

Barrel-Horse Fitness

Condition your barrel horse properly to help ensure his strength, soundness and longevity.

Article by Jan Murawski Evans
Photographs by David Stoecklein

Barrel racing is a fast, furious and lucrative equestrian sport. To win, a horse must be quick, precise and fit. Swift, tight turns put extreme stress on a horse's front and rear limbs, making joint and muscle strength necessary to prevent injury. Conditioning helps ward off lameness, augments a horse's overall muscle and joint stability, and ensures that he can run his fastest

through the cloverleaf pattern.

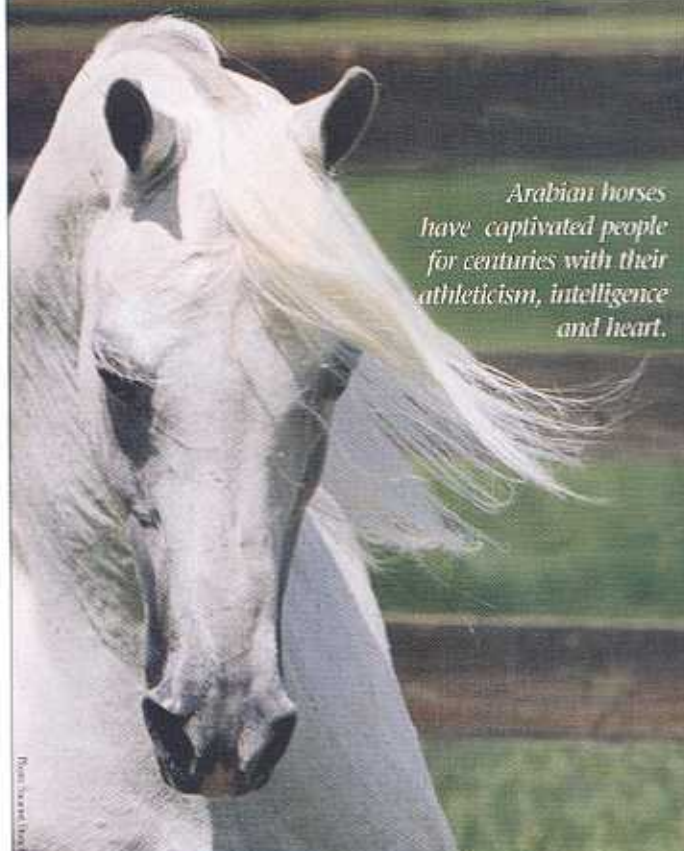
Keeping a barrel horse sound and in top condition doesn't have to be a challenge. During her 34 years of barrel-racing experience, Cathi Hadley, Canon City, Colorado, has developed a simple regimen that gets her horses in top physical and mental shape, plus keeps them sound throughout the grueling summer barrel-racing season.

Timing: Start Early for Success

Hadley begins training a young futurity horse more than one year before his first competition. After schooling the horse to accept saddle and rider, she teaches turning and stopping basics and also begins conditioning the animal. If she plans to run the horse as a 5-year-old,

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she starts conditioning him in the early spring of his 4-year-old year.

Hadley starts a seasoned barrel horse about 60 days before the first competition, gradually conditioning the horse to peak form.

Where to Work

Suitable ground conditions should provide enough traction without the hardness that might cause concussion injuries. Hadley trains her horses in an indoor arena, where she can control the footing depth and moisture content. She prefers soft footing that allows the horse to sink about halfway to the coronary band, as opposed to deep, heavy soil.

Realistic Regimen

Approximately eight weeks before entering a seasoned horse in competition, Hadley starts to condition the animal. During the first week, she alternates a day of work with a day of rest. On working days, Hadley warms up the horse by walking him five to 10 minutes. Then, she rides at a medium trot five to 10 minutes, depending on the horse's age and physical fitness. Each week she adds five minutes of extended trotting, until the horse can successfully perform at that gait for 30 minutes. At the end of each session, Hadley cools down the horse at a walk.

