



Trainer's Tip: Shape up

by Brent Winston, equine trainer

As we are being teased with warmer weather, many of us are anxious to get out and enjoy our horses with some trail-ride therapy. Maybe we haven't had time to ride during the winter because it's too dark by the time we get home or it's just plain cold. But as we approach trail-riding season, we should consider our horse's fitness level before we jump on and start going for long rides.

Horse fitness is often overlooked because horses are big, strong animals that should be able to handle a lot of work. However, even the strongest of horses functions the same as you and I physiologically, meaning that their muscles get sore, their tendons and ligaments get tight, they run out of air and they get tired. A sore, tired horse can be a grumpy, uncooperative horse—which takes the fun out of riding. However, if our horses are prepared for longer trail rides, they will not only feel better, but the risk of injury will be minimized. Here are some steps that will help you and your horse enjoy trail-riding season a little more:

First, make sure your horse is healthy enough to start getting in shape. When your veterinarian comes out for spring vaccinations, have him or her give your horse a brief checkup and a quick, general lameness exam. It is common for horses to stand around and not do much during the winter, making it easy for a slight lameness to go unnoticed. Also consider your horse's diet. As you start to get him in shape and ride more, he will be burning more calories, so you might need to add feed to supplement those lost calories. However, be honest about how much you are actually riding and the amount of feed you are giving. If you are feeding a high-calorie diet and not riding as much as you had hoped, your horse will start to have a bunch of pent-up energy, which can affect his behavior in many ways. I have heard it said that 80 percent of behavior problems are because the horse is overfed and under-ridden. Of course, this should be determined on a horse-to-horse basis as no two horses are the same.

The next step is a process called loading, which means start light and build up from there. For example, if I want to get my horse ready for a three-hour ride, I might start with short, half-hour walks to get a lot of the kinks worked out and help my horse get limber. I will then work up to 45-minute rides and then an hour, three to four days a week. The best way to build up to a three-hour ride is to increase the intensity, because it simply isn't practical to go for a two- or three-hour ride three days a week. After you walk out for a week or so, you can start trotting for 10 minutes during your 30-minute ride, and then start loading from there. The general rule of thumb is to increase the volume and intensity by no more than 5 percent per week. You will start to see changes

in your horse's cardiovascular fitness almost immediately (seven to 10 days). Start conditioning your horse six to eight weeks prior to create a solid foundation for fitness.

Next, it is important to work your horse on a variety of different surfaces to help strengthen the supporting tissue of the lower limbs. On trail rides, we often ask our horses to step through rocks and water, and over logs and a multitude of different terrain and obstacles. If your horse isn't conditioned to this, you can run the risk of rolling ankles and bowing tendons. Just like us, it only takes one wrong step, and then we are on stall rest. By conditioning to different terrain, you are minimizing the risk of injury.

The last step is to get yourself in shape to ride, if for no other reason than that you will feel less sore and enjoy riding a lot more. It will also allow you to help your horse negotiate rough terrain, go up and down hills, and all the other things you may ask your horse to do. If you have a strong core, you will be able to ride more efficiently and make the ride nicer on yourself and your horse. Some good exercises to do are squats, sitting on a balance ball, lunges and plain old walking. Of course, horseback riding is a great core builder too. As with conditioning your horse, ease into it and build up. If we do too much right away, we will become sore and unmotivated just like our horses.

In conclusion, set yourself and your horse up for success by being prepared. Check him out to ensure he is happy and healthy enough to start getting in shape. Start light and ease into it so that it is enjoyable for both of you. Condition your horse to a variety of riding scenarios to minimize the risk of injury. Make sure you are in shape for the riding that you intend to do. And until next time, keep ridin' with a loose rein and check yer cinch from time to time.