

FIT FOR LIFE

Dressage competitor and former eventer Jim Koford's advice on conditioning the sport horse

BY KATHERINE WALCOTT



FIT AS FIDDLES: Fitness advocate Jim Koford (jogging the Dutch Warmblood gelding Rhett [R. Johnson x Hendo], owned by Shirley McQuillan/Touchstone Farm) was the 2009 Anne L. Barlow Ramsay Grant recipient

SHARON PACKER/SPORTSPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

You can get so much more from your horses when you get them out of the ring,” says Grand Prix-level dressage trainer and competitor Jim Koford.

Koford should know: His strong beliefs in conditioning dressage horses of all levels stem from his eventing background. Before he decided to concentrate exclusively on dressage, Koford evented at the highest level, including a ride around the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event**** in 2000.

As a result, he understands the value of conditioning in both maximizing current performance and preventing injuries.

“Every athlete, in every discipline, human or horse, they cross-train,” says Koford. Jumper riders do dressage (flatwork, as they call it). Koford’s dressage horses do modest jumping, trot sets, hills, and canter work.

For this article, we asked Koford to share his wisdom and best practices for conditioning the sport horse.

Get Out

For Koford, hacking and conditioning are not once-a-week activities for variety’s sake. His horses go for a brisk al fresco warm-up, work in the ring, and then cool down outside.

“Get them, outside of the ring, in a place where they are in a good working frame of mind, so you go in the ring and it’s not dull. It’s not drudgery. If you just go from the stall to the ring, their bodies are tight and stiff. They’re mentally thinking, ‘Ah, gotta go to work.’ It’s just a different mental state.”

And “when I say hack on a long rein, I mean seriously power-walk,” he adds. To Koford, hacking is about preparing the horse physically and mentally for the work to come. “It is a time to establish the tone for the day. It’s really getting the hind legs active. Really making sure that the horse is using its whole body when he’s moving so that his whole body is loose, not just his legs.” He wants the horse to swing through the back and hips, stepping underneath his body and using his neck. The result: a horse that is energetic and forward-thinking.

“Hotter” horses do longer, slower warm-ups to settle and clear their minds, Koford says. Lazier types do transitions within and between trot and canter to get them “in gear” and working.

Whatever your horse’s temperament, be “mindful of really getting the horse soft, through his body and with an active hind leg,” Koford advises. “So many times you’ll get your horse active and they’ll tighten up a little.”

After the training session, the cool-down helps the horse to unwind and loosen up. “Again, it’s the same thing: really making sure that the horse is using his body,” Koford says.

The warm-up phase helps the rider, too. Like many USDF members, Koford commutes to the barn—in his case, an hour’s drive. “By the time I get here, my body is locked up tight and I’m thinking about whatever,” he says. A slow, gradual warm-up “gives you a chance to find your zone, where you can bond with your horse. You put yourself in the place where you need to be. The movement of the walk underneath you loosens up your back, loosens up your body. It sets you up for a really good place for your work.”

Getting out of the ring can provide other horse-health benefits, as well. According to Koford, horse owners can be misguided in their desire to protect their mounts from injury. When horses spend their days going from cushy, bedded stalls to soft, perfectly level arena surfaces, “You’re not developing bone density or soft-tissue strength. These are necessary to hold up to more serious work. You don’t want to pound them, but walking on a firm surface is actually a beneficial stress to the horse. They actually need just a little bit of concussion so that their legs will tighten up.” Then in the future, “when you ask for more collection, the structure of the horse is going to be there for you.”

Stay Out

It should come as no surprise that Koford is an advocate of turnout.

“With all the horses, keep them moving, and [give them] as much turnout as you can. I know people say, ‘Oh, he’s a valuable competition horse; I don’t want him to get turned out.’ If you turn out for an hour a day, yes, they’re going to get cut up, and they’re more prone to being injured. My horse now is turned out for probably fifteen or sixteen hours a day. He comes in when it gets a little bit hot and the flies are out. Especially with the older horses, the more movement you can give them, the better.” ➔

She Wrote the Book on Conditioning

If you’re yearning for detailed, technical information about conditioning, then look no further than world-renowned equine-biomechanics expert and *USDF Connection* contributing editor Dr. Hilary Clayton, who has researched, written, and lectured extensively about the finer points of exercise physiology and conditioning the sport horse.

Her book *Conditioning Sport Horses* is available from Sport Horse Publications (sporthorsepublications.com). Read Dr. Clayton’s research reports as McPhail Dressage Chair in Equine Sports Medicine at Michigan State University at cvm.msu.edu/dressage.

An International Perspective

In the summer of 2009, Koford spent three months at Michael Klimke's barn in Münster, Germany. The son of the late legendary dressage master Dr. Reiner Klimke, Michael Klimke is an international dressage trainer and competitor who carries on his father's legacy of classical training—including cross-training.

At Klimke's stable, Koford learned, careful conditioning and warm-up are part of the program. "There's a racetrack there, and every horse—from the young horses to the Grand Prix horses—they go out on the track every day. Ev-er-y day," he says, enunciating each syllable for emphasis. "Some horses go out twice a day. It is absolutely mandatory. It's every bit as important as the work that you do in the ring.

"The horses are so much fitter in Germany," Koford continues. Evidently Klimke and his countrymen recognize that "Just knowing the movements for the Grand Prix isn't enough to produce a really tremendous performance in the ring."

The increased fitness not only pays off in terms of performance; it also pays in the form of savings on vet bills, Koford says. "In Germany, it's a bit like going back to the Dark Ages as far as veterinary care. They don't really do joint injections, and they don't really use any Adequan or Legend. These are horses going into CDIs [FEI-recognized dressage

competitions] at the Grand Prix level. The biggest difference is fitness. I mean to tell you, these horses really go.

