and she's going to rip me a new set of lips...better brace my jaw and get my head up to protect myself."

See how that works?

Be systematic. Don't try to teach your horse something you haven't laid the foundation for. Also, don't get into an argument you don't have the tools to win.

Before you ask your horse to move laterally, for example, first be sure he understands the concepts of giving to bit pressure and moving away from pressure on his sides.

Go back to get ahead. Start every schooling session by asking your horse for something he already knows well and is comfortable with. Then, after he's shown you a few times how good he is, sneak another little bit of learning in there.

For example, go back to that good circle you were just walking before you ask for that little lateral step. Break all learning down into small bits, always returning to the last thing your horse did well (especially if he gets confused), then inching forward from there. This keeps him in a positive frame of mind for learning.

Be creative. I usually try to teach my horses something a certain way, but

if I'm not getting through by the third attempt, I take a different approach. In other words, I won't *force* a horse to learn something "my way."

Let's say I'm asking for a transition from a large, fast circle to a smaller, slower one, and my horse won't slow down. I can lope him until he *wants* to slow down, then reward that thought.

differently. Some trainers have a "my way or the highway" mentality. When a horse fails to respond, they say, "This horse doesn't 'fit' me." What they're really saying is, "I'm not very creative."

Ride the horse you're riding. This means that although you're working from a plan, you're also quick to change that plan depending on what your horse



Set your horse up to succeed by using your aids in a way that enables him to "find" what you want. Only when he understands a movement, such as bending, should you begin asking him to do it a specific way.

This works with many horses, but if it doesn't with the horse in question, I may try breaking him down to a trot, then to a walk, then to whoa and rest. I may also try pulling him into a much-smaller circle to slow him down. Or, as a last resort, I may draw him "into the ground," then back him up to reinforce my point.

Ultimately, you must figure out what works for each horse, as each learns

needs on any given day or in any given moment.

For example, if you'd planned to work on lead changes but, when you started warming up, your horse wouldn't move off your leg, change your game plan and work on sidepassing instead. Continue with that until your horse does become responsive to your leg, then resume your original plan. →

Also, don't expect your horse to be able to do something just because his dam or sire did it, or because you saw someone else doing it with a similarly bred horse. Concentrate on the unique individual that is *your* horse, and ride accordingly.

Be realistic in your expectations.

This applies both to your level of expertise and your horse's ability and level of training. In other words, don't try to do something you don't know how to do, or that's way above your horse's level.

In determining what your horse is capable of, consider not only his current level of training, but also his breed, his conformation, his age, and his level of maturity.

Accept 1 percent improvement a day.

This doesn't sound like a lot, but think of it: In 100 days, you've got 100-percent improvement. That's significant progress, yet very doable.

Let's say on one day your horse makes a little breakthrough in his walk-to-lope departure. You can ask him for that same level of performance a couple more times, to reinforce the learning, but don't keep trying to improve it further on the same day. That way, your horse begins to think, "Hey—I'm quite a little looper!"

But if you keep after him to do even better than he just gave you, he begins to think, "I'm *still* not getting it! I must be a terrible looper." He gets more and more anxious, and the gain you made disappears.

Accept that 1 percent, then ask for another 1 percent tomorrow.

View everything in proportion.

Don't become fixated on any one part of your horse's body, or any single exercise, or any specific training goal to the exclusion of everything else. For example, don't put excessive importance on your horse's head set at the expense of his ability to move laterally, or be collected, and so on.