Because each horse is different, Hadley carefully monitors the horse during the workout and cool-down, noting the recovery time and any other problems the horse might show after exercise.

To prevent boredom and save time, Hadley alternates riding and ponying. If she's getting her seasoned horse and a young horse ready, she rides one horse the first day and ponies the other. The next day, the two horses switch roles. This keeps the horses' minds fresh and their attention on the job, instead of them becoming mindless machines.

If the horse is fit, he won't breathe hard or extremely flare his nostrils after 30 minutes of trotting. If a horse is

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Barrel-Horse Conditioning Schedule



TIME FRAME	EXERCISES
Nine weeks before first barrel race	Shoe horse, have veterinarian examine teeth, administer vaccinations, etc.
Week No. 1	Three times a week on alternate days, warm up horse at a walk for five to 10 minutes. Next, trot five minutes. Then cool down at a walk.
Week No. 2	Three times a week on alternate days, warm up horse at walk five to 10 minutes. Next, trot 10 minutes. Then cool down at a walk.
Week No. 3	Three times a week on alternate days, warm up horse at a walk five to 10 minutes. Next, long-trot 15 minutes. Then lope five minutes. Cool down at a walk.
Weeks No. 4, 5 and 6	Three times a week on alternate days, warm up horse at a walk five to 10 minutes. Then long-trot 20 minutes. Next, lope 10 minutes. Cool down at a walk.
Weeks No. 7 and 8	Three times a week on alternate days, warm up horse at a walk five to 10 minutes. Next, long-trot 20 minutes. Then lope 10 minutes. One day run barrel pattern once. Cool down at a walk.
Before competition	Warm up horse at a walk five to 10 minutes. Next, long-trot 15 minutes. Then run barrel pattern. Cool down at a walk.
Between competitions	Allow horse to rest the day following competition. Three times a week on alternate days, warm up horse at a walk five to 10 minutes. Next, long-trot 15 minutes. Then lope five minutes. Run barrel pattern one time during the week only if a tune-up is necessary. Cool down at a walk.

laboring, Hadley allows another week of conditioning to get the horse's respiratory system in shape. Once he's fit, after the five- to 10-minute warm-up, Hadley trots 20 minutes and lope five minutes, gradually adding time until the horse can comfortably trot and lope for 30 minutes without struggling to catch his breath.

Two weeks before competition, when

the seasoned horse can trot and lope easily for 30 minutes, Hadley runs the barrel pattern once a week. Her cool-downs consist of walking and pushing calves into the chute for calf roping.

To teach a horse to be calm in the fast-paced situations he'll encounter at rodeos, Hadley also just sits on the horse and watches her husband, Mike, and his brother rope calves. →

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Develop a Winning Strategy

Although Hadley starts to train her futurity prospects a year before they compete, a conditioned youngster doesn't stand around at home while Hadley travels to competitions. She takes along the youngster to accustom him to traveling every weekend and arena noises

and objects. If she stays overnight at the arena, Hadley rides the prospect in the arena before and after the rodeo so he can become accustomed to waving banners, livestock and other distractions.

These strategies develop the horse's mind and emotions before the extra stress of competition is added to the weekly trips. When the horse doesn't fear his new environment, he doesn't waste his

Healthy Habits

In addition to conditioning, the feed and care of a barrel horse influence his overall performance. Here are a couple of care tips from professional barrel racer Cathi Hadley.

- **Fueling a barrel horse.** Horses are natural grazers, so life on the road, where a horse receives little to no grazing time, can wreak havoc on a horse's digestive tract. Careful attention to diet year-round, and especially during the competitive season is vital.

Hadley feeds whole oats and local grass hay that contains clover or alfalfa. Her horses remain on the same feed throughout the year, whether they're competing or resting. This simple diet keeps her horses free of colic or tying-up, and at suitable weights.

- **Living in a natural environment.** Hadley's horses live outside. Although they have 16-by-16-foot stalls and covered shelters, they spend most of their time in 20-by-100-foot pipe-fence runs, where they can see other horses and barn activity. Because horