



Cross Training

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Cross-training. We have all heard the term 100 times. We all know we should be adding it into our program, but what is cross-training really, and how do we add it in?

Well, it's not as simple as just doing a couple of exercises. Cross-training needs to change and adapt with your horse as your horse's program and training evolve and build. Of course a Grand Prix horse cannot have the same cardio focus day as a kids pony. It is a very important part of a program. Skipping over cross-training is a real detriment to the horse.

In very simple terms from a physical development perspective, your rides should alternate between a cardio-focused day and a strength-focused day. Switching back and forth between cardio and strength ensures that your horse is using different muscle groups in a different capacity from day to day. This allows the muscles to be challenged through increased carry and collection on the strength day, and repetitive stress and oxygen exchange on the cardio day. The exercises themselves may vary, or even just the way in which you perform the exercises may vary.

Think of the strength day as the day in which you are trying to climb up a step in your training. This could be when you are asking for a more engaged frame, or when you are demanding more in the lateral movements, and asking your horse to hold more collection through all of the gaits. A strength day might also mean including a larger and more technical gymnastic exercise.

It is important to remember that as you move up in jumping height and width, a horse needs an enormous amount of power to propel its body weight over the fence. This power comes from the ring of muscles that produce collection. I often hear my show jumper clients say that collection is for dressage riders. In fact, jumping horses require a higher degree of collection as they power up for the take off phase of the jump than dressage horses need until the dressage horses reach higher levels of training and competition.

It is important to afford your horses frequent walk breaks on strength days. The tissue being taxed needs a chance to recover and drain. The warm up and cool down phases of your ride are also important considerations that need to be done every day.

After strength day should come the cardio day. A cardio day should consist of repetitive exercise to build nutrient exchange in the muscles and help to increase the horse's efficiency. This is a very important aspect of training that is often missed, especially with horses that live in stables indoors. Practicing and building up cardio fitness is important for stressful situations, like competition, so that the body is able to keep up the flow of nutrients to areas that need it, and so that the body can drain waste products away from the muscles being taxed.

On cardio day walk breaks should be less frequent, but should be longer. It's important to ensure that the horse is able to fully recover its wind before starting the next set in the workout.

When designing or planning your strength and cardio days, be realistic and flexible with your own horse's needs and attitude. If you are supposed to do a strength day workout but your horse seems to have a bee in



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his bonnet and just needs a gallop to get it out of his system, then maybe harping on the strength workout isn't the best choice that day!

Another way to 'cross-train' with your horse is to vary the setting of your workouts. Nowadays so many stables and facilities have state-of-the-art footing, which is a nice thing to have for jumping, turning, and so on. But riding around on flat and perfect footing all the time is a bit sterile. It can be a healthy addition to your program to include walking on trails, climbing hills, walking through snow in the winter months, and even traversing across hills. Of course it is important to be mindful of everyone's safety when changing terrain, but it can break up the monotony of riding around in an arena all the time as well as potentially strengthening your horse.

I wish the best of luck at the upcoming spring shows. Remember, having your horse evaluated by a professional therapist or your veterinarian can give you the information you need to adjust your training program now to be stronger and to help fend off injuries!