

HORSE CARE, HORSE TRAINING, HOW TO

Horse Training Exercises for Outside the Ring

JESSICA MORTON - AUGUST 11, 2021

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Incorporating outdoor horse training exercises into your schooling regime is a healthy and creative way to get your horse fit.

Being outside gives you the flexibility of choosing hills, roads or forest trails for a more relaxed or strenuous workout. Moreover, exploring can also be a motivation to ride more regularly and bond with your horse.

Like any training, it's important to start slowly and gradually work up to more intensive riding.

Here's a selection of 6 horse training exercises to help strengthen and condition your horse and lower his risk of getting injured as your training progresses:

Suppling exercises

One of the best horse training exercises to create suppleness in your horse is lateral work. Don't be fooled by how deceptively simple lateral work can be. It is so useful it should be incorporated into every schooling session – including your hacks outside.

Spirals

Spiraling in and out of a 20-meter circle is a fantastic suppling exercise, challenging different muscle groups and working your horse's coordination and timing too.

Of course, you do need a bit more space for this one. If you have access to a large flat field, spirals are an inventive way to engage your horse's hindquarters and improve both his balance and suppleness with the increased demands of a smaller circle. Always remember balance, timing, and rhythm are essential when addressing the size, shape, and uniformity of each round you make.

How Do I Do This?

- Before you start, place a marker where the center of your circle is.
- Begin in a lively walk on the outside of the spiral - a big circle, 20 meters or larger
- After a few practice rounds of the circle to ensure you are working at a steady and rhythmic pace. Begin to decrease the circle down to as small as possible without losing momentum or balance.
- With each stride, ask him to move over a little more until your circle gets smaller until you are on a circle of about 10 meters.
- While you are moving to the larger circle, be sure to keep your horse evenly bent from poll to tail slightly facing the inside of the circle.
- After two rounds, begin to guide your horse one step at a time out to the larger circle you started on. When expanding the spiral encourage the horse to move sideways by pushing him with your inside leg at the girth.
- Repeat the exercise twice in each direction and later do the same at trot.

Leg Yield Steps

Leg yields were first devised as horse training exercises to help horses learn how to bend their bodies. It is best performed slowly and methodically in the walk before moving on to trot and canter exercises. Practicing a few steps of leg yield on a relaxing hack is a great way to strengthen the horse's hind leg, develop straightness and increase stability in the hindquarters.

During this exercise, the horse needs to bend in the midsection, working inside and outside muscles. Performing a few steps of leg yields in each direction is a fantastic way to stretch your horse out. This also gives an opportunity to evaluate how strong and supple he feels on each side.

How to do it:

- While riding along the left side of your path, choose a point on the trail to ask your horse five steps of leg yield.
- When you arrive at that point, apply your left leg to ask the horse to yield to the side while the outside (right) leg keeps the horse moving forward. Your left rein asks for subtle flexion in the opposite direction of his movement while the right rein helps keep straightness and cadence.
- You should be seated ever so slightly with your weight on the inside hip but your shoulders should match the horses.
- Travel five steps of leg yield then move straight along the right side of the lane.
- Ride five steps in straight motion.
- Then apply the opposite aids to change diagonal for yield and flexion and travel five steps laterally until you reach the left side of the lane again.
- Give him praise and carry on.

Strength Exercises

Exercises for developing muscular strength outside the arena include hill work (like weightlifting for horses) and transitions on hilly terrain.

Hill Transitions

Working a horse on hilly terrain encourages him to use his back in a way that helps loosen his dorsal and croup muscles and engage the hip and back.

Practicing transitions is useful for impulsion, collection, and acceptance of the aids. To make downward transitions even more interesting and challenging, try doing them downhill.

Your horse will need to transfer his weight to his hindquarters, tucking his haunches under his body, strengthening his backend.

How Do I Do This?

- Whilst warming up in the open, practice some half halts and transitions from your seat to get him focused and balanced.
- Choose your hill and gradient level. The footing must be somewhat smooth and stable.
- When you are at the top of the hill, roughly divide it into thirds.
- As you ride down the hill, ask your horse for a downward transition at each point.
- During each transition, the horse must slow down his pace and brace himself. A well-performed transition will be smooth with no tripping or head tossing.

