

## *Enlightened Fitness For You and Your Horse!*

*by Paul Dufresne*

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.



*Walk as slowly as you can with long steps*

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.



*After walking, move into a jog*



*Trunk twists, pushing one arm back and one forward*

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.



*Bent knee lunge*

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 over done 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.

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 foot falls 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 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)



*Bend ankles, knees and hips, then swing hips*

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.



*Lift the toe of the front leg & 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/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.

# Enlightened Fitness for You and Your Horse – Part 2

By Paul Dufresne



Pushup with Ljibbe on box.

Lat stretch using rope at fence

Pec stretch

Squat using rope at fence to facilitate posture

Leaning back on lats, seated rowing exercise

Last month's article described how you can exercise to ride better by mixing horse time with exercise and have fun with it!

We started by moving around the arena, inviting your horse to join you and to move beside you so you can see the horse in your peripheral vision. The objective was to focus primarily on yourself and just allow the horse to walk with you, with minimum corrections to reposition it. As the connection developed you would focus on the variations of your walk and jog, focusing on relaxation and fluidity in your movement... and "b-r-e-a-t-h-i-n-g" without tension. After a good warmup and stretch of the major muscle groups of the legs, arms, shoulders and torso we can progress to the next part of the workout.

With a good fence to hang onto, put a towel around a post or solid rail and hold each end of the towel with your hands. Then with your knees bent, allow yourself to fall back away from the fence in a rowing action with your own weight and then draw yourself back towards the fence. If this is too much resistance you can do this on your knees or even do it with surgical tubing. This will help develop the large muscles of the back – the lats, biceps, posterior deltoids, as well as forearms and wrists. For the opposing muscles you can stand up, leaning against the rail with your feet a couple of feet away from it or a more upright push-up position. You should be able to do over 10 repetitions so you are developing endurance primarily and then strength. Initially more repetitions with less resistance is not only safer to avoid over straining, but will burn more calories. After these two exercises you should do a lat stretch by standing in a wider-than-shoulder stance and reaching over with your arm to the other side. From this position you can also press your elbows back to stretch the pectoral and anterior shoulder region as well as a triceps stretch.

For the major muscle groups of the legs you can do a high knee swinging the leg to the outside and forward carefully going to a side lunge. Go down into a lunge, press up, then step up together and repeat to the opposite side. This will exercise the large muscles of your legs include the glutes (butt) and groin. Care should be taken not to take too big a stride and not bend too deeply – never go past a 90 degree at the knee. Step up

and repeat to the other side. Again you are looking for over 10 repetitions on each leg but should be happy with less if you are not in shape. More reps can be done as you get more fit. After this you could do a groin stretch, hamstring stretch, quad stretch and calf stretch.

Another great major leg exercise is the squat; you should only go as far as you are comfortable, with a stance just slightly wider than your shoulders and with your knees never bent past 90 degrees. You should keep your back flat and upright. You are still looking to do over 10 reps unless this is too hard for you. If necessary, start with less and build it up over a couple weeks or more and do not go as deep in the squat. Later (after a few weeks of regular training three times a week) you can jump up from that position to develop a bit of power, which the horses like to do and is useful in jumping in two-point. Stretching the muscles of the legs in the lateral lunges once again is a good idea after the exercise.

Lastly we could do some balance and core exercises. Most equine facilities have a plastic barrel, box type pedestal, or if you have a big exercise ball you can practice sitting on your ischeals (two bony butt bones you find if you sat on the very edge of a chair). Practice balancing with your legs just slightly up or even practice doing leg crunches one side at a time. If you are quite strong you can do both legs together with opposite arms. This exercise should only be done if you can balance with the back flat. If you have trouble keeping your back flat, go back to the exercise of contracting your abdominals with your back flat against a wall or fence, as previously discussed – relaxing and repeating until your core becomes stronger.

These are suggestions for exercises that would improve your fitness in terms of flexibility and muscular strength. You can do fewer repetitions in one set of exercises if you are finding it is quite difficult. Later you can do more sets of each exercise, building it up progressively over a few weeks. Even your cardio can be improved in the walking and jogging, with a minimum of 15 minutes in your heart rate target zone. Heck you could even mix the large muscle endurance exercises and the walk/jog section and turn most of the exercises into cardio/endurance mix or add some cavaletti which would probably keep your

## Enlightened Fitness, cont'd



Knee raise,  
turning out to  
side lunge



Balance on Ljibbe  
twisting crunch



Balance on barrel, single  
leg tuck crunch



Running light like  
Passage with Ljibbe



Doing leg knee  
raises and strides  
with Hurrigan



Doing squat jumps with  
Hurrigan

horse more enthused and you more fit. Again, if you want to influence your horse, make sure you focus on how effortless you can move while staying relaxed and not pounding your body. Many more exercises can be done, but people have a lack of time, so if you can focus on a minimum that develops the major muscle groups as well as riding fitness, you might be more inclined to give it whirl – especially if you are entertained by your horse interacting and improving with you – and they will! When we are relaxed, the horse knows. When we focus energy, the horse also recognizes this. When we move with the least amount of tension possible, the horse joins us, as there is room for them with little expectation. Sometimes you get more when you ask less. Let me know how it plays out.

*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.*