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For Albertans About Albertans

There is no Off Season

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There is no more off season. Well, there is if we make one for ourselves. There is a horse show somewhere in the world every week of the year, so any break we take is really because we feel that it's the right choice for us as riders and for our equine partners.

Shows in Alberta seem to end for the year around the beginning of November, and start up at varying levels in February again. For those who travel, the shows keep going later (end of November in California, Christmas time in Florida and Europe) and start earlier (January everywhere Albertans could go!). No matter how you slice it up, there isn't much time for a break anymore.

It would be a fair assumption that most riders will give their horses a break of some kind, obviously from shows, but also a week or two (or more) when the horses don't work at all.

What's the plan for bringing the horses back after a break? How early before the first competition back do we need to start? Probably most importantly, how do we decide how intense to make the training in the build up to the show season?

When considering both upcoming shows and the breaks that precede them, it makes sense to work backwards from the dates of travel to decide both when and how long a break can happen. Some guidelines we work by at our farm is to ensure at least three weeks of full fitness training before the shows begin. These weeks would entail jumping patterns and exercises close to the difficulty level and height at which we hope to compete, while continuing to train the flatwork and rideability that will be called upon while jumping courses. Ideally, the last week before traveling or beginning competition would be a bit of a buffer – if training and fitness levels are deemed to be at a high level, then it would be ideal to save the jumps and just work on building cardio fitness and more flatwork training; if one more practice day of jumping is needed, early in this final week is a good opportunity to do so.

In order to get to those crucial final three weeks of finishing touches, planning for roughly two weeks of jumping small patterns, cavalettis, and poles would be ideal. Increasing both strength and cardio fitness while mixing in some small jumps is the goal, and at this point there is still no pressure to jump large jumps if one's horse is still too fresh. This is a great chance to really work on rideability and discipline – lots of transitions to help get through the freshness!

Backing up one step further, it would be the most fair for the horses not to start jumping as soon as they come back from their break. The big variable in this stage is how long the horses should work on the flat before mixing in the small jumps. This will depend on how long the break is, as that will determine how much muscle mass, strength, and cardio fitness the horses would have lost. Typically in our program, the week before starting to add in jumps we like to have the horses fit to flat for about 40 minutes of normal work – that means lateral work, transitions, and small turns and circles.

It's important to listen to your horse to decide how much time you need to get up to the 40 minute flat level. This would vary from horse to horse, how long the break was, and of course how fit the horse was heading into the break. Whatever you decide, I would recommend taking it quite easy the first few days back – 20 minutes, nothing too stressful.

One of the most overlooked aspects of increasing fitness is allowing for enough breaks during a ride to let your horse's muscles drain, and to let them regain their breath, before starting another set. In this sense, it is much like human athletes training at the gym. A person can't simply lift weights non-stop for 40 minutes – there will be a limit to how fit and strong one can become like this. It is important to push the boundaries in order to improve, but be very realistic and fair – and be patient! Fitness will take time to improve.

A great way to start to work in poles into the fitness work is to use the following exercise. Start by placing two rails, placed nine feet apart, heading across the short wall at one end of the arena. The idea is that the rails would be on a slight curve, such that they would align with a 20m circle. Place two more rails at the other end of the arena (if your arena is very long, place the rails no more than 40m away from the initial poles) in a similar fashion – nine feet apart, on a curve to match a 20m circle. Finally place one rail in the centre of the ring across the long diagonal, and another one across the opposite diagonal in the centre of the ring. All put together, the rails should form a figure-8.

Start by trotting the figure-8 through the rails. Then increase the difficulty by trotting the rail across the middle of the ring, then make a canter transition, canter through the rails on the end, followed by a trot transition to head across the other rail in the middle of the arena, and back up to the canter for the two on the other end. The final step is to canter the whole pattern, with lead changes across the rails in the middle of the arena. The idea is to maintain an even rhythm through all of the rails, in spite of the lead changes.

To increase the difficult one more level, count the number of strides you do between all of the rails, and then start doing different numbers by collecting your stride and lengthening your stride, being sure to maintain the same track and going through the centre of all of the rails. If you ensure the horse maintains adequate bend for the track required from its ears to its tail (i.e. not only neck bend, but use enough inside leg and outside rein to manage the rest of the horse's body as well), this exercise will be an extension of any other lateral work you may do – it will engage the horse's hind end and encourage the horse to use its abdominals to support proper posture.

A nice break from competition, training, and stress is an important part of the overall health of your horse. It is up to you and your trainer to determine the optimal length of the break for your horse, depending on your competition and training schedule and how your horse tolerates so much rest. Be sure to plan with your nutritionist or vet how to alter your horse's feed requirements both as they head into, during, and out of a break. Remember always that our horses are real athletes that do unbelievable things for us all the time, and their bodies deserve the utmost in care, training, preparation and planning.