



Breaks: for better fitness

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Breaks are something that, for a human athlete, are chosen by assessing the individual's feelings in that moment of exertion, and deciding if one can continue. When trainers and riders are looking at training the equine athlete, we must start to understand some muscle physiology to responsibly train the horse.

Many people don't realize that the longevity of your horse is dependent on the health of his/her tissue, and that overworking this tissue can cause problems that start small and multiply until the horse displays an unsoundness. One of the main points I would like you to take away from this article is that just because your horse is doing a movement does not mean his body CAN do the movement. This may seem like an odd thing to say; The horse completes it's task, but without the correct conditioning this task will take a toll on the horse's soft tissue. This toll will accumulate in the body and will show up – it may take time, even years, but it will show up.

A good example of this is a horse that is seemingly sound. Maybe if you were to talk to the rider the horse starts off stiff, is slow to warm up, and regularly has a side that is tougher to ride, but overall the horse is doing its job, and the rider has no clue that there is a soft tissue problem building in the body. One day the horse comes out of the stall unsound, the horse was ridden in a lesson the day before, seemed fine and did its job – the rider had no complaints. The horse was put in the stall for the night and just came out sore the next day. No trauma was witnessed, and the horse has no visible wounds, swellings or any indication that an injury was sustained. This is a typical case of a horse that has had repetitive stress, and the soft tissue of the horse tightened to the point that unsoundness resulted. It is the nature of the horse to do the work we ask of him/her. I believe that 99% of horses do try to do this for us, and when they don't, I hope that you as the rider look deeper into why they are not able to do what we ask.

Let's talk about breaks and what happens when we give muscle tissue a break. Muscles are made up of muscle fibres. Between the muscle fibres is where the circulatory and lymphatic systems are busy at work delivering nutrients and removing waste products. As we condition the horse, not only does the muscle gain strength but the systems feeding, cleaning, and cooling that muscle also become more proficient. Lots of waste products are created when the muscles are working hard, and without breaks – and correctly timed breaks – our horses' muscles can take a beating! During a break, even a short one, the body has time to drain some of these waste products, cool the tissue and replenish some of the nutrients used.

There are two types of breaks: wind breaks and drainage breaks. Wind breaks, although also allowing the horses muscles to drain and do their recovery work, are needed for the horse to fully recover its respiration. This recovery is essential for the horse to reduce stress in the respiratory system, and other body systems, and to re-oxygenate the body. The movement during a break must be in a relaxed state to release the tension in the muscles and allow for recovery. Without the horse in a relaxed state, the tissue just does not have the ability to let go and release.

A good method of improving a horse's overall fitness, and therefore health, is to separate riding days into two categories – strength days and cardio days. This will ensure the soft tissue of the horse gets worked in two very different ways. On a strength day the primary focus will be to build more stabilizing muscle tissue. This day would include lateral exercises and collected work. The work is more intense on strength days, and because of this, breaks will need to happen more frequently. In a one-hour ride we should take two longer breaks so that our horse can fully catch its breath and stretch, but we should also have 6-8 short breaks to allow the horse's tissue to drain. These breaks can be as short as 20-25 seconds, depending on the horse's fitness level, and you may choose to allow the horse out



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of the working shape to relax further.

On a cardio day the two areas of focus will be to build the horse's soft tissue in a repetitive fashion, and to work on improving the horse's respiratory fitness. In a one-hour ride we would expect to give 2-3 long breaks so that our horse can fully catch its breath. We should spend more time in each gait, working on exercises that our horse knows well and can accomplish easily. On this day you may not have the horse in such a collected frame as on the strength day. The focus on these days should not be on training something new, but should be to increase muscle tone and respiratory function at the horse's current level.

In the examples described above, the horse is presumed to be fit enough to endure a one hour ride. Your horse may or may not be at this level of condition in its soft tissue, so proper evaluation of each horse's individual situation is important such that the fitness program can be tailored to each horse's needs.

To get a better idea of your horse's current fitness level, consult your veterinarian, professional therapist or trainer to get an educated perspective. Fitness and breaks must be determined on an individual horse basis. We take into consideration, level of showing, age, footing, weight, rider level, horse education level, feed, and many more factors. A program applied blindly to every horse will not bring your individual horse the greatest benefit, but the guidelines stated above will get you going on the right path. I hope this helps you to decide how to safely increase your program to a level that will allow your horse to work safe and sound! Our equine athletes are not only our mounts, but in most cases they are our friends too. The more you know about their bodies, the better caregiver you can be.