

STRETCH YOUR HORSE'S BACK

HOW TO GIVE YOUR HORSE GYMNASTIC BENEFITS

By Mary Ann Judkins
with Juli S. Thorson

Imagine that you make your living as an athlete, and that every day you are called upon to perform feats requiring strength, agility and endurance. Then imagine how long your career would last if you were never given the opportunity to stretch and warm-up before practices and competitions. It isn't hard to picture yourself stiff, injured and washed up at an early age, is it?

Performing horses need the same chance to stretch and warm-up that human athletes do. Without this benefit, training can never be fully successful and a horse's useful life will be shortened by pain, resistance and debilitating injury.

It is especially important that you devote time to stretching your horse's back before you ask him to perform training or competitive maneuvers. Not only do the back muscles support you, the rider, they also support the horse's ability to collect and balance himself. If these muscles aren't properly prepared for work, you're asking for trouble.

I'd like to share the routine I use for stretching a horse's back. This series of warm-up exercises takes as little as 20 minutes, and is something I employ at the start of all training, lessons or competitive sessions. By incorporating a similar warm-up into your own riding routine, I think you'll see a number of benefits, including better extensions, less resistance, more flexibility and a happier horse.

BEGIN AT THE WALK

Many of us keep our horses stabled year 'round. That means those horses stand in a stall for 23 hours, waiting for us to come and ride them. Therefore, their backs need some time to adjust to the weight of a rider and the demands of exercise.

When I first get on a horse, I spend about 10 minutes letting him walk out on a long rein. I encourage the horse to go along as though he were on a trail ride, asking him to travel in a relaxed, ground covering way.

I sit back in the saddle with my upper body upright and my seat out in front, going with the motion of the horse. I keep my seat muscles soft—tensing them would prompt the horse to brace against the force by tightening his back—and I think about letting my seat go *forward*, not side to side.

I drive the horse's walk by using my legs to push *with* the side to side motion of the horse's barrel. That encourages him to step further up behind, getting a better stretch of his legs and getting more relaxation through the back. If the horse is reluctant to walk energetically, I may tap him lightly with my whip.

I let the horse keep walking along on a long rein until I feel his whole body begin to loosen and move forward more freely. You

should have no trouble detecting this; other signs to watch for include attentive ears, raising of the tail, and the neck being carried out in front in a natural way, as though the horse were walking out in a field on his own.

The next part of the warm-up involves getting the horse to drop his neck to stretch his front half. I begin by working with the horse at the walk, just to give him an idea of what I want, but move on to the trot once he understands. The greater impulsion of the trot gives the horse more stretching opportunities.

FEEL AND FOLLOW

After establishing a free walk on a long rein, I establish a large circle of about 20 meters (66 feet). I take up the slack in the reins until I have light contact with the horse's mouth, or the feeling of just a bit of weight in each hand. I keep my hands wide and low—about 12



Trot pole work requires the horse to stretch down, and lift his hocks.

inches apart—with the withers poking in between my hands. I keep the outside rein contact steady as I massage the inside rein. I continue to push the horse forward with my legs.

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This encourages the horse to soften his jaw, drop his neck and stretch down. The *instant* I feel him start to stretch down, I follow him down with my hands, softening my contact so he can keep stretching. This “feel and follow” idea is the key to getting a horse stretched in front—if you hold and don’t soften, the horse will quit going forward. He’ll jam up and tighten his back, which of course is the opposite of what you’re ultimately trying to accomplish.

If the horse tries to raise his neck in an attempt to evade contact, I simply take my hands wider to “catch the slack” in the reins, and continue to drive him from behind. That sends his energy forward to meet a restraining hand; when the energy can’t go out through the mouth, it comes up through the horse’s back, causing him to lift his back and drop his neck. As soon as he begins to drop down, I bring my hands together again and soften.

I work at the walk in both directions until the horse understands what I’m asking. Then I proceed to the rising trot, which is easier on the horse’s back than the sitting trot.

I trot the horse in the same 20 meter circles. If he has had a bad direction, I start with his good one to let him loosen and get comfortable. Then I work his bad side. I’ll go back and forth, in one direction and then the other, until I feel his back begin to loosen and rise up beneath me. He’ll feel as though his hind legs are pushing up into my seat, and he’ll be springier, with more suspension and a swinging feeling from behind.

As the horse gets softer and freer like this, I ride him in big three loop serpentine. When bending through the loops, I push from inside leg to outside hand, asking the horse to give laterally as he travels forward. This further stretches his back muscles and makes him more supple.

A trot that feels too fast is usually the result of a tight back.

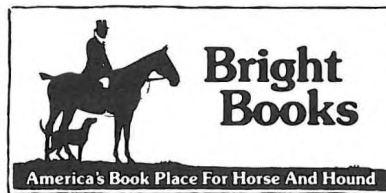
As I’m working in this fashion, I don’t worry if the horse seems to be trotting too fast, especially if he’s green. As he softens through the back and adds more impulsion and suspension to his working trot, his rhythm will slow down on its own. In fact, a trot that feels too fast is usually the result of a tight back.

TROT POLES, LEG YIELDS

Other methods I use to encourage stretching include trotting the horse over poles laid on the ground, and asking him to yield laterally in response to pressure from my leg.

Trot pole work requires the horse to stretch down and lift his hocks to go over. The procedure is simple; I put several poles down about 4½ - 5 feet apart, depending on the horse’s stride, and ask him to trot through them. As he gets proficient at this, I increase the distance between poles to encourage extension and suspension of the trot. This is something I may do a couple of times a week, both for green horses and for more seasoned ones.

I incorporate leg yield as soon as the horse is going forward and going straight. In other words, I want him to be far enough along in training to travel with impulsion and to keep his body properly aligned with traveling on a line and properly arced with traveling on a circle.



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I introduce leg yield work at the end of a warmup session, on a day when the horse is moving most forward. I’ll have him walking energetically around my arena, turn down the quarter line (the imaginary line between the rail and the center of the arena), and leg yield him toward the rail. I ask for just enough lateral steps to be sure he’s responding to my leg aid. Then I allow him to go forward once more to get his impulsion back, before asking for another leg yield. When the horse will respond at the walk, in both directions, I add work at the trot.

FURTHER WORK

With a green horse, this routine may take 30 minutes or more and constitute nearly his entire day’s work. A more seasoned horse will reach the relaxation stage more quickly, and will go from the warm-up to more difficult work. I’ll return to the relaxation exercises, though, if he feels stiff or tense any time during the rest of my ride.

Everything in this program builds strength in a horse as well as helping him to relax and stretch. In fact, if all you did every day was this kind of routine, you could improve your horse’s topline tremendously because you’d be building muscle up over his loin.

I encourage you to make an investment in the time it takes to provide this sort of gymnastic work for your horse. He’ll be a better athlete for it and do a better job of meeting your needs. □

Mary Ann Judkins, a dressage trainer, competitor, and clinician is a firm believer in making a horse’s work enjoyable. Part of that enjoyment comes from helping him to relax and stretch at the beginning of workouts. Equally important is giving the horse lavish and copious praise whenever he does what’s asked.

“I am constantly telling my horses how great they are, how wonderful they are, to build up their egos. They have to want to work, and they have to believe in themselves. Even a little horse can give you a big ride if you help him have a big ego.”