

A Simple Method of Conditioning the Endurance Horse

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Francois & Laura Seegers training on the beach at Eco-horse Safaris

We are frequently asked by people who are interested in taking up endurance, or who have bought a horse from us, how they should prepare their horses for an endurance ride. There are many different ways to condition horses. The good methods have this in common: a slow beginning, a steady build up of distances ridden, and later, gradual increase in training speed. Too fast, too soon, too often, leads inevitably to injury.

We used this simple program ourselves for many years before we began riding our horses without shoes. It's a straightforward system that we learned more than 20 years back from another experienced endurance rider at a day seminar when we began doing endurance. The principles are much older than modern endurance sport, and don't change with fashion as they are based on the physiology of the horse. We have taught this method to many riders with good results. It is a method of slowly preparing the novice horse for his first endurance ride, but also for giving the advanced endurance horse a good start after a period off work. There are many more sophisticated training techniques that we won't discuss in this article. Once a horse has completed this initial program, other techniques can be applied. This simple foundation will only help the other training techniques give better results.

You don't need to use this program. Endurance has plenty of experts and each one has their own method of getting horses fit. But if you don't know where to start, you can use this program with confidence, it has been proven. It can prepare a healthy novice horse to complete 80km slowly. (Don't have any illusions of winning, for that you need a whole lot more time and work, and besides you have a 16 km/h speed limit on novices). It

builds a good foundation of fitness, that can be developed from there. Also by using it, albeit in shortened form, on the same horse at the beginning of each season, the horse will only get stronger and tougher.

WARNING: The method is easy to understand, but not easy to apply, especially **Phase one**. I am referring to impatience. Few people will find the Walking Phase easy, but it is a good lesson in self-control and therefore worth more than gold to the endurance rider. Remember, the method only works if it is correctly applied. Do not skip Phase one.

EXPLANATION OF TERMS

1. **Conditioning:** Working the horse to become strong enough to complete endurance rides without damage.
2. **Hard work/ workout:** This involves hard work where you ask the horse to put in a greater effort than he is accustomed to. Typically, 20 minutes after the workout the horse's pulse will be higher than you are used to. That means you have stressed it.
3. **Recovery day:** On these days you allow the horse to recover from the stress. Exercises you can do are twenty minute lunge sessions (ring work) at a steady trot, schooling, a gentle hack or outride, etc.
4. **Rest day:** Typically a Sunday. No work at all.
5. **Exercise:** The level of work that does not stress the horse. It just maintains the fitness.

TIME SCALES



The beginning of a Long Slow Distance ride

The time it takes for various body tissues to adapt and condition, are as follows:

1. Heart and lungs 3 months

2. Muscles 3-6 months
3. Tendons and ligaments 6-12 months
4. Hooves 7 months
5. Bone 1-3 years

NB! A horse can be got fit enough to go fast in a relatively short period, but will not be conditioned to withstand injury. Only after 3 seasons of endurance (provided he had no serious tendon/ligament injuries) will he be thoroughly conditioned to be ridden hard and competitively.

“IF THERE ARE SHORTCUTS, NO ONE HAS DISCOVERED THEM YET”

PROGRAM

Begin with LSD (Long Slow Distance)

The goal is to build a broad foundation of stamina by riding long distances slowly. The different phases define the type of workouts that will be used. We recommend that through all the phases you lunge the horse at trot one day a week and school one day a week. Workouts are done on outrides.

BAREFOOT HORSES

We used this program for many years before we switched to barefoot riding. It is suitable for shod horses. **If you plan to keep your horse barefoot, you need to extend the period of the Phases to give the hooves more time to adapt.** The hooves can be worn quite short and need time to grow. By increasing the distances ridden slowly over a longer time, the hoof gets more chance to adjust and recover.

PHASE 1 (WALKING) lasts 6 weeks (Barefoot horses 3 months)

Goal: To prepare the horse physically and psychologically for more intensive exercise. To start the conditioning of the legs and tendons. To build muscle. To make the horse calm and obedient. To accustom the horse to the open road. To teach the rider discipline!



