

THE WARMUP

A riding session should be divided into two parts: the warmup and the development work. We all want to continue to develop our horse's abilities, to teach the horse something new or improve on something he already knows. And we don't, of course, want our training sessions to feel like one long warmup, but a good warmup is essential to the successful development of our horses, and will help keep them sound for a long time. A proper warmup also results in the greatest pleasure of all...riding your horse when everything works correctly.

To begin with, you need a clearly defined goal for your warmup and an established system that leads to that goal. The system should be as uncomplicated as possible, but it must at the same time include all the basic areas that are essential to moving forward in your horse's development. This makes the subject of warmup an important one, so as you read this, take time to really think it through.

Your primary goal in the warmup is to achieve good communication with your horse. This means that at the end of the warmup, your horse should:

- work in harmony with the rider
- answer all the aids correctly
- be supple, and let go of all tension
- work in a steady tempo and in good balance
- use both sides equally (be straight)
- stay on the aids
- go forward to the bit (be "on the bit")

In brief, your goal is to feel at the end of the warmup, that you and your horse are ready to do anything (taking into consideration the horse's age and level of education).

A competent, educated rider seldom has to react.

The daily training begins in the rider's head. Before you start, you need to be mentally prepared. Just because you prepared yourself mentally yesterday or last week, does not mean you are prepared for today. Get charged up mentally before each ride! Have a plan!

To reach your goals successfully, you must be able to create a mental picture of the horse correctly executing the movements...and even imagine how it feels. Only then will you be able to influence your horse in a way he can understand. If you cannot clearly visualize what you want your horse to do, you will end up following instead of leading. The horse will become confused and take the initiative, and you will respond. Avoid reacting to what your horse does as much as possible. The horse should respond to *your* signals. To be creative you must be proactive, not reactive.

If you feel that the horse is not working properly and doesn't answer the aids correctly, something is missing. The cause is very seldom disobedience, but rather a lack of preparation, so why not warm up according to a system that includes all the necessary details? By using a system that works through each part of the warmup, one at a time, you always know where you are at any point in your warmup program. Using this approach, if you reach a point in your warmup that does not give the result you want, you can easily identify the problem and the aids that the horse needs help to understand.

The horse is a creature of habit, who should be fed and watered on a regular schedule, but the horse's need for consistency is not limited to feeding. He also likes consistency when it comes to his training, and that requires that you follow a program not only for the warmup, but also for the development work. You should be consistent in your training approach, in the way you give the aids, and in the way you handle your horse. Everything you do with the horse should be consistent. Inconsistency and changes in your routine cause the horse to become nervous and suspicious.

Demand of yourself that everything goes well from the first to the last step of your ride. Every single detail you ask of your horse should start as a thought that leads to a decision, and finally becomes a mental picture of the horse working correctly. Using this mental picture, imagine how it feels when the horse successfully performs the movement and let this guide you when you ask your horse to work. This is the only way to influence your horse clearly and in a way that he can understand.

THE WARMUP PROGRAM

The warmup must be organized in a way that is logical from the horse's point of view. It can be divided into these three parts.

PART ONE

Before starting, ask yourself if the horse is ready to learn. Is he receptive to your influence, or does he come into the arena tense and nervous, not listening to you or responding to your signals even before you mount? Do you find yourself responding to what the horse is doing instead of

the reverse? If so, then you know that the horse will never be willing to work under the aids once you are in the saddle. In this situation you should start by working with the horse from the ground before getting in the saddle. For more information about working the horse in hand, read the chapter in Section 3 (Understanding the Horse) called The Psyche of the Horse.

The training starts from the first moment you begin to handle the horse. It's important that the horse is mentally with you every step of the way in order to avoid problems that stem from poor communication. When you feel that you and your horse are communicating effectively, you are ready to move on with the warmup.

All horses are different and need an individualized warmup program for their age and level of education. The following is just an example.

