

DRESSAGE, EVENTING, HUNTERS, JUMPERS

VOL. 56

PRACTICAL HORSEMAN

# EXTRA



## 3 STRATEGIES TO MAINTAIN FITNESS IN WINTER

Brought to you by

Great American  
*Family*

10 Blanketing Tips

# Great American *Christmas*

Your destination for faith and family entertainment.  
New Original Movies every Saturday and Sunday night.

## Welcome Home



A Christmas for  
the Ages



A Royal Christmas  
Romance



A Christmas  
Blessing



A Paris  
Christmas  
Waltz



Bringing Christmas  
Home



My Christmas  
Hero

Great American  
*Family*

# 3 STRESS-FREE STRATEGIES TO MAINTAIN FITNESS

*Here are fun, low-key ways to help maintain your horse's conditioning this fall and winter so you can more easily step into spring.*

AMY K. DRAGOO

**A**s competitive series and year-end finals draw to a close and the holiday season gears up, you might be planning some well-deserved downtime for you and your horse. It's time to enjoy focusing on turkeys, gift giving, tree-trimming and ringing in the new year!

With all the festivities, it may be difficult to stay

focused on a riding plan and to set meaningful goals. Plus, for many, the weather and waning daylight hours can make getting quality workouts in the saddle a challenge.

We've dug through our files and found three fun, low-key strategies to help you maintain your horse's strength and suppleness through the winter. We also have some tips on how to build a conditioning plan for your horse from the comfort of home (see sidebar, page 5). These strategies and tips are easy enough to put into practice now—no matter your schedule or discipline. And, they will help you and your horse be in the best possible place and shape to return to your riding goals once the decorations have been put away and the birds start to sing.

## 1. Enhance Pre-ride Preparation

Your pre-ride preparation already involves grooming and tacking up. Additionally, consider adding basic unmounted stretching activities for your horse. One such practice is carrot stretches.

Veterinarian and researcher Hilary M.



◀ Asking your horse to march forward in the walk, especially up and down hills, is a low-impact way to help him maintain strength and conditioning.



DR. HILARY CLAYTON

Clayton, BVMS, PHD, Dipl. ACVSMR, MRCVS, a leading expert in equine biomechanics, explains why: The muscles that move and stabilize the joints in your horse's neck and back are activated in a carrot stretch.

Research studies have shown that regular performance of carrot stretches, even in the absence of any other type of exercise, activate the muscles that stabilize the horse's back. When he is moving, these muscles hold his back in a rounded shape and prevent small amounts of motion between the vertebrae that could lead to spinal arthritis. Doing the stretches immediately prior to the start of exercise prepares these muscles for the work that follows.

#### Here is Dr. Clayton's method for carrot stretches:

1. Cut a carrot lengthways in strips about 1 centimeter in diameter. The carrot pieces (or other food treat) will be used as bait to entice your horse to move his head and neck into specific positions. Always wear leather gloves to protect your fingers in case your horse snatches at the bait as he reaches to get it.

2. Stand your horse against a wall or have a helper to prevent him from moving his feet as you teach him to stand still while his muzzle follows the carrot downward or sideways. The stretches are chin to chest, chin between the knees, chin between fetlocks and chin to shoulder, chin to girth, chin to flank and chin to hock (see photos, above).

3. Try to get your horse to hold each stretched position for a few seconds before allowing him to take the bait, and then let the muscles relax before repeating the stretch.

When your horse is learning these exercises, be happy with

◀ In core-training carrot stretches, the horse follows the bait with his nose. Ask your horse to move his nose sideways to the shoulder, girth, flank and hind fetlock in bending exercises.

▲ In rounding exercises, ask your horse to move his nose downward to the underside of his neck, the middle of his chest, and between his knees or his front fetlocks.

a little stretching and then increase it gradually over time. A horse who is well motivated to get the treat will be more eager to stretch farther than a horse who is less motivated. The key is that your horse should stretch as far as he can without losing his balance. Even without maximal stretching, these exercises are useful for activating the muscles that round and bend the back and that stabilize the joints of the back and neck. It is recommended that a horse perform at least three repetitions of each stretch daily. The sideways stretches are performed both to the left and right sides.

