



A guide to Horseball horse fitness

This guide will commence from the end of the last league weekend in the autumn through to international events.

End of the season

I am a believer that all horses need a period of down time after the hard events of the summer. All other disciplines that require high levels of fitness give their horses a break. Hunters have the early summer off, polo ponies have some time off over the winter, eventer's and even dressage horses are turned away to some extent. You must let them unwind gradually – maybe you will just hack them out once a week or turn them completely away. Whichever, it is the change must be gradual from the end of the last competition. This quiet period should last for a maximum of 2 months.

A period of light or no work allows the horse to unwind, relax and give his/her body a chance to recuperate. It also allows you to address his/her body condition score and make adjustments to it. The disadvantage of this is that when you start riding again you MUST increase fitness levels SLOWLY and CAREFULLY to reduce the risk of injury.

An example of bringing a horse back in to work (can be tailored to the individual horse)

FIRSTLY- CHECK their teeth (done 6 monthly in performance horses by a vet or a qualified 'Equine dental technician' – not any old bloke with a bucket and rasp), vaccinations (must be in accordance with FEI regulations for those wishing to compete at FIHB events), ensure tack fits, worming – seek veterinary advise if you are unsure. This is also a good time to address the quality of your horses shoeing.

Look after their legs – protect them during work – cool them QUICKLY afterwards. Take boots/bandages off first. Cold hose/cool boots (apply for max 20mins) – stable bandage if stood in the stable over night – if their legs are inclined to fill with oedema (more prevalent in older horses)

*Starting from **no work and no injuries**
Begin at the latest in January*

- Week 1 - 30 mins walk on road 3 times/week
- Week 2 - 50 mins walk – 5 mins trot split over the time (doing the faster work up hills is beneficial, try not to pound them on the flat) 3-4 times/week
- Week 3 - 50 mins walk – 10mins trot 4-5 times/week
- Week 4 - 50mins walk 15 mins trot and start canter 4-5/week

Walking your horses off after exercise is one of the most important aspects (even in these early stages). You want your horse to be sweating a little bit at the end of these

early sessions. Sweating too much and you may be going too quickly – tendons, ligaments and muscles need a chance to adapt to exercise.

Week 5 - 40mins ride 10 mins trot 10 mins canter (start schooling) 5/week

Week 6 - 40 mins ride 20 mins trot 15 mins canter 5/week

Week 7 - 45 mins ride more schooling – begin Horseball / jumping

Week 8 - Increase amount of Horseball

Week 9 - Begin interval training, 2 sessions per week on top of hacking/schooling etc. Horses need to have started these canter interval sessions way before the first competition (i.e March).

Working backwards 8 weeks from the International competition date, a fitness programme should be followed for horse and rider. This will involve 2/3 interval training sessions per week.

Horses must be stabled for at least the final week before attending internationals – they will be stood on a lorry for up to 4 days and in a stable for the competition so they MUST be used to it.

Get in to the habit of having your horse's shoes done approximately 1 week before competitions (at home and for internationals)

Canter interval training

Before your horse attends any international competition he/she horse needs to be able to canter for at least 10 minutes (in one go, without a break!) without becoming stressed. Ideally your pony should undertake fast work as part of his/her training programme, twice a week for around 6-8 weeks prior to the competition.

If your pony is not used to doing much fast work you will need to start by doing 2 to 3 minutes and then gradually building this up over several weeks. To avoid lameness and injury your fast work should be done on a safe surface (i.e. not hard, boggy, rutted, deep, etc.).

Fast work can be done in an arena of 40 x 20 m or larger, on gallops at the beach etc. You should aim for a speed of around 400 m / min to start (the distance around a 40 x 20 m arena is around 120m so aim to complete a lap approximately every 18 seconds). Remember you need to help your pony with this work so you should be standing up in your stirrups and be leaning forward over the pony's neck as he does this canter work.

Horse Fitness – start a minimum of 8 weeks before the competition.

If you ride for the following numbers of days then the following tables indicate typical regimes that could be undertaken.

Ride for 6 Days

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Rest	HB	School	Canter	School	HB	HB

5 Days

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Rest	Canter	Rest	Canter	School	HB	HB

4 Days –someone will have to lunge the horse on day 3 or 5 as it will not be 100% fit

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Rest	Canter	Rest	Canter	Rest	HB	HB

3 Days or less – will not be fit enough

Canter interval work: NOT ON HARD GROUND.

Jumping position **WITH REIN CONTACT**.

- Use either a gallop, a school, a big field.
- Avoid deep mud.
- Wear leg protection
- If possible, get off and run along side the horse for the 10 min cool down
- Cool legs down appropriately

Wk 6 (before competition)	20 min warm up	3 min canter	2 min rest	3 min canter	2 min rest	3 min canter	10 min cool down
Wk 5	20 min warm up	4 min canter	2 min rest	4 min canter	2 min rest	4 min canter	10 min cool down
Wk 4	20 min warm up	5 min canter	2 min rest	5 min canter	2 min rest	5 min canter	10 min cool down
Wk 3	20 min warm up	6 min canter	2 min rest	6 min canter	2 min rest	6 min canter	10 min cool down
Wk 2	20 min warm up	7 min canter	2 min rest	7 min canter	2 min rest	7 min canter	10 min cool down
Final Wk	20 min warm up	3 min canter	2 min rest	3 min canter	2 min rest	3 min canter	10 min cool down

If the horse has any leg problems, consult your vet, rest until better and start all over again at the beginning.

This table really outlines a minimum requirement, If you start with enough time you may get all the way up to 9 or even 10 minute canters - just proceed with caution keeping a close eye on your horses legs.

*****An alternative and my personal preferred option once a horse is cantering for 5 minutes is to canter for shorter periods (i.e max 5 mins) but with a shorter interval (max 1 min). This begins to replicate match conditions. Then add in further repetitions up to 6 times. These shorter periods may allow you to add in a few faster bursts to elevate your horses heart rate further.*****