

Equine Sports Therapy

Fitness - getting your horse back into shape

By Kristen Giglio

With the beginning of lighter evenings and more desired weather, we are starting to recondition our horses from having a usually relaxed winter schedule.

As our horses begin a more disciplined routine, we must remember that they are started back

into their regime slowly and with adequate attention to the shape that their bodies are now in. It is important to slowly build and increase their fitness, as a work schedule which is too intense, too quick, will only cause problems as the workload increases. Proper warm-up and cool-out is essential to help prevent injuries and to decrease muscle

tension. Routine stretches, both prior to riding and as part of your cool-down regime, will allow you to detect any discomfort or muscle pain, as well as help the muscle to stretch and cool down adequately aiding in preventing muscle tension and toxin or fluid build-up.

If a horse is pushed too quickly, not only will it cause injury; your horse will become resistant and frustrated with you and the work being asked. Remember to slow down and be aware of what your

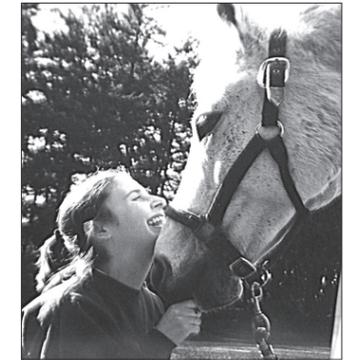
horse may be communicating to you.

How your horse responds to its new workload is as important as what it is doing physically. If your horse is showing resistance, it may be trying to tell you it's in pain and its workload is causing discomfort. If the resistance persists, your workload should be re-

assessed, and an Equine Therapist should assess it muscles to make sure that they are not stressed or reactive. If pain is eliminated by proper reconditioning, your horse will be introduced to the new season with less problems and better results.

Here are some simple ideas and exercises to help you successfully and comfortably

start your horse back into the new season. Firstly, it is very important to make sure your horse is soft, supple and warmed up properly before you start to ask more. Secondly, your horse should be walked for at least 10 minutes before asking for a more intense gate. A "good" walk for warm-up is essential. Make sure your horse is walking forward and carrying itself under you. A slow, short pace does not ensure an adequate warm-up. Lots of bending and long and low will help you horse stretch its back and muscles to allow for more flexibility. This will allow for a more



Kristen Giglio is a Certified Equine Therapist and Animal Health Veterinary Technician. She owns/operates Advanced Connections Equine Therapy and offers such services as massage therapy, magnotherapy, trigger point therapy, applied kinesiology, saddle fitting and acupressure. Contact Kristen at (250) 370-9951, or visit www.acetherapy.ca. Veterinarian recommended. Available seven days a week.

desired response when you are asking for increased contact and frame. If your horse has a hard mouth and resistant when you are doing this, either it is not able to perform what you are asking or your hand may be over-used and asking from the bit rather than the body as a whole. If your horse is not carrying itself from the hind end to the front end, or lacks impulsion then any work will be behind your leg and sluggish. Your horse will evade what is being asked and your rhythm and forward movement will suffer. This will prevent proper muscle toning, strength and body reconditioning. Complementing you horses' forward impulsion and flexion will encourage better head and overall body carriage. Furthermore a proper prevention and wellness program will allow for a happier horse with fewer problems.

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