Lunging PSV Jedi

4 or 5 workouts per week. Build up to 2-3 hours of active walk per session. The horse must walk with purpose and not lag. The horse must learn to walk properly and not jog. He must learn to walk on a loose rein with his head down and neck extended so that his back can swing freely to develop the back muscles. Use varied terrain – rough, stony veld, ridges or mountains, sand, even tar road for limited distances. During the work sessions only walk – the horse can trot in the lunge ring, and trot and canter during schooling. But during the work sessions the horse may only walk, even up hills, just walk.

By walking uphill the horse builds strong muscle. After a few weeks you will see what I mean. (Tip: At the start of Phase 1, take a photo of the horse's quarters from behind, pull the tail out of the way so you can see the inner thigh muscles too. After 6 weeks take another picture. Compare the muscling.)

In between, one day lunging, one day school.

Rest day optional. Because walking is low intensity work, a rest day is not essential, but it will certainly do no harm to have a day off.

If you don't have enough time to ride that often, you can aim at riding a total of 48 hours of walking. The 48 hours is derived from 4 workouts x 2 hours x 6 weeks. In practise it will lengthen the period of the Walking Phase, but you will have the peace of mind that the horse has walked the requisite kilometres and time.

In the last 2 weeks of Phase 1 you can begin trotting short distances during the walking sessions in preparation for Phase 2.

PHASE 2 (Trotting) lasts 4 to 6 weeks. (Barefoot horses 3 months)

Goal: to develop the horse's stamina so that it can trot long distances rhythmically and at a constant pace. To develop the trotting muscles and

teach the horse an energy-saving trot. To teach the horse not to just canter, but to stay in trot until asked to canter. To make the rider's legs strong enough to ride long distances at the trot. To teach the rider self control. To prepare the horse physically for more intensive exercise.



Trotting: Abbi Tennant & PSV Liberty, Ashley Gower & PSV Mercury

3 or 4 workouts per week. Start out at the walk until the horse is thoroughly warmed up (15-20 minutes). Begin trotting slowly and alternate with periods of walking if the horse becomes tired or out of breath. Build up gradually until the horse can trot actively for 2 hours without a break. The younger or less experienced the horse is, the more gradual should be the increase in pace during the phase. The horse must learn to trot relaxed with head low, neck extended and back rounded. Only this way can he develop long powerful strides.

The powerful, ground-eating hundred miler trot takes years to perfect. Don't push the horse into a faster trot. It will too easily throw him off balance and onto the forehand. A horse like that will hang on the reins, is hard to stop and turn and puts strain on his forelegs. (Does that sound familiar?) Rather keep him back a little and let him find his correct balance. As the horse becomes fitter, he will start pushing himself. Keep him in a rhythmic trot. (Count in your head: a thousand and one, a thousand and two, a thousand and three, ... to find the rhythm.) Don't let the horse fall into a canter. Horses that are allowed to canter when they want, will not develop their trotting muscles. The horse can canter in the school. Use different routes. Hills will be more intensive work than flat ground so give him a rest after that.

If time is limited, some of the trotting workouts can be replaced by a workout on the lunge. Up to 40 minutes maximum (5 minutes of warm up at the walk not included) of trotting in the ring at a rhythmic pace. 40 minutes lunging will replace 2 hours of trotting on the road. Ring work is harder work

than the road because the horse has to keep his body bent laterally and that takes more energy. You can't replace all roadwork with lunging because the horse has to be used to the rider's weight and learn to balance himself at the trot.

In between, 2 recovery days: 1 day lunging, 1 day school.

A rest day is essential. At least one rest day per week. If the horse does not feel right, or begins his workout with low energy, give him a few days off. He might be sick or overtrained (not adjusted to the work he is doing).

