

Christine Scully on Equine Stretching

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How you can assist performance by adding a simple activity to aid and maintain muscle function....STRETCHING.

Sports people well know the value of stretching in their physical fitness routine. All of us, sports people or not, have seen athletes in all fields of sporting activities stretching during warm up and after exercise. If it is of such value to human athletes, why is it rare to see a rider cool, untack, and then stretch their equine athlete?

In horses we can stretch either actively (ie the horse acts to perform the stretch) or passively - where the handler guides a component of the horses body into a stretch - ie we are active and the horse is passively accepting.. well that is the plan!! My focus this month is the passive stretch performed after work or when the muscles are warm.

In my travels I see many horses each week and a majority of their handlers are asked to stretch their horse after work initially these stretches are used in rehabilitation, but as the horse recovers we stretch to maintain the lengthened muscles and reduce the risk of re-injury. The reasons for stretching are valid in both rehabilitation and any other equine training program with positive benefits seen in both passive and active range of movement. Those clients that stretch their horses regularly report changes such as increases in length of stride, suppleness, balance and cadence.

The reasons behind the above reports that stretches:

1. Correct the balance of tension within the muscle
2. Lengthen muscle fibres and surrounding tissue

3. Enhance blood flow through the muscle tissue
4. Enhance and/or maintain contraction and relaxation ability.
5. Alleviates tension

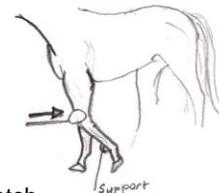
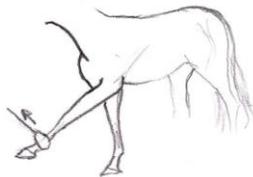
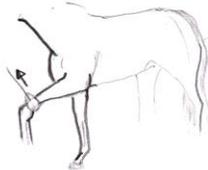
These factors combine to both re-educate after injury and assist in preventing sports related injury... a fine thing!

Now knowing the benefits of such a simple exercise, I am sure you are about to run out and pull your horses legs in all different directions, but just before you do lets look at a few basic guidelines.

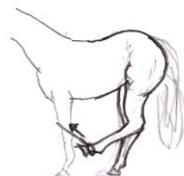
1. Stretch when your horse's muscles are warm... cold muscles are more likely to tear, and in a compliant horse it may be an oops before you know it. So stretch after work, after massage, or after play, and not after initial saddling.
2. Guide the horses limb in the arc of natural movement, avoid any force or fighting. If the horse does not passively accept the stretch, put the hoof down and retry. An uninjured horse resisting is most often due to handler position or the limb has been taken out of its normal range of movement.
3. Stretch only in the direction the horse normally moves its limb
4. When you reach a firm but comfortable position for the horse (and yourself) hold for 15 - 30 seconds to allow the muscle to become accustomed to the elongated state.

Some stretches to enhance length of stride (please excuse my artistry!):

- 1. Forelimb:** a. Jumpers stretch b. Full limb extension c. "shoulder" stretch



- 2. Hindlimb:** a. Hamstrings stretch



- b. quadriceps and TFL Stretch



There are a couple of times when stretches are either not a good idea or should only be performed by a practitioner. These include:

1. Persistent resistance to a particular stretch
2. Injury. eg. Stretches are not performed if there is a suspected muscle tear, as there is a risk of further injury, once healing has progressed, a qualified practitioner will know when a stretching program can be reintroduced.

In all horses ensure you are aware of the horse, maintain your safety at all times, encourage, but do not force the stretch, and just enjoy watching that length of stride increase over the next few months.

Until next time take care of yourselves and your equine friends. Christine