Get outside input. Ask a knowledgeable friend to watch what you're

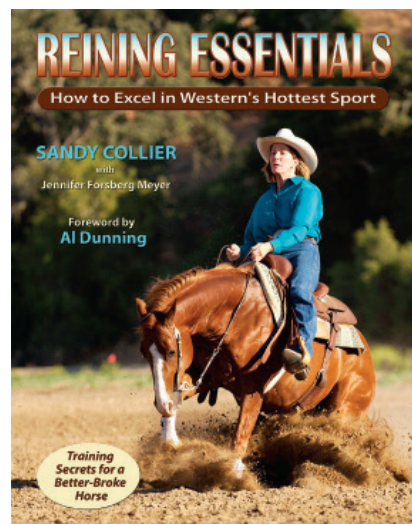
doing and provide feedback. I've had friends say, "Why are you doing that?," when I didn't even realize I *was* doing it. Take lessons, go to clinics, and write down the feedback so you can work on it at home. Watch videos of yourself schooling or showing. (And a word about those show videos: We tend to buy only the ones that show good performances, but the ones we most need to analyze are those showing weak ones. That's where we need more work!)

Know when to get help. Use the various forms of feedback you have to help you know when to turn to professional help. Everyone's threshold for this is different. Obviously, if your horse is behaving in a way that scares you, or if what you've diligently tried is just not working, hire a trainer. You may need only a few corrective sessions to get back on track.

People tend to wait until problems have escalated, when they could have paid \$30 or \$40 and been straightened out in 45 minutes. As with your car, it's better to get a tune-up regularly than to wait for the darn thing to break down before taking it to the shop.

It's OK to work your horse. Everything I've said about being fair and reasonable and flexible is true. But I don't want you to get the impression that you can't ask your horse for his best effort. People often feel guilty about pushing their horses, or about making them work when it's cold or it's feeding time or it's late in the day or whatever. Don't!

Think of it this way: What if you saw a help-wanted ad that said, "Job opening. Two square meals a day and a comfy room provided; housekeeping services included. Full medical benefits. Pedicure and new \$125 shoes every six weeks. Applicant need work only one hour per day." Wouldn't you want that job? I sure would. So when you're riding your horse in that one hour per day, don't be afraid to ask him to *work*. ★



REINING ESSENTIALS
How to Excel In Western's Hottest Sport

By Sandy Collier, with Jennifer Forsberg Meyer

Published by Trafalgar Square Books in 2008

Softcover; 240 pages

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THINGS TAKE TIME

Are you an overachiever with serious goals in mind? Learn why working harder and longer isn't always better for your horse.

96, 97, 98...

BRIGMAN

The biggest competition of the year is just around the corner, and you've been training ... hard. Your horse is the most talented one you've ever owned and making it to this competition is on top of your bucket list. You can hardly wait, and when you get there your horse will be so fit and ready you know he'll be unbeatable. That's why you've scheduled some extra sessions with your trainer, and a couple of hard conditioning rides before you go.

Wait just a minute! It might be time to pump the brakes. In reality, overtraining at a time like this might do more harm than good. Not only are you setting your horse up for failure at the competition if you wear him down, you may be asking for an injury that could threaten his future—or even his life!

In this article, I'm going to explain how your horse's bones and soft tissues

get stronger over time, and why carefully scheduled periods of rest are essential for making him strong and protecting him from injury. You'll learn how the important structures of his musculo-skeletal system adapt to exercise over time, what conditions are most likely to set your horse up for an injury, and, perhaps most important, what steps you should take to keep him sound, strong, and injury free.

STRESS, REST, REMODEL

Your horse's bones, joints, and soft tissue structures (tendons and ligaments) are at the core of what he needs to perform. And if he gets injured you're out of luck. Understanding how these tissues adapt to stress is the key to formulating a training program that will get him strong and keep him sound.

Let's start with bones. While your horse's skeleton may seem solid and un-

changing, in reality, bones are a dynamic structure. Just like muscles that get bigger and stronger with exercise, bones can get bigger and stronger in response to stress. In general, bone metabolism involves two types of cells: osteoclasts that are responsible for cleaning up damaged bone tissue, and osteoblasts that produce and lay down new bone where it's needed. These cells work together to help build strong bone.