"In America, it's unbelievable what people spend with their vets. In Europe they don't, many times, have the option to go out and hack because the weather is so bad so much of the year; but those horses are still going out two or three times a day, getting on the walker or being hand-walked, and just keeping the bodies moving because standing in a stall really is one of the worst things you can do for your athlete. The horses aren't designed for it."

Koford is putting his money where his mouth is. By the time this article sees print, he will have relocated from his home base in Raleigh, NC, to Klimke's barn in Germany for the foreseeable future.

"I'll be working for him. I have not had a boss in 25 years," Koford says. But the benefits of the three-month stint convinced him that the move would be worth it. "It's like, every day be on your A game. Deliver the goods; there are no excuses."

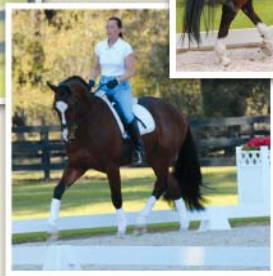
Conditioning for Ages and Stages

Just as a horse's temperament dictates the appropriate warm-up routine, so, too, do his age and level of training influence his conditioning program.



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Koford does not target specific heart rates or other numbers when he conditions horses. Instead, he strives to build fitness gradually, always checking his mounts for subtle signs of overwork.

“You have to be so mindful of watching their legs and making sure they’re not showing signs of stress in their legs, or in their muscles too—that they’re not coming out with windpuffs or a sore back or just tight and stiff,” he explains. If any of these red flags crops up, then he backs off.

Young horses. Koford advocates lots of LSD—long, slow distance. “This is because their stifles aren’t tight yet, especially the big adolescent horses that grow to be these inordinate sizes and haven’t really grown into their bodies yet. Yes, you do want to work them in the arena and build slowly; but they definitely need to get out there and develop strength in their tendons and bones. Mentally, they need to be ‘despooked’ and see the world.”

Koford continues, “With the young horses, if you can get on varying terrain so that you can do some hill work, then they learn to balance themselves and you’re not pulling on their faces, ‘riding backward,’ to balance them. They learn to carry themselves—to sit and to wait and to balance a bit. They develop adjustability and balance and proprioception.”

Developing horses. Lay the groundwork for your five- to seven-year-old’s future by getting him fit now, Koford advises. “Once they’ve been fit as a young horse, even if they have a bit of a lay-up, they’re going to [regain fitness] more quickly and more easily.”

Adult horses. “By the time they are seven, many of them are going into the Prix St. Georges, either starting the Prix St. Georges or thinking about Prix St. Georges,” Koford says. To meet the athletic demands of FEI-level tests, “They do need more aerobic work.”

Now it’s time for more cardiovascular work, including hill work. “The horses want to go forward, and you are going to develop so much more pushing power by pushing up the hills, especially when they’re using their backs. Then when they come down the hill, you develop the sitting power and the carrying power that’s necessary. When you go into the ring and you’ve got so much more horse, the horse is like, ‘Wow, this is so fun! I love it when I lengthen.’ You’re using the horse’s natural instincts to go forward up the hill and the natural instincts to sit and carry and balance.”

High-performance horses. “You’d better continue to make sure that the horse is not always going in soft footing, because that is just setting him up for problems down the road,” Koford warns. “When you’re starting the more seri-

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LIKE FINE WINE: Kept fit and not overdrilled, older horses can continue to excel in dressage. The Dutch gelding Udon was eighteen when he took rider Steffen Peters to his first Olympic Games, in Atlanta 1996.

ous collection, you have better done your homework so that he's set up for a long and successful career."

Koford says he's seen too many upper-level horses sidelined by injury. "[Strains of] suspensories are practically epidemic at that level," he reports. "With my eventing background, I make sure I do the homework and really leg the horses up and—knock wood—I've had very, very few leg problems."

Training on varied terrain promotes soundness and also makes horses more adaptable to differing conditions. As Koford points out, "The footing at shows is not always perfect. Sometimes the footing is muddy; sometimes the footing is deep; and you want to make sure that you've done your homework so that you can go through that footing. You have your horse legged up [fit] so that it's not going to be as vulnerable to injury."

Schoolmasters. The maxim "use it or lose it" certainly applies to the older campaigner. "Horses that are well maintained can stay active and competitive," Koford says. "There are eighteen- and nineteen-year-old horses in the Olympics doing dressage. I can tell you, they're not going in the ring every day and just drilling the movements. The thing is, they know the movements. Yes, if you buy a schoolmaster, the horse knows the movements; and yes, the rider would love

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to drill. However, you really want to keep them fit without pounding. The warm-up and the cool-down are even more essential for an older horse because they are naturally going to be a little stiffer.”

It’s equally imperative with an older horse to stave off boredom and sourness. “It’s even more important that you don’t go out there and just expect them to perform,” says Koford. “To keep them fresh and enthusiastic and interested is going to be your challenge with the older horses—trying to keep them fit doing a variety of exercises, and not over and over and over the same thing. Physically and mentally, it’s a buzzkill for the older horses.”

Conditioning: It’s Not Just for Eventers Any More

It is tempting to see Koford’s emphasis on conditioning simply as an artifact of his eventing career. However, the fact that a top German dressage facility has the same practice shows us that conditioning is integral to correct dressage. ▲

Katherine Walcott, of Wilsonville, AL, has tried both eventing and dressage at the micro level. Achieving the upper reaches of either discipline is impressive. The idea that someone could do both makes her dizzy.

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