NB: Horses differ greatly in their work ability. If the work load is too heavy for your horse, you can put in fewer workouts per week. Give those horses a longer time to condition before you go to an endurance ride.

PHASE 3 (Canter) lasts 2 weeks or longer (Barefoot horses 4 weeks or longer)



Cantering: Francois Seegers & PSV Platinum

Goal: To make the horse's heart and lungs fit. To teach the horse to canter rhythmically and at a constant speed. To enjoy life.

2 sessions per week (or 5 sessions in 14 days). Warm up first. Start trotting and canter short distances. Alternate the canter with trotting to clear lactic acid from the muscles. Build up gradually until the horse can canter for a total of 1 hour per session interspersed with trot for a total of 2 hours. Longer rides can be attempted too. Teach the horse to ride at a controlled canter with other horses. Teach him to canter relaxed on a long rein at a constant speed (not easy with a hot horse). In the first season do not sprint the horse at full speed.

In between, 2 to 4 recovery days: 1 day lunging, 1 day school.

Rest days are absolutely essential. One to three rest days per week. If the horse does not feel right or starts his workout without energy, give him a few extra days off.

PHASE 4 (Building reserves/Tapering) lasts 1 week.



Building Reserves

One week before the endurance ride, let the horse recover with light work only. Remember to reduce his energy concentrates accordingly.

In short: It should take you 3 to 4 months (7 months for a barefoot horse) to prepare for your first slow 80 km. You can enter for a 30 or 60 km before you attempt the first 80 km to get more experience or to make the horse used to long distances more gradually. With a novice horse you can take a leisurely 5 to 6 hours to complete the 80 km, depending on the terrain. For the novice rider it is a great achievement to complete 80 km. For the experienced rider on a novice horse it is a brick in the foundation of the horse's career. Only in a horse's third season of endurance can one really see what the horse is capable of, in terms of speed over distance.

PRINCIPLES

1. Build the horse up **gradually** to maximum work.
2. A **stressful** session must be followed by a day of **recovery**.
3. As you **train faster and harder**, you need to put in **more recovery days**. While you are just walking, no days for recovery are necessary, but you need to lunge and school to develop the horse properly.
4. Remember the **principle of improvement** is based on stress and recovery to a higher plane of fitness. If no recovery is allowed, you will break down what you have built up by causing injuries to the weakest parts.
5. **No more than 2** of the hardest workouts per week.

6. **1 complete rest day** per week.
7. **Don't do hard workouts on consecutive days.** (That is only for advanced horses, not novices)
8. **Lunge one day a week** (ring work) Slow rhythmic trot for +/- 20 minutes. Done right, it will improve obedience, suppleness and power. We seldom canter young horses in the ring because of the risk of injuries like overreach or slipping or ligament injuries.
9. **One day a week school your horse** to make him supple and obedient.

Keep Records

Keep track of your horse's exercise. Monitor the fitness and improvement of the horse over time. You must be able to take your horse's pulse. Use your hand just behind the horse's left elbow, or a stethoscope or a heart rate monitor. Before the workout take your horse's resting pulse. Most horses will be between 28 and 48 beats per minute at rest. Know your horse's typical resting pulse, eg 40. As the horse becomes fitter, the resting pulse will drop, eg to 38 or 36. Unusually high resting pulses like 66 indicate excitement or fear, or they can be signs of pain or fever as with colic or biliary fever.

After exercise take the pulse again, eg, 5 or 10 minutes after stopping exercise, to see how quickly the pulse drops. The fitter the horse, the quicker it drops. You can also measure it 20 minutes to get an idea what it would be at maximum time you have at the vet check. Speed of exercise, degree of fatigue, and weather conditions will influence recovery pulses.

It's best to fill in a book after every workout or exercise with a description of the time and type of work, pulse measurements before and after exercise and any remarks. It can give you a very good record of your horse's progress. Below is an example.

We hope this information was useful. May all go well with your conditioning. See you out on the road!

Francois & Laura Seegers, [Perseverance](#), October 2012