Uphill Back-Up

There are exercises that place more demand on a horse's overall strength and power; one of these is the rein-back. Rein-back is a versatile movement that you can practice in all sorts of situations out on a ride. It's a useful for opening and closing gates and repositioning your horse in emergencies too.

The rein-back is a great exercise to strengthen the horse's entire musculature and is even more effective when performed hillside. Backing up on a hill will increase strength in your horse's hindquarters and stretch and lengthen his muscles and help him learn to perform downwards transitions without tightening his back.

How Do I Do This?

- Find a gentle hill with solid footing. Begin with your horse's hind end facing the start of the hill.
- Move your legs slightly behind the girth and lighten your seat.
- Now squeeze your legs firmly while keeping your contact fixed but elastic.
- Your horse should move backwards with clear diagonal pairs (the right fore and left rear should move backward at the same time).
- As the horse begins to step back, release all pressure from your hands and legs and let the horse relax.
- Try again for a few more steps, this time slightly more active. Be careful not to ask for backward strides that are too long or to overdo this exercise. Keep the movement rhythmic and balanced. You want to avoid a hollow back or draggy back legs.

Cardio Exercises

When bringing a horse back into work, one of the most invaluable weapons in your arsenal is cardio work. Horses respond quickly to cardio training and working out in the open country is far more interesting and challenging than repetitive arena work.

Interval Bursts

Interval training is a physically intense workout over a relatively short period that can be done anywhere. Quick bursts of energy improve your horse's acceleration and boost his fitness and stamina.

The aim of this exercise is to develop your horse's overall muscle power and lung capacity by mixing up shorter and longer sprint distances each time. This exercise can be performed at walk, trot or canter, depending on the fitness of your horse.

How Do I Do This?

In a large flat field, set up several markers (you can use sticks or large stones for this) in the shape of a big oval.

Use your horse's stride length to set the distances, going from just two or three strides to as many as ten. The exact distances between the markers aren't as important as having them vary between each one.

- At the start of the oval pick up the reins and initiate a nice working gait (e.g., trot)
- As you approach the first marker, increase the trot all the way up to the second marker.
- Immediately after you pass the second marker, half-halt to slow down to your original working trot.
- After passing the third marker, push forward into an extended trot to the fourth marker and then half-halt to return to the slower working trot at the fifth one.
- Continue like this for five minutes
- Take a five-minute walk break on a loose rein before repeating the pattern for another five minutes.
- Do this three times in each direction.

Get Your Gallop Going

Galloping, when done correctly, is a great way to get a horse fit, and it will also help develop elastic muscles and healthy ligaments.

Routine galloping sessions on open land where the horse can really move out should be done on different leads each time and ridden with a light seat. This position allows you to absorb the horse's movement in your ankles and knees, so his back is unrestricted. Stirrups should be shortened at least one hole for extended galloping sessions.

How Do I Do This?

- Find a safe galloping area that is free of hazards such as rocks and sinkholes or bad footing.
- Many riders, especially those that usually ride in the ring, worry about galloping their horses for fear of losing control. If you are not accustomed to riding your horse outside the arena, begin by training your horse to listen to your aids at the trot and canter. Once you have relaxation at the other gaits, you are ready to gallop.
- Start your gallop slowly. Some horses get giddy on speed, and an overly fast start to your training session can offset the previous work you've done to get your horse attentive and listening to your aids.
- After you have started the gallop, it is important to ride uninterrupted and settled for around 3 minutes to obtain maximum benefits from this exercise. Short bursts of gallop mixed in with trot and canter will only serve to agitate the horse and nullify the benefits of this exercise.
- When you finish your gallop, walk your horse for at least ten minutes to help his muscles remove any lactic acid that has built up and return his heart and respiration rate to normal.

Consistency Is Key

While working on horse training exercises outside the arena is a great way to keep him motivated and the work interesting, the single biggest factor to keep in mind when training your horse in the ring, or out on a trail, is consistency. And the best way to achieve consistency is to set modest goals that you know you can achieve before tackling trickier exercises.

As you add new horse training exercises to your horse's repertoire, be sure to keep things fun and be generous with praise. At times difficulties may arise, but if you do fail, learn from it. Study it. Reflect on it and try again another day.

Don't forget to check out our blog **Mental Tricks to Help You Conquer Your Fear of Riding** if you are experiencing hesitation about riding outside of the ring.

WRITTEN BY JESSICA MORTON, ON AUGUST 11, 2021

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