WARM UP THE MUSCLES AND INCREASE CIRCULATION

Walk the horse for five to ten minutes on a fairly long rein before going to work. If you can do this work outside before entering the arena, that is preferable. Another alternative is to walk the horse over a set of cavalettis. It is important to take time with this step, primarily to avoid injuries.

CREATE BALANCE AND HARMONY

Begin in walk with a goal to help the horse work in balance and in harmony with his rider. Remember that everything you do is a signal to the horse. Consequently, you must be sure about what you want your horse to do, and clear about how to communicate so that your horse has a chance to understand what you are asking. Take up the reins as a signal to the horse that the work has begun. You want your horse to respond by turning his attention to you. Sit correctly. A correct position invites the horse to stand up straight and place his body right under yours, creating a unified center of gravity between horse and rider. By placing your weight equally over both seat bones you will help your horse find his equilibrium. If you don't have a feeling that the horse is right under you, the horse has no chance of following your weight. Read the chapters in this section (The Basics) called Harmony and The Rider's Position.

ASK THE HORSE TO RESPOND TO DRIVING AIDS

When you feel you and your horse are in harmony, that he follows your weight, is relaxed over his topline, and by using your seat you can change his length of stride, then you are ready to move on. The horse will relax over his topline only when he lowers his neck and reaches out to the bit of his own free will. Under no circumstances should the horse be forced to round his neck.

By asking the horse to respond to the driving aids, you can help the horse balance himself without tensing. Ride in a straight line, drive the horse softly forward with your seat and your lower legs, placed slightly more forward than normal. It is wrong to use continuous driving aids.

This irritates the horse and makes him less sensitive to driving aids.

A horse that answers the driving aids correctly:

- gives you a feeling that he pushes his body forward with his hind legs, as if the energy is moving forward and out between your legs.
- produces a thrust from his hind legs that sends energy through the back muscles, thereby activating them.
- creates a feeling that the muscles under the saddle “swing” and are active so that the energy can travel all the way over the top line and out to the bit.
- stretches his neck longer, out in front of you and between the reins. When this happens take a light contact with his mouth so he has something to go forward to. You are now driving the horse from behind and forward to the bit. When this works correctly, it feels like the reins are made of elastic which the horse should carefully stretch. It should be the horse who reaches forward to the bit, and not the bit that is pulled back to the horse. When the horse reaches forward to the bit, it straightens the vertebrae in his neck and back, just as if you were pulling on one end of a pearl necklace to make the pearls come into alignment.

When the horse moves his front legs forward you should feel that this movement starts up at the withers and follows all the way forward to the front foot. The front feet are then set down on the ground along an imaginary line in front of the horse’s chest. It should not feel as if the horse is moving his front legs back in under his body, as this would mean that he is carrying himself too much on the forehand.

The hind legs should act as the motor. The horse should thrust himself forward with the hind legs, rather than pull himself forward with his front legs. You should have a feeling that the horse lifts his hind legs up and forward, stepping in under his center of gravity. The further forward under his body he places his hind feet the better the self-carriage and thrust. If the horse puts his hind foot down too soon, and not all the way forward under his center of gravity, he will be forced to carry too much of his weight on his forehand.

SUPPLE THE HORSE’S MUSCLES ON THE OUTSIDE OF THE DIRECTION OF MOVEMENT

When the horse has answered the driving aids correctly it is time to supple his muscles on the outside of the direction in which he is moving. The following exercise requires that your horse understands how to answer the aids for turn on the forehand; primarily inside leg and inside seat bone.

This is best done in counter shoulder-in, which you can ride anywhere in the arena, both on straight and bent lines. In this case the counter shoulder-in is used for the purpose of suppling rather than as a collecting exercise. You want the horse to stretch his neck forward and down, relaxing his muscles on the inside of the bend and stretching the muscles on the outside. Remember, the inside is always the side toward which the horse is bent. There are three reasons to start by suppling the outside muscles: it helps the horse find his own natural balance, it ensures that both the muscles on the outside and those on the inside are suppled, and it develops the proper response to the outside aids, discouraging the horse from leaning against them, and preparing for the correct response when later, you ride the horse from inside leg to outside rein.