When your horse exercises intensely, he's likely to experience very small areas of trauma to his bones—which can be both good and bad. The good news is that this micro-trauma stimulates something called stress remodeling. Osteoclasts clean up the damage to make way for osteoblasts to lay down new bone, and the bones get stronger over time. The bad news is that if you don't give your horse the time he needs to heal, that micro-trauma won't repair



While it's beneficial to start some high-intensity training with your young horse, consider a schedule with one or two high-intensity exercise sessions a week, with each one followed by a couple of days of rest or lower-intensity work to allow time for recovery.

PHOTO BY PROMA/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

itself, and is likely to worsen with repeated stresses. The result? Stress fractures that cause pain and lameness, or eventual catastrophic fractures that can threaten your horse's life.

The dynamic nature of bone remodeling can also impact your horse's joints. Bone that sits just beneath the cartilage surface—known as subcondral bone—has the same susceptibility to damage as other parts of his skeleton. And subcondral bone is essential for supporting the stability and health of the cartilage above it. When this bone experiences micro-traumas during intense bouts of exercise, it undergoes the same remodeling process seen in other bones. If given time to heal it can become stronger in response to stress. But if intense exercise continues on this damaged bone, the cartilage at the joint surface loses its support. Arthritis will develop over time, and your horse's long-term soundness will suffer.

Finally, soft tissues including tendons and ligaments are just as susceptible to damage during intense exercise as bones and joints. These soft tissue structures are designed to stretch in response to stress, but when the amount of stretch exceeds the capacity of the structures, they'll experience small tears in the tissues. Similar to bone, if given time to heal, these small tears can repair themselves without the risk of significant injury. But if they continue to be stressed, they are likely to fail.

Unlike bone, adaptive remodeling of soft tissues doesn't necessarily make them stronger than they were before, meaning it's even more important to pay attention to how you train if you hope to keep your horse's tendons and ligaments healthy. Studies show it takes as long as 72 hours for the superficial digital flexor tendon of a racehorse to return to baseline after it's been stressed during an intense workout. While this may not hold true for every soft tissue structure, it's a reasonable baseline to consider when formulating your horse's training plan.

TIMING MATTERS

It's easy to see how overtraining is one of the most common underlying causes of musculoskeletal injury. What can you do about it? There are three times in your horse's life when he's most susceptible to the damaging effects of overtraining: when he's young and first starting into work, when he's recovering from an injury and coming back to work after rehabilitation, and when he's

he's young. Every maneuver you ask your horse to perform results in specific types of stress to specific structures. For example, your barrel horse experiences much different types of stress than your reiner. In order for his bones to adapt correctly, your barrel horse should run some barrels, and your reiner should be introduced to sliding stops and spins. But how much is too much?

Studies tell us that a horse is



A mature, hard-working horse with an intense training and competition schedule is susceptible to injury if not given proper recovery time.

a mature, hard-working horse with an intense training and competition schedule. Paying especially close attention to your horse during these vulnerable periods is a good place to start.

Careful beginnings

How you condition and train your young horse is particularly important. The bones of a young horse can actually get bigger and change shape in response to stress. That means if you ask your young horse to do controlled, sport-specific work early in his life, his bones will develop in a way that actually protects them as he grows older. Because of this, we can't overlook the importance of including sport-specific work into your horse's training plan, especially when

skeletally mature when he reaches 2 years of age, although his bones don't reach their maximum density until he's 6. That means his training program between the ages of 2 and 6 is critically important.

Another important key to successful adaptive conditioning is knowing when to train, and when to stop. Unfortunately, no one has the exact answer about optimal training schedules for youngsters, but we can try to apply what we do know to determine what's best. Research with thoroughbred racehorses shows that most catastrophic fractures happen six to eight weeks after a horse first enters training. With this information in hand, how you manage your young horse's schedule boils down to

common sense. While it's beneficial to start some high-intensity training with your two-year-old, make sure you allow him time to rest between hard work sessions. Consider a schedule with one or two high-intensity exercise sessions a week, with each one followed by a couple of days of rest or lower-intensity work to allow time for recovery.

