

# Exercising Your Horse During Winter

By **Darla Rathwell**



Short daylight hours and icy cold temperatures can cause many riding challenges. A basic understanding of how to keep your horse healthy and safe in cold weather will keep you in the saddle all winter and give you a head start on conditioning your horse for the heavier riding season once spring rolls around.

## BEFORE YOU RIDE

Use common sense. If it feels painful to take a deep breath of wintery air into your lungs, it's most likely too cold for your horse to be galloping around sucking in ice crystals. Dustin Grams of Grams Horse Training says, "I cut my lessons and training off when my thermometer in my indoor arena reads -20°C (-4F). Any colder is too hard on horses' lungs."

Keep in mind this is indoors where there is no wind chill. So if you are planning to ride outdoors, check your local weather forecast and take wind chill into account.

Before tacking up, check your horse's feet for ice balls and packed snow. If you're not able to chip it off, groom your horse while you wait for the snow and ice to thaw. Grooming is a splendid time to check over your horse. Grooming is also a vital part of your routine for it will help rev up your horse's circulation and unclog any blocked pores allowing him to sweat.

## ALLOWING FOR A PROPER WARM UP

"It is important to give your horse a lot of time to become warm in the winter and to gradually bring their body temperature up," explains Tara Gamble, BSc (Ag), AQHA Professional Horseman and Certified Horsemanship Association president. Typically, horses feel very tight when it is cold so Gamble warms up her horses by allowing them a lot of time to walk and gently stretch laterally. "I always walk in both directions and bend the horse both ways to encourage equal muscle development. A warm up should be progressive with lots of time spent feeling how your horse is responding — straight lines and gentle bends initially are better handled by the horse," she adds. "The time frame I spend in the winter walking to warm up is 10 to 15 minutes."

Grams agrees and adds that once horses have enough time to get their circulation going to the large muscle groups and lower extremities, then they should soften up. Once your horse feels relaxed under saddle, then it should be okay to move to the jog or trot.

## HOW HARD SHOULD YOU WORK YOUR HORSE?

How hard you should work your horse during an exercise session in winter will depend on his current condition and whether he is a pleasure or performance horse. "If you are planning on strenuous workouts (ie: to a sweat), then it is advisable to have an indoor facility and ensure the time necessary to cool your horse down," says Gamble. "If your horse is not conditioned to strenuous exercise, the extreme cold is not

necessarily the best place to start. However, consistency in workouts will help your horse maintain his fitness level and contribute to his overall physical well being."

Gamble uses this rule of thumb in her own program at JT Ranch. Read your horse: if he is in distress it is too much. There are plenty of simple, less strenuous exercises you can do in the cold such as walking/jogging straight lines off the rail, bending and counter flexing your horse, circles, figure eights, stopping and backing up or even just spending time standing still. This will allow for time on your horse and help promote an all around well trained horse.

## COOL DOWN

At the end of a riding session allow at least an extra 15 minutes to walk your horse out and start the cool down process. For optimal cool out and drying, riding during daylight hours is best. But, since this isn't always possible, you must make sure your horse is completely dry. It's a good idea to put a cooler on your horse whether he is blanketed full time or not to help cut down on drying time. An excellent choice would be one made of polar fleece, which absorbs moisture and washes well. "By using a few different coolers you can really cut down on your drying time. I use the first to absorb the majority of the wetness, a second and even a third if necessary to make sure the horse is good and dry," says Grams. Ensure they are completely dry by feeling between his front legs in the chest area and behind the elbows, adds Gram. "Places like the flank and abdomen also need to be dry." Once your horse is dry, remove the damp cooler and brush him out. This fluffs his under coat, which is a natural protector from the cold. Once dry and you have decided to blanket your horse, use a dry blanket!

## TURNOUT AFTER EXERCISE

Should you blanket your horse? Horses that are not ridden during the winter don't usually need a blanket because they will grow a fluffy undercoat or loft, which helps keep a pocket of air next to the skin that heats up. The loft combines with longer guard hairs to keep the horse warm and dry.

"Blanketing has advantages for horses that are shown and/or clipped, hard keepers, older or naturally short haired such as some Arabians and Thoroughbreds," says Grams. Also, a blanket may be needed if your horse does not have access to a shelter. But remember, if you start blanketing you have to keep a blanket on all winter. Make sure the blanket is well fitted to avoid excess rubbing and check straps and belly bands to keep your horse safe. A weatherproof blanket is important because a wet blanket will cause your horse's hair to become flat, eliminating the loft part of the hair and causing your horse to become cold more quickly.

## MEASURING FOR A BLANKET

Measuring for a blanket only takes a few minutes, but will save you from buying the wrong size and having to do an exchange. To make measuring your horse easier, ask a friend to give you a hand. Have your friend hold the measuring tape in the center of your horse's chest. You will measure across the widest place on your horse's shoulder and all the way to the center of his tail. Blankets come in even-numbered sizes, so if your measurement is odd it's best to go up a size. 

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