

Keeping Your Horse Fit

Some Important Rules & Hints For You & Your Horse

There's been a lot written lately in all of the Horse mags about keeping your horse sound in wind and limb and in preventing lameness.

In this short article we'll look at some of the more important things to consider. Some might be obvious, some aren't but all will help you keep that beautiful animal of yours 'fighting fit'.

Your horse – how well do you know him?

Ask your self this. How well do you really know your horse? How well do you know his mental & physical make up because that will guide you as to anything going wrong. Physically you should know your horse well and this means touching him regularly so that you get a familiarity with him. Run your hands over his legs and feel them, every bump and hollow! Stroke his back and hindquarters and feel the muscles and the structure. You don't have to be an anatomical expert but by doing this you'll know if something feels different.

His mood is just as important. Horses get moods – we all know that but an equable horse becoming a sullen horse may well be cause for concern. Mood swings shouldn't necessarily be signs of a problem but if you spend time with your horse you'll learn when a minor rebellion is just that and not a sign of something very wrong.

Feeding – Very Important

...and a minefield too!! There's much been said lately about Developmental Orthopaedic Disease in growing horses (DOD). It seems that diets that are high in carbohydrate, glucose and starch have been linked to this disease. It is also associated with body mineral imbalance leading to bone and cartilage disruption, consequently a young animal with this disease will never grow into a sound, mature horse. In the early stages then, make sure feed includes plenty of good grass hay and supplement with pelleted feeds for extra energy and try to avoid sweet foods or molasses based formulations. As a rule of thumb 0.75 – 1% of horse body weight should be in concentrate fed 2-3 times per day. Be aware that overfeeding horses leads to similar problems to those found in humans and these days all too obvious. Overweight, obese horses are prone to joint breakdown and the excess of calories ingested

may lead to excess energy that may reflect itself in 'inappropriate' behaviour.

Exercise – vital for conditioning

As in humans, a fitness programme for horses not only aids performance but also strengthens muscles and joints. There's a theory that controlled exercise leads to 'microdamage' and the healing of that tissue damage leaves the muscles stronger than before. If this continues over time the horse progressively becomes stronger. This also applies to bone but the process takes about 4 times longer. Now if a horse is in a large enough pasture then he'll probably walk enough to keep himself fit for trail riding on ground similar to his pasture but for more than that he'll need conditioning, just like any athlete. Here are some suggestions based upon recent writings by Matthew Mackay-Smith & Christine Barakat:

- ✓ Start slowly with 20 minute work outs four times per week. Make sure you incorporate walking, trotting and then short canters. You want to challenge the horse rather than exhaust him.
- ✓ When he's ready for more, increase the distance or the speed of your workout. Never increase both at the same time.
- ✓ Use the type of terrain you're ultimately going to be work on as a training background. A flat arena is not suitable if you're going to use the horse over rocky or uneven bush terrain.
- ✓ Don't work your horse if he's off-colour, in a sour mood or bad tempered. You may not be able to 'work through this' and it will do more harm than good. Cut your losses and leave it for a couple of days.
- ✓ Cross training can be a good thing. Like humans, animals can 'burn out' from too much of one sport. It's a good idea for example, to jump a dressage horse and to trail ride every horse.

Care of the feet and attention to surfaces

The horse had evolved to travel over flat, spongy ground with a vegetative layer as padding. A surface of sharp rocks, loose materials or thick mud has the potential to cause real damage including cuts, bruising and tendon damage. Always look ahead and assess the type of surface coming up. If you can't go around then let the horse pick his own way through. With experience, he'll learn to recognise difficult surfaces and adapt his footing to them. Be aware of any sudden unpredictable changes in ground because the horse can damage itself in that change of footing. In Australia we have horses working on all types of surface. Soft sand is notoriously

difficult with the potential to cause great damage to a horse unused to it. Hence with regular exercise in soft sand conditions the horse is able to handle this difficult surface. Strangely enough, wet sand around the tide mark is probably the ideal surface to ride on.

Golden Rules For Exercise

It's simple. Always warm your horse up before a ride and always let him cool down afterwards. It's a basic principle for exercise in humans too, so why should it be different for horses?

A warm up stretches the muscles, ligaments and joints in preparation for increased movement and activity. It boosts circulation and also prepares the horse mentally for the upcoming exercise. This mental preparation can mean fewer problems with slipping or tripping. If the horse is turned out daily then he'll require less warm up than a stall kept animal who will need at least 5-10 minutes of walking or jogging with a long rein. At events where you might be involved in several competitions or performances, don't forget to warm your horse up before every event.

The 'cool down' is equally important in getting rid of the excess heat built up during exercise. As we all know, if we don't keep moving after exercise our muscles stiffen up and can cramp. So it is with our horses and doubly so if we load them into a trailer and ship them off home without regard for a cool down period. A sweaty horse treated like this will be exposed to draft and illness may well follow. Walking a horse until his metabolism returns to normal is a good way of cooling down and a good sign of this is if the skin temperature has returned to normal. This is usually a brief period but can be prolonged if the horse has been exercised to his limits.

Hoof Care

Like us again, horses don't have standard sized feet and each shoe should be customised depending on the state of the hoof on the day of the visit to the farrier. The hoof has to bear much stress and strain and so the shoe must be designed to ensure that the foot lands flat dependent upon the shape and movement of the leg.

A good dialogue with your farrier is vital as is a visit every two months or so. Ask him what he's doing and why. Is his approach the one you think suits your horse or not? If not then tell him what you want...or go elsewhere to someone who will listen. It makes sense to keep drawings or photos over time so that you've got a record of any changes to your horse's feet. By doing that you can pinpoint the start of any possible problems.