Further data tells us that a young horse is also at higher risk if he's coming back to work after longer than 10 days of rest. If your youngster is laid up for longer than 10 days, be especially careful about how you bring him back to work. Long, slow distance conditioning is the place to start, but don't forget the importance of carefully reintroducing high-intensity sports-specific exercise.

Return from layup

What happens when a horse is laid up for an extended period of time? His bones will actually lose bone density, putting him at higher risk for injury. In fact, the most common time for stress fracture related catastrophic fractures to occur is within 10 to 21 days following a layup. A mature horse's bones can demineralize by 15% after just two weeks of stall rest. If your horse experiences an illness or injury that requires complete stall rest, his return to work can be especially risky.

Most of the time when your horse is laid up with an injury, his rehabilitation plan will involve a carefully controlled exercise program that slowly progresses over time. This can help minimize some of the risk, but it's important to remember that how you reintroduce high intensity work is still important. Once you get the green light from your veterinarian to go "back to work," take it slow. Reintroduce hard training sessions gradually, and don't forget to schedule days off in between.

The campaigner

If you're lucky, you'll get your youngster to work successfully and keep him going without an illness or injury that

requires any significant layup time. But now, what should you do to protect your mature, hard-working campaigner? Just when you think you've got it made, your horse is entering a time of life where he may be especially susceptible to repeated micro-traumas of his bones, joints, and soft tissues.

Rigorous competition schedules are one of the biggest threats to your horse's long-term soundness. While it may be tempting to get out there in the show pen week after week, chances are it isn't worth the potential price. Choose your competitions carefully, especially if you have a trained and talented horse. Skip the small events and save your horse for the ones that really matter. And remember to give him a day or two off after he's been asked to perform at a high intensity.

Many high-level competition horses that compete regularly never train between competitions. Instead, they maintain their strength through carefully controlled conditioning work. But remember—it does require sport-specific training to keep tissues adapted to the work that's required in their discipline. If you're maintaining a very light competition schedule, be sure to incorporate some high-intensity sports-specific training into your conditioning plan. And never forget, after you train hard, a day or two off work today can save you from a much longer layup later.

3 Rules to Remember

What's the bottom line? Most injuries occur when bones, joints, and ligaments have been slowly damaged over time. These tissues frequently experience small traumas that require time to heal. If healing happens before more stress

is applied, your horse's body will adapt and get even stronger. If stress exceeds his ability to adapt, he'll get injured. Here are the most important rules to remember:

Rule #1. Take a break. When the structures of your horse's musculo-skeletal system are stressed, they need time to repair. Schedule days off after high-intensity training days.

Rule #2. Be specific. For your horse's body to adapt to the demands of his sport, it needs to be stressed accordingly. It's essential to include sport-specific activities as a part of your carefully scheduled conditioning program.

Rule #3. Listen to your horse. If you have a carefully planned out training and conditioning program that includes days of rest on top of high-intensi-

ty, sport-specific training, you're doing great. But don't get caught up in your calendar. On a day when your schedule says "go" but your horse says "no," you'd be wise to listen. Small injuries can cause low-grade pain that might impact your horse's way of going or his attitude toward work. Always be willing to add in a previously unscheduled day of rest to allow his body to heal if he seems or even just a little "off."

Everybody worries about a catastrophic injury. While it's true that the occasional horse will break his leg from being kicked in the pasture or tear a ligament from stepping in a hole, the vast majority of injuries actually happen in structures that have been previously damaged from chronic over-stress. The good news is that your horse's ability to adapt to stress means hard work, scheduled carefully, can actually help keep him sound. But for your horse to benefit from that hard work, his body needs time to heal. ★

"The bones of a young horse can actually get bigger and change shape in response to stress."