



Dumb Friends League.

COMPASSION ALWAYS ♥

Trainer's Tip: Polishing off the winter rust

by Brent Winston, head trainer, Harmony Equine Center

Wow, what a start to the year! With the unseasonably warm weather and longer days, many of us are getting the urge to take our horses out and ride through the beautiful Colorado landscape. However, many of our horses have been not doing much all winter—and with most horses, this can present trouble for the first several rides.

More often than not, horses get what we call “fresh” after any kind of significant time off. Some will buck, some will want to be “chardy” (go faster than we would like) and some may have other behavior issues arise. In all cases, this can be intimidating and not very fun. Many times, our horses are just using energy that has been stored up, and they need to “bounce off the walls” for a bit. Others have simply forgotten some of the things we have been teaching them. No matter the reason, it's important to get all the parts and pieces of your training working again so everyone can be safe.

At Harmony, we like to test the horse out on the ground. If you have access to a round pen, this is a great way to take the edge off your horse. If you don't have access to a round pen, a lunge line or even a lead rope is sufficient. Start moving your horse around you, making sure to push forward from behind the drive line, or the girth. You are looking for your horse to start to relax and pay attention. A lot of times, people work to get their horse tired, but this doesn't always have to be the case; we are simply looking to get our horses thinking about us and relaxing. Some horses need to get tired before this will happen, but that isn't the point. Sometimes it's good to do these refresher sessions a few days in a row before riding.

Once you are ready to saddle up and ride, it's a good idea to move your horse again with the saddle on to work out any kinks that may have appeared over the winter months. Once your horse is good and relaxed moving around you with the saddle, the next thing to do is check for softness. You can check for softness by taking one rein at a time and putting a light amount of pressure on it to see how much resistance is there. If you feel resistance on either side, keep the same amount of pressure on, and wait for your horse to give softly to that pressure. It's also not a bad idea to check and see how softly and lightly your horse backs up for you on the ground. Again, if you feel any resistance, work at getting it out before you get on the horse. If your horse is tight, it could lead to other problems once you get on.

After you have eliminated resistance on the ground, you might be ready to get on. When getting on a fresh horse, we like to make sure that we have the head tipped toward our body. We do this so that if the horse tries to move away or bolt, we are able

to direct the back end of the horse away from us. When you are in the saddle, repeat all the softness exercises on both sides of the horse. You can then ask the horse to move her hindquarters. Do this by getting softness and then taking your leg back toward the last ribs of the horse and applying pressure, increasing the pressure until she moves her hind end away from your leg. Keep her head bent throughout this process to ensure nothing unexpected happens.

Once you are able to move the hips in both directions and your horse is quiet and relaxed doing so, you are ready to ride forward. Don't be surprised if your horse is a little quicker than you are used to. As long as she stays in a walk, she will walk out the jitters. If you start going too fast, you can just come back to the softening and move the hips until they relax again, and then continue on. If you are more comfortable walking, do that until you feel it is safe to trot. A fresh horse may overreact if she is asked to trot off right away. Do all this in a safe environment, such as a round pen, arena or even the pen you keep the horse in, until all the parts are working and you are back on the trusty steed you put away last fall.

In conclusion, we wouldn't want to drive a car without making sure it is in safe running condition. We should do the same with our horses. It wouldn't be fair to expect them to just "get off the couch" and perform at the top of their game.

In the upcoming months, go out enjoy your horse, and be safe. Until next time, keeping riding with a loose rein.