



Equine Care Tips

Making your Warm up and Cool Down Beneficial

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The art of equine training demands that the rider/trainer has a logical and thorough understanding of muscle activity and energy production. In the real world most horse owners do know to warm up and cool down, but as we are not all exercise physiologists, the hows and whys can be a little bewildering. Let's delve into your warm up and cool down and how to ensure it is effective.

Warming your horse up before work – what does this mean to you? I often see riders get on the horse, long rein non-directed walk around the arena or on the road and then up and on to “the bit” to start work... Some “lucky” horses get a bit of a massage prior to this procedure. Hmmmm, even with the massage, this approach can do with some improvement. Why you ask? Well let's have a look...

The aim of warm up is to prepare the muscles for work, and to gain and maintain relaxation, both physically and mentally.

An effective warm up will:

1. Increase the heart rate and heart output
2. Increase the blood flow to the muscles, reducing it from internal systems such as the digestive system
3. Increase the respiratory rate and depth to allow increased oxygen intake.

Overall the effect is to increase oxygen delivery to muscles, enhance the ability to produce energy aerobically and reduce lactate build up during work. Thus we can already see we will gain in delaying the onset of fatigue caused by increased lactate levels.

One of the things we see in response to the above happenings is an increase in the temperature of the horse. During an effective warm up the temperature of the muscles rises by approximately 1°C, resulting in stronger muscle contraction, increased pliability of muscle tissue and thus a reduced risk of injury. By making your warm up progressive you ensure this response is effective and muscle action and thus performance is enhanced.

Basic warm up procedure:

1. Walk on loose rein for a short time – the length of time is dependant on the horse's recent activity - ie pasture kept requires less walking than stabled horse
2. Increase work intensity slowly moving up into the trot or canter – movement needs to be active with little if any restriction from the rider – ie *Not in any form of collected frame!*
Remember we are aiming for relaxation, thus we chose the gait preferred by the horse.
3. Work at this rate for 5 – 10 minutes then we can commence suppling exercises – eg turns, serpentines leg yielding etc. As the horse increases in fitness the demands of the suppling exercises also increase – ie we move on to voltes etc. And eventually the warm up reflects the work the horse is doing at the time – ie if doing gradients in work then warm up with slight gradients in warm up – if jumping we use small grids to warm up – but only on the fit and supple horse!
4. 15 – 30 minutes later our horse will automatically flow into the work session and be well prepared both mentally and physically to cope with the demands of the session.

Warm Down.

Your horse has worked well at the rally – you hop off, give them a brush and a bucket of water – an obligatory biscuit of hay and go and join the other riders for lunch. You feel you have rewarded your horse for a job well done and sure they will appreciate the rest – but the pain and stiffness in the muscles the following day may well be avoided if we just put a little more effort into the procedure of warming down.

The warm down is basically a reversal of the warm up, with the objective of moving from exercise to rest through a progressive reduction in the intensity of work.

1. Maintain light work at the trot or the canter for 5 – 10 minutes to assist in redistributing blood flow back to the internal systems, aid the use of excess lactate in aerobic energy production and thus enhance the removal of this by-product from the muscles.
2. Incorporate active suppling exercises throughout this time to ensure full release of any muscular tension and reduce the onset of post work soreness. It will also encourage full range of movement in any joints that are held in a relatively static position during the work session – eg the neck – allow the horse to stretch
3. Follow this with 5 – 10 minutes of walk on a long rein.
4. Stop when your horse is relaxed in mind and body.
5. Follow the warm down with passive stretches.

It is always important to ensure your horse is cooled down well after work, which in hot humid weather may require that the horse be sprayed, given access to shade and if possible a breeze, avoid offering anything but small amounts of water until the temperature has reduced to below 39°C, prior to this time the blood is still distributed away from the digestive system and feed may induce digestive upset.

These small factors may be of great importance in enhancing the performance of your horse, and their desire to train and work with you, make it pleasurable and relaxing and you will get greater reward for you both.

Until next time take care of yourselves and your equine friends

Christine.