## 2. Stretch to Strengthen Stifles

Another unmounted exercise can help you strengthen your horse's stifles through stretching, says Kenneth L. Marcella, DVM, who has served as a veterinary official for many FEI competitions around the world. Injuries to the ligaments of the equine stifle generally result from a combination of speed and rotation. These include awkward takeoffs or landings from jumps, sudden stops, quick changes of direction and other missteps a horse may take when traveling at speed or when out of balance, Dr. Marcella says.

Dressage horses may also be affected by stifle injuries because the requirements of their sport necessitate bending and rotating their upper bodies, which can also place the stifle joint at risk. Additionally, the stifle is susceptible to arthritis,



resulting from a slow process of wear and tear occurring as a normal consequence of athletic activity, and/or more acute, traumatic soft-tissue strains and tears.

Careful progressive strengthening work can help protect your horse's stifles against injury.

**Here's Dr. Marcella's method for stifle stretches:**

In each of the following exercises, lift your horse's hind foot off the ground and stretch as described until you feel slight resistance. Hold the stretch for 10 to 20 seconds as tolerated, then release. As he becomes more accustomed to and comfortable with a stretching routine, you will be able to



KLM EQUINE

▲ 1. Flex your horse's hip and stifle by lifting the hoof upward and forward. As you flex the joints, help the horse maintain his balance by keeping the lower leg toward the midline and the horse's weight centered over the supporting leg. Hold each stretch for 10 to 20 seconds initially.

▲ 2. With the hoof still lifted and the hock flexed, push the point of the hock toward the midline while you pull the foot away from the midline. This motion rotates the stifle and stresses, and eventually strengthens, the ligaments and supporting structures of the inside stifle. Reversing this exercise—pulling the point of the hock outward and pushing the hoof inward—rotates the stifle in the opposite direction and serves to strengthen the outward supporting structures.

3. Pull the hoof backward, stretching out the hind leg in the same position you would use to pick out the foot or that a farrier would use to trim it. Slow pressure and your horse's relaxation will eventually allow you a good deal of extension in this position.

## Start Planning Your Conditioning Strategy

As fall turns to winter, you might not be ready for full-conditioning mode with your horse, but it is a good time to start planning your goals for next year and setting up a conditioning strategy.

An easy way to develop an appropriate conditioning program is to watch videos of competitions at the same level at which you are aiming to compete, says Hilary Clayton, BVMS, PHD, Dipl.

ACVSMR, MRCVS. When you play the videos, time the duration of the exercise bursts at different gaits and speeds to determine how much time is spent in fast trotting, cantering and galloping and how long the horse spends walking or trotting slowly. Use this information to develop a conditioning plan that will bring your horse to the required fitness level by building up the work periods until they

match those of the sport.

Horses used for show-hunter competitions, lower-level dressage competitions or similar occupations should be fit enough to be ridden for 45–60 minutes at walk, trot and canter, Dr. Clayton recommends. Horses ridden in more strenuous sports, such as eventing and show jumping, should be conditioned specifically for those activities, taking account of

whether the fitness requirement is primarily for endurance or speed.

If you have a target date for when your horse needs to be fully fit, work backward from that date to determine when to start conditioning based on increasing the workload by 5–10 minutes per week. If the requirements of your sport include specific skills, such as jumping, allow approximately an extra month to strengthen the appropriate muscles.



◀ Hand-walking your horse downhill and uphill is a great exercise to make your horse utilize his hind end and work the muscles and structures that support not only the stifles but also the lower back and pelvis.

Walking is also a large part of Olympic veteran Jim Wofford's conditioning plan at the start of a horse's new season. His reason is simple. "Both the walk and the gallop are four-beat paces," he says. "When you walk your horse, you are

work on gradually improving his range of motion.

