

Module 10: Creating a Fitness Program



You've got a goal in mind, and you want your horse to be as good as they can be before that time. Maybe it's a big show, a driving trial, a parade, or just a long anticipated fun drive with friends.

You want to be sure that your horse is as fit and strong as they can be, so the job that you're asking them to do is easy for them, and they're able to give the best performance possible.

We've all been there, where we go out every day and drive our horses and we're dedicated and we work hard, but we don't seem to be making any progress. We need to work smarter, not harder, and hopefully the exercises and concepts in this course will help you do just that!

Building Them Up, Not Breaking Them Down

I had a lesson client who was very hardworking. She wants to win and is completely willing to put in the time to make it happen. She said to me one day, "I'm driving him every single day for over an hour! Why does he never seem to get more fit – he's always tired!"

He WAS always tired, because he was working every day for an hour, without time to recover. She thought she was doing the right thing, to help him get stronger and fitter, but she was overdoing it, and just wearing him out.

Remember that muscle is made stronger by breaking it down. Tiny microscopic tears heal, and build bigger and stronger muscles, which again are "damaged" by work, and heal stronger, and so on. The same holds true for ligaments and tendons and bones – they have to be stressed to get stronger, BUT they also need time to heal in order for that to happen.

Down time matters too. In fact, I think it's the most overlooked ingredient in a fitness program.

I had the opportunity to hear Dr. Nancy Loving speak at a conference. She's *the* expert on equine conditioning, an equine veterinarian who also competes in endurance riding. With her demanding career, she maintains fitness on her horses for 100 mile rides, working them twice a week. Twice a week!

She said that when you're gaining fitness then 3-4 times per week is optimal. Once they are fit and strong for their job, once or twice a week is sufficient.

Time To Recharge

Work depletes the glucose and other fuel in the muscles and tissues of your horse. Downtime allows them to replenish so they're able to perform at their peak.

Note: downtime doesn't mean standing in a stall. Horses should be, as much as possible, kept in a large space with friends, so they continue to move on their own and express natural behaviours.

In addition to a schedule of no more than 4 days a week and no more than 3 days in a row, periodic extended breaks from work is good for them, both physically and mentally. And if you have that big event coming up,

further reducing their workload in the week leading up to the event is a good idea. Let them stockpile some energy, ensure any lingering muscle soreness is well healed, and give them the chance to compete at their best.

Mix It Up

The leading cause of injury in performance horses is repetitive strain. Competition causes us to be very focused on certain movements, and we repeat them ad nauseum, looking for perfection. This is less of a concern if you're training for Combined Driving Events, as the sport itself lends itself to strong, adaptable, all around horses, but if you're competing in the show ring, it's important that you do more with your horse than practice the big trot around and around the arena.

Go on a trail drive, practice some obstacles, do the exercises in this course. Go further outside the box and teach your horse to jump or do tricks. I swear that Rocky has improved in his use of his hind end under harness because of his fondness for his rear trick; everything you do with your horse will benefit their performance, and a horse that is used to many forms of movement on many different kinds of terrain is going to be one that is much less likely to become injured.

Know Your Horse

I suspect by this point in the course, even if you haven't had a chance to drive all the exercises yet, you already have a pretty good idea of which areas your horse is strong in, and which they struggle. Every horse is different, so it's really important that you have awareness of their strengths and weaknesses to be able to tailor each drive to helping them.

Remember that every skill feeds into the others, so you'll continue to work on their strengths as a way to improve their weaknesses. For example, if they're excellent at transitions, but struggle with bend, you could use transitions right before the bend to help them use their hind end better, and therefore improve the bend.

This is no time to be "barn blind" – no matter what your horse struggles with, they're still amazing, and never let anyone tell you otherwise. But knowing where they're weak is the first step to choosing exercises to help them get even better.

Have a Goal

Before you go out to drive your horse, take a moment and think about what you'd like to work on. Pick some exercises that would lend themselves to improving that goal. Plan out how you think your session with go. "We'll walk for 5 minutes, and work on our free walk a lot. He's been stiff to the right, so we'll start warming up to the left, and then go right and see if that helps. Once he's warmed up we'll do some bending exercises – deep serpentine, and I'll set up some cones. Then if that goes well, a walk break, some lengthening, and then cool down." Or maybe it's just, "I want to drive on the trails today. We'll walk the first 5 minutes, then do some transitions, and then I know he loves to zoom on the trails so we'll do that a while before we walk home to cool out."

It doesn't have to be too detailed, but having a plan before you start allows you to do any set up you need to (cones, etc) and makes sure you don't get out there and find both you and your horse bored with driving the same circle without any goals or improvement.

Be Willing to Change It

You have to drive the horse that's in front of you on the day. You might think you're going to work on bending, and instead spend the session overcoming a newly discovered fear of pylons. Or you might think you're going to work on impulsion, only to find that you have a tense ball of nerves on that day, who needs to go back to basics and focus on rhythm and relaxation.

Could go the other way too – maybe you're planning to work on driving nice round circles, but your horse is doing so well, and is feeling so forward and handy, that you quickly move on to some extension and collection exercises.

Having a plan is important. Listening to your horse and being willing to change it is even more so.

When to Quit

One of the hardest things to do as a trainer (and we are ALL trainers when we are driving our horse!) is to know when to quit. Generally, we always go too long. If it's going badly, we want to "win" and keep at it, even though it rarely gets better as both horse and human get more tired and frustrated. And if it's going well, we can't resist "just one more" to see if we can get it even better – but the fatigue factor is important to remember there too!

My recommendation is to always quit a little sooner than you think you should. The consequences of quitting "too soon" are ... well, I'm not really sure there are any! But the consequences of going too long can be many and varied.

When in doubt, quit, even if it's going badly. You can always do a favourite skill to finish on, and come back fresh next time, hopefully with a new approach to whatever you were struggling with.

Don't Forget to Walk

The one thing that I believe should be universal in every training session is to begin and end with walking. Warming up and cooling down at a free walk has physical and mental benefits that are just not worth missing out on. And a walk break can be a reward, or a time out, depending on the situation, and a reset button for both horse and driver.

Walk on.