

Trainer's Tip: Make Time for Spring Training

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The signs of spring are everywhere, which means it's high time to start working with your horse before you begin riding. Any work is better than no work, and it will help your horse get in shape physically and mentally.

The winter season in Ohio—with its slick, frozen ground, snow and cold temperatures—can limit or even bring to a halt the interaction we are able to have with our horses. As spring approaches and we start gearing up to hit the trails or the horse show circuit, remember that horses have had just as much time off as you. They are not machines, and just as you and I could not run a 5K or climb a mountain without proper preparation, horses need to get back in shape, too.

Exercise and interaction will also help horses refocus their minds. When we take our horses out into the world, we want them to trust us and look to us as their leaders. If they have taken the last four months off, chances are they are more connected to their pasture buddies than their human ones.

Keep in mind that if a horse is physically out of shape and uncomfortable, the problem will inevitably surface in the form of a "behavior issue." For example, a horse may be "cold backed," where she bucks or hops around when first saddled or ridden after being laid off for a while. This is almost always the result of stiff, unused muscles in the back, shoulders and abdomen. Or when a horse trips excessively going up or down hills, folks may tell me their horse is "lazy" or "not paying attention." The horse may have those problems, but more often than not I find the horse does not have the strength in his hindquarters to properly lift his front feet due to lack of use.

Give your horse the benefit of the doubt with issues like these, and try to alleviate them by lunging, exercising or riding your horse for weeks or even months before you ask anything substantial of him.