1. Flex the hip and stifle by lifting your horse's hoof upward and pushing it inward toward the midline of the body. This is similar to the motion veterinarians use to do a hock flexion test as part of a lameness or prepurchase examination. Then, with the hoof still lifted and the hock flexed, pull the leg outward away from your horse's body.

2. Pull the hind hoof forward toward the back of the knee of the front leg on the same side.

3. Pull the hoof backward, stretching out the hind leg in the same position you would use to pick out the foot or that a farrier would use to trim it. Slow pressure without forceful pulling and your horse's relaxation will eventually allow for a good deal of extension in this position.

See Dr. Marcella demonstrate these stifle stretches in the photos on page 5.

### 3. Walk Your Horse Into Shape

Dr. Marcella says another way to strengthen the stifle is hand-walking your horse up and down slight inclines. Doing this exercise unmounted is especially valuable because the horse can focus on his own balance and movement without trying to compensate for the rider's weight and position.

**Here's Dr. Marcella's strategy:** Walk your horse up and down a small hill. Ask him to walk slowly and maintain a straight line, not allowing him to cheat and swing his haunches to either side. This requires balanced use of the stifles. Periodically halt him—this increases the forces on the front part of the quadriceps and patella (kneecap) ligaments—and then walk off again. As with all attempts at strength and conditioning work, an improperly done exercise is nearly worthless and often damaging, so keep the exercises simple—and do simple well.

Similarly, walking your horse under saddle strengthens and stretches the stifles and helps with overall conditioning. A quality working walk "requires him to be balanced on each leg and to use his quadriceps to push forward. This, in turn, strengthens muscles and ligaments," Dr. Marcella says.

galloping in slow motion with little concussion and a low risk of injury."

**Here's Wofford's strategy:** Every time your horse's shoulder moves forward, close your opposite leg in rhythm with the walk that you want rather than the walk he might offer. For example, as his right shoulder moves forward, close your left leg at the girth and then your right leg at the girth as his left shoulder moves forward. When you get off after an hour's vigorous walk, your legs should be more tired than your horse's legs.

When the weather and footing is nice, Grand Prix dressage rider Jessica Jo "JJ" Tate says to take the walk outside and add some hill work if possible.

**Here's Tate's strategy:** Start with 15 to 20 minutes of walking, allowing your horse to stretch out and lubricate his joints. This will give you time to connect with him as well—and to settle into the present moment, letting go of outside stressors. Give him as long and free a rein as possible, maintaining just enough contact to control him in case the unexpected happens (safety first). Encourage him to march forward and swing his back. Ask for a little bit of poll flexion so that he's softly on the bit and chewing nicely. Avoid holding him tightly on a hard contact, which will make him brace in his topline.

Additionally, you can gain a lot of thrust by walking up and down hills, Tate says. As you ride on a hill, continue to ask your horse to stay round and soft over his topline, always working toward shifting more weight from his front legs to his hind legs. Keep your seat bones in the saddle when going uphill but close your knees a little so you can lighten your seat and stay in balance while offering him some support. Going downhill, lean back and close your knees slightly as well. The more you can support your horse with your seat, knees and thighs, the less pulling you'll have to do on the reins.

Especially going downhill, Tate adds, ask your horse to take very measured, even steps. This will help teach him to lower his croup, sink into his hocks and flex his stifles, which will, in turn, improve his ability to "sit" in his collected dressage work. 🐾

KLM EQUINE

# 10 BLANKETING TIPS *FROM EMMA FORD*

To keep your horse warm and safe in winter, adopt the tried-and-true practices of a pro.

By Leslie Threlkeld



Emma Ford is a professional groom who has worked for many years for eventer Phillip Dutton. She shared her extensive experience as co-author of the book *World-Class Grooming: The English Rider's Complete Guide to Daily Care and Competition* along with fellow pro groom Cat Hill.

Emma has seen everything that can go wrong in a barn, and when horse care and barn management are concerned, she puts a strong emphasis on safety for the horses and the people working around them. When it comes to blanketing during the cold months, she is particular about her routine for how blankets are put on, taken off, maintained and stored. Here are her top 10 tips.

## 1. Reattach Leg Straps

Emma's number-one blanketing pet peeve is when the leg straps are left dangling. After unclipping a leg strap, she always brings it to the outside of the horse's leg and clips it back on the same side. Then, when you go to put the blanket back on, the straps don't swing dangerously.

"It's a safety hazard to leave them loose and flying around," Emma says. "I've had the straps get caught in a ceiling fan spinning above. I've often been caught in the face or the horse in the eye. It takes two seconds to undo it and do it back up again."

When removing a blanket, Emma always undoes the leg straps first followed by the chest snaps or buckles and leaves the belly surcingles for last.

"My feeling is if a horse gets spooked and the chest is undone, the blanket can slide off over him backwards and it's simple to get out of. If the surcingle is undone and he gets spooked and the blanket shifts, it can end up around his neck and that's more of a danger."

## 2. Cross the Leg Straps

Emma never likes to see a blanket without leg straps or a tail string to keep it in



**DO** fasten a blanket's chest snaps with the clips facing inward toward the horse.

place. "It's purely a safety issue. All it takes is a roll or gust of wind for a blanket to shift over the neck, and the horse spooks."

Leg straps should always be crossed in the center to keep the blanket from shifting sideways if a horse lies down.

"The idea is when the horse rolls, the straps will balance the blanket," Emma says.

"It is dangerous not to cross them because if the blanket slips and the leg strap goes below the hock, a horse could start kicking out or get a leg through the strap."

## 3. Make Sure the Blanket Fits

A blanket that is too large is at risk of sliding off to one side, making it less effective for warmth and possibly spooking the horse. A blanket that is too snug will rub uncomfortably on the withers and shoulders. If it's too short in length, the belly and hindquarters will be exposed to the cold. The best way to ensure a blanket isn't going to slip or shift is to buy one that fits well.

"Bear in mind every brand can fit a horse differently," Emma points out. Some brands of blankets are made for horses with bigger or narrower shoulders or are shorter or longer in length. Research and, if possible, try several brands to find the one that fits your horse best, providing him with optimal comfort and warmth.



**DON'T** clip the snaps facing outward. They could catch on a fence or the grill of a stall door, posing a safety hazard.

## 4. Always Point Chest Snaps Inward

Some blankets close at the chest using snaps instead of buckles. If your blanket has snaps, always point the opening side inward toward the chest. Otherwise, the snap will be likely to get caught on something.

"You have to have the snap side itself closest to the horse so if he pushes against a wire fence or grill door there is no chance of him attaching himself to a door or fence. I've seen it happen!" Emma says.

Some blankets close at the chest with neither a buckle nor a snap and require you to put the blanket over the horse's head. Some horses may not be comfortable with this or need a slow introduction.

If you use over-the-head blankets, Emma urges putting them on in a stall and never when the horse is loose in the field. You don't want the blanket to be hanging off his neck unsecured if he spooks and takes off running in the pasture.

## 5. Avoid Static Electricity

Static electricity can occur when removing a blanket during dry winter weather, giving your horse a bad shock and putting you at risk of being trod on.

For especially sensitive horses Emma uses a product called No Shock Anti-Static Grooming Spray that can be

sprayed on the horse to reduce static. She will also remove blankets a particular way to avoid static.

“Fold the blanket into thirds and literally lift it off the horse,” Emma says. “Take the back half and fold it forward, then fold the front half backward and lift the whole thing up over the spine. Don’t just drag it off.”

## 6. Keep Blankets Off The Ground

Bunching up a blanket and throwing it on the ground or over a railing doesn’t look nice and it can also create a hazard for your horse who could trip or get tangled in a loose strap. Always fold blankets neatly and hang them up out of the way.

There are two methods to folding a blanket, as explained in *World-Class Grooming*. One is for a lightweight cooler or sheet, explained in the photos and captions below. The other is for heavy or puffy coolers and blankets, explained in the photos and captions on page 10.