SUPPLE THE HORSE'S MUSCLES ON THE INSIDE OF THE DIRECTION OF MOVEMENT

When the horse feels elastic, supple and through in the muscles on the outside of the direction in which he is moving, it is time to work his muscles on the inside. Shoulder-in is a good movement for this purpose. Again, shoulder-in is normally a collecting movement, but in this case will be used as a suppling exercise. By allowing the horse to reach forward and down with his neck, while at the same time asking for a bend to the inside, you will invite him to stretch all the muscles through the outside of the bend and his top line.

After completing the work with driving aids, counter shoulder-in, and shoulder-in, you should have a horse who feels elastic through his whole body. The horse should also push his body forward with his hind legs, reach forward with his neck between the reins and go forward to the bit.

We have still not worked on the resisting aids, and it is best if you can avoid that to start with, but if you have a horse with a tendency to run away from you, it may be necessary. In that case you can use walk-halt transitions in order to encourage your horse wait for you to drive him forward. It's important that the speed in which you are working is a speed you have created with your driving aids. If you have to use resisting aids to keep the horse from going too fast, it will have a negative effect.

WARMUP IN TROT

Now it's time to pick up the posting trot. Allow the horse to develop a forward-moving trot gradually out of a jog-trot in order to give his body time to increase circulation and pump oxygen to all his muscles. During this time, you can continue the suppling work with counter shoulder-in and shoulder-in, and ride circles and other figures to help the horse relax and come into balance. Once he feels relaxed and the tempo is steady (at this point he should lower his neck of his own free will and relax his back), you can ask him to go forward with slightly bigger strides. If the horse responds by giving (softening in your hand), the timing was right. On the other hand, if the horse tenses and quickens his tempo, it is too early to ride more forward.

When you are satisfied with this trot work it may be helpful for some horses to do a little warmup in canter. The goal here should be the same as in the trot; to get the horse more balanced, relaxed and supple. The exercises you choose naturally depend on the horse's age, level of education and condition. Most importantly the horse must have an opportunity to warm up in a way that does not overexert him.

After the canter work, give the horse a walk break.

PART TWO

After the break, it is time to bring the horse more “on the aids”. You will not get a detailed explanation here of how to ride the horse on the aids, but you can read about it in the chapter, [On the Aids](#).

When your horse is on the aids, you should feel that you could ask anything of him and he could respond successfully. Again, this of course depends on his level of education. When you bring the horse on the aids, or as some say “into a frame”, it is a bit like putting together a puzzle. All the body parts must be in place and working together for the horse to physically carry the rider in balance over his center of gravity and to easily answer all the aids. The best way to bring the horse on the aids is to ride many different exercises, each requiring the horse to organize his body in different ways. There is a particularly helpful exercise called the Broholm exercise, described in the chapter [Straightness on Bent Tracks](#).

PART THREE

Once the horse is on the aids, we can work on going forward to the bit. A complete explanation of this can be found in the chapter, [On the Bit](#). To say the horse is going forward to the bit you must be able to see and feel the following:

- The horse is in harmony with the rider
- The horse is completely supple
- The horse is physically and mentally relaxed
- The horse is in balance and works in a steady tempo
- Half-halts go through without the least resistance

When the horse goes honestly forward to the bit, you should feel that his topline works like an accordion, and that you can lengthen the topline (open the accordion) or shorten the topline (close the accordion) at will. Exercises such as transitions, changes of tempo, and correctly executed half-halts are primarily used to achieve this goal.

When you are done with your warmup, you should have a horse that is both between the aids and

on the bit. He should move naturally in each gait and move forward freely.

Get to know your horse so well that you can develop a warmup program that meets his unique needs. Turn your warmup into a system you can use when you are at shows or clinics. By knowing how long it takes to complete your warmup program, you can also determine when to start your warmup before a test.

To get the most out of this chapter, I suggest you also read from this section (The Basics) the chapters called Harmony, The Aids, On the Bit, Balance and Equilibrium, Under the Aids, Straightness, The Half-Halt, and The Frame.