



Field hunters need a fitness plan that's tailored to their age, experience and individual metabolisms. These two had the summer off, grazing on pasture and just being horses.

Legging Up Your Hunter

Experts weigh in on how best to condition your horse.

BY MARC C. PATOILE | PHOTOGRAPH REBECCA PATOILE

The foxhunting season proper is soon upon us and if you have not started legging up your hunt horses for the season, now is the time. Many foxhunters continue to use their hunt horses throughout the summer months for showing, eventing, polo, trail riding or pleasure riding, thereby eliminating or reducing the need for a lot of legging up. But many others give their field hunters some well-deserved time off at the end of the season and conditioning for when

hunting starts becomes an annual ritual.

We have been fortunate to enjoy field hunters who lead double lives, also excelling as polo ponies or show jumpers in the summer. We have also been fortunate to have field hunters who simply enjoyed three or more months off in a pasture, not having been ridden at all in the off-season. There is no right answer to the “to turn out or not to turn out” question. Some horses seem to do better being in work all season, while others seem to benefit from the time

off and develop a bad attitude if they don't have some time just to be horses.

Even if your field hunters remain in work, you may experience the need to bring them into better shape for the season or you may have the need to recondition after a layup from injury of horse or rider.

Different breeds of horses, different speeds of hunting (whether that is a result of the speed of hounds in different countries or your chosen flight within a given hunt, or both) and different terrains for

hunting may require different conditioning, so no one program may address every need or circumstance, nor every discipline. Surely, a staff horse needs more conditioning than most hilltoppers. Then again, we have all enjoyed some hunts where the unique terrain may enable a hilltopper to see more miles than the staff at hunts with small, flat and wooded countries.

For foxhunting, all experts would agree that conditioning should come into line with actual hunting conditions as the program progresses. But where to start? There are a myriad of answers to this question.

In order to make any generalizations about a program for getting horses fit for the rigors of hunting season, we have to start with a few assumptions. We have asked these experts to base their recommendations for a conditioning program on the criteria that the horse has not been recently injured, that it is sound, that it is not a youngster, and that the person conditioning it has access to a variety of terrains. Obviously, if the horse hasn't been sound, is young, or if you have only an arena and no place to hack out, you will have to adapt your program accordingly.

Dr. G. Marvin Beeman is nationally known for his veterinary lectures on lameness and conformation issues. He is also

the past president of the Masters of Foxhounds of America and Joint Master and huntsman to the Arapahoe Hunt. As he has been riding to hounds for over 70 years, we wanted to know his take on several conditioning questions based upon the experience of hard knocks coupled with veterinary acumen.

While Dr. Beeman has used hunt horses for horse showing and polo, he is primarily a life-long huntsman who hunts and exercises his hounds six days a week. Few of us, outside of staff, will have that sort of luxury for conditioning options.

So, we wanted another crossover opinion, from Charlie Dennehy, a professional hunter/jumper trainer and grand prix rider, whose parents rode to the hunt as well as having been nominated to the Show Jumping Hall of Fame. The Dennehys

are well known in the show world and were all formerly members or junior members of the Arapahoe Hunt. Charlie admits that as a full-time professional show jumping trainer, he's ridden 99 percent of the time in arenas for the past decade or more. His father, Wilson Dennehy, was present as these issues were discussed.

Interestingly enough, we heard the same general routine recommended by all. So it seems that the old and the new schools of thought for conditioning, whether for show jumping in the arena or for foxhunting, are aligned, as least among these experts.

Dr. Beeman explains, "You'd be surprised how much more fit horses stay in large grass pastures, as opposed to those confined to stalls and small paddocks. But for either, it is best

to start slow and work them every day when conditioning, starting with 20-30 minutes of walking, adding five minutes of trotting each week until you are up to 20 minutes. Obviously you have to do some walking to cool them out. You want them to work up a sweat each time,

added to the 20 minutes of walking and 20 minutes of trotting. Interval training was tested on racehorses and was found not to be effective, so I don't concentrate on watching the clock for these intervals of walk-trot-canter, I focus on the horse. You want him to

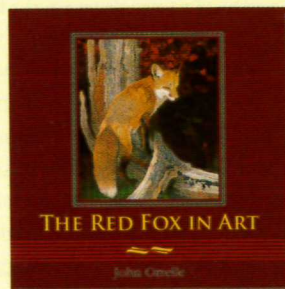
Both Dr. Beeman and the Dennehys recommended incorporating different terrain and footing into your conditioning program, especially if that is what you will be hunting.

without their respiration being labored. Then after a good four weeks of this program you can start adding five minutes of cantering to the program each week, in intervals, until you are up to 20 minutes of canter-

get a good workout, but you obviously don't want to have labored breathing, so use common sense."

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footing into your conditioning program, especially if that is what you will be hunting.

When asked about adding jumping into the conditioning program, Wilson Dennehy responded that the horses can be "jumping fit and showing fit in 60 more days, once they are properly conditioned." Following the same general conditioning guidelines outlined by Dr. Beeman, Dennehy added, "Assuming the horse has been trained for jumping and just had the summer off, you can start right back at jumping, once the horse is fit again. We like to jump every other day for eight to twelve days. Add three to four jumps each day. After 10 sessions, they should be going good again over fences, but you do not need more than 15 jumps in any session."

Once they are fit and hunting again, Dr. Beeman said,

"the key is regular exercise for at least six days per week. A little bit of walking, a lot of trotting and cantering (not over 15 mph) with occasional extended galloping."

And as for keeping them sound and fit while hunting, he recommends, "Gallop downhill and let them slow down as they go uphill; when at the top allow them to take three or four deep breaths by walking a few steps, then proceed on." Many people do the reverse, as the horse will generally want to gallop uphill, but letting him do so is bad planning for conserving your horse.

Dr. Beeman also recommends, "Slow down in deep footing." It may seem that the deep footing is softer (and it is if you have to land in it), but "Going fast through heavy going, especially on a tired horse, can cause tendon and

A Guideline for Interval Training for Foxhunters:

Here is a basic program for legging up your hunter. Vary this according to the footing and how your horse feels.

WEEK 1: 20 minutes walk, 5 minutes trot

WEEK 2: 20 minutes walk, 10 minutes trot

WEEK 3: 20 minutes walk, 15 minutes trot

WEEK 4: 20 minutes walk, 20 minutes trot

WEEK 5: 20 minutes walk, 20 minutes trot, 5 minutes canter

WEEK 6: 20 minutes walk, 20 minutes trot, 10 minutes canter

WEEK 7: 20 minutes walk, 20 minutes trot, 15 minutes canter

WEEK 8: 20 minutes walk, 20 minutes trot, 20 minutes canter

ligament injuries." Dr. Beeman said, "If your horse is getting tired, use good judgment about pressing on!" 🐾

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