## 7. Reblanket Each Day

Sometimes the weather is too bad to ride or life and work get in the way of saddle time, but you still shouldn’t leave your horse wearing a sheet or blanket for multiple days in a row.

“It’s just like wearing clothes—they shift. You want to take blankets off every day to check for any issues going on underneath the blanket [like a rub or injury],” Emma says. “If you leave it on too long it’s going to create a pressure point. So it’s nice for the horse if you can re-blanket every day and put it back in the correct position.”

## 8. Keep Blankets Clean

A clean blanket is a warm, long-lasting blanket. Just as you don’t want to wear dirty clothes, your horse doesn’t want to wear a dirty blanket. Stable blankets are easily washed in a washing machine, but a waterproof turnout blanket can be trickier to maintain because the more often it is washed, the less waterproof it will be.

If your horse has lain down in urine

or manure or rolled in dirt and mud, Emma suggests hanging up his blanket and spot washing it with a bucket of plain warm water and a sponge. If it smells bad, a vinegar-and-water mix will help get rid of foul odors.

If water is seeping through a turnout and your horse is becoming damp underneath, there are products available for rewaterproofing. Alternatively, it may be time to buy a new turnout blanket.

## 9. Be Mindful of Blanket Insulation

Horses are naturally able to keep themselves warm even in very cold temperatures, but you should put waterproof clothes on unclipped horses if it is cold and raining. Once they get wet and the hair is against their skin, they may get chilled because their long coat hair cannot stand up and provide good insulation.

However, if the weather is extreme enough that you feel the need to blanket an unclipped horse, Emma prefers

## To Fold a Lightweight Cooler or Sheet

1. Check that the leg straps are hooked, then hold up the cooler.

2. Fold it in the middle, lining up the chest and tail. Tuck the belly straps into the fold.

3. Fold the neck side into the center.

4. Fold the belly side into the center.

5. Hang the blanket up with the folded edge facing out.



COURTESY, TRAFALGAR SQUARE BOOKS/HORSEANDRIDERBOOKS.COM

## To Fold a Heavy Cooler Or Blanket

1. Start by holding up the blanket.
2. Fold it in half widthwise (hot dog style). Check that the belly straps are tucked into the fold and the leg straps are reattached. Then fold the blanket in half lengthwise, using your arm as a guide.
3. Line up the neck with the tail.
4. Hang the blanket with the folded edge facing out.



COURTESY, TRAFALGAR SQUARE BOOKS/HORSEANDRIDERBOOKS.COM

to see him wearing more than just a lightweight sheet.

“If you just add a sheet, you’re not really adding an insulator, and they are probably colder that way,” she says.

“A plain sheet at that stage will just flatten the hair, so instead you should probably put on a medium that has an insulation layer.”

Clipped horses almost always have heavier blankets during the colder months, and Emma never likes to see clipped horses wearing only a sheet, even on warmer winter days.

### 10. Don’t Overthink It

One of the most mind-boggling deci-

sions for horse owners is often which blanket they should put on their horse depending upon the weather. Temperature, humidity, precipitation and access to shelter all come into play and, of course, we want our horses to be comfortable.

Sometimes there are major temperature swings throughout the day or night and you may not be able to switch out blankets accordingly. You don’t want your horse to be too cold but you definitely don’t want to over-blanket and find him sweating. What should you do?

“I tend to look at the weather and see what it’s doing for most of the night. The low may be 30 [degrees] but

it’s only going to be 30 at five o’clock in the morning,” Emma says. “I see what it’s doing between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. and blanket according to what that temperature is. They might only be slightly warm at night or a little cold for an hour or two before you get there in the morning. People definitely overthink it.” 🐾

*Interested in learning more about blanketing as well as other horse-management and grooming tips? You can purchase Emma’s book *World-Class Grooming for Horses* on her website, [worldclassgrooming.com](http://worldclassgrooming.com) or from *Trafalgar Square Books* at [horseandriderbooks.com](http://horseandriderbooks.com)*