

Enlightened Fitness For You and Your Horse! By Paul Dufresne



Hurrican strong walk



Hip, knee, ankle twist



Hip and back twist



Bend knee and straighten with arm swings

People are generally aware that our own fitness is as important as that of the horse, but finding the time can be a challenge.

We need to exercise to ride better but we have limited time to spend with our horses. So why not mix horse time with exercise and have fun with it?

Begin by moving around the arena, inviting your horse to join you in a relaxed, slow walk (good motivational music comes in handy). Ask your horse to move beside you so you can see the horse in your peripheral vision. The objective is to focus primarily on yourself and just allow the horse to walk with you, but if your horse forges, correct and reposition it. Add a few prepared stops, possibly backing up a step and moving forward again several times until the horse is staying with you. As the connection develops you can start to play with the walk.

First walk as slowly as you can with long strides, looking ahead and then walk as slowly as you can with very short steps, always staying in rhythmic movement. Move into a stronger walk with a big stride and encourage your horse to stay with you at a walk - focus on the quality of your walk and not on the horse.

Make sure you're breathing deeply and that your stride is long and relaxed - make sure you utilize your knees, hips and ankles. How soft can you walk? How slow can you walk? How strong can you walk in the most effortless manner? Play with this while adding an occasional halt, backing up for a few steps or even rocking one step back and then forward again. Make a point of stopping frequently to take inventory of how you feel. Are you breathing? Are you relaxed? Are your shoulders loose or tight? How does your lower back feel? Unwanted tension not only wears you down, but it also comes across as nervous, uncomfortable energy to the horse. To loosen up, you can walk while driving one shoulder forward then the other, then shrug the shoulders up and down, forward and back. Once you have experimented with the walk and have yourself more relaxed, you can move into a soft jog.

Invite your horse into the softest jog possible by jogging softly yourself. Focus on light, rhythmical breathing, moving as effortlessly as possible and keeping arms and shoulders relaxed. Listen to your footfalls and the horse's. How soft are they? If you stop and then resume the jog, does the horse join you lightly? Focus on your relaxation and fluidity and the horse eventually joins you in similar

movement. After 10-15 minutes of this you will have the blood flowing and your muscles warmed up. Now you can loosen your joints, ligaments and muscles further.

At this point, position your horse behind you so it can observe you and join in if it feels like it. First allow your head to rest to one side then the other, and forward and back several times until your neck relaxes. Then stand with your feet together and bend your ankles, knees, and hips. Slowly swing your hips in a large circle in both directions (loosens and lubricates the joints). Next, stand with your feet slightly wider than your shoulders, knees bent. Put a hand on each knee with your back straight, and twist your upper body one way and then the other. With hands still on your knees, hollow your back and then round it like a cat. Straighten your legs and bend them again with your arms free, and do trunk twists while pushing one arm back and one forward, alternately. In this same stance, step onto one leg while touching the other leg to the opposite arm and alternate. You can also do this while stepping forward and backwards. Keep your arms low to start but, as you warm up, try to bring them higher. Be aware of how it feels. If it feels tight, don't push it. Maximize the range of movement, but it should never be uncomfortable or painful.

To develop more strength in your stride you can step forward in a bent knee lunge, stepping up and down on the same leg a couple of times, then repeat with the other leg. Don't do too many at first. This exercise can easily be overdone if you are not in sufficient condition. After a few repetitions, step forward with one leg bent and rest your chest on your knee. From this position, lift the toe of the front leg and stretch the soleus of the calf. Keeping your chest on your leg, straighten your front leg as much as you can to stretch the hamstring muscles. Straighten the back leg in that position by pressing the heel down and you can stretch the more powerful gastrocnemius muscle (larger muscle of the calf).

For the last exercise, step back against a wall. Place your feet about shoulder width apart and bend your knees into a moderate squat. Press your lower back as flat against the wall as you can and hold for a few seconds. This should relieve tension in your lower back but also exercise some of your core muscles. You could then resume the walk/

Enlightened Fitness, cont'd



Bent knee lunge



Bent knee to extension
hamstring and calf-lift toe stretch



Ljibbe/Paul soft jog



Wall flatten lower back using
core and repeat

jog transitions and see how effortlessly you can move and whether your horse is mirroring you.

Next month we will progress with these exercises and cover more of the muscles of the legs, core, shoulders and back. We will further see to what extent the horse will join us. I will explain more how this affects the connection with your horse and how you can apply this to riding. Most people don't realize how unnecessary tension affects the horse. Horses were born to be sensitive to energy so we have to make sure that if we have muscle tension it is positive and has the meaning we want it too.

Paul Dufresne is a writer, performer, trainer and clinician in Kelowna, BC, who educates in Natural Horsemanship; Classical Arts; Liberty and Circensic Dressage. He teaches people to understand horses, but more importantly how to tap into their relaxation reflexes in ways seldom seen in North America. In doing so, he is able to guide people in creative experiences where the human learns to be an effective, safe leader. The horse learns to be more emotionally secure and will respectfully follow while developing athleticism in a mutually courageous manner by having a deeper understanding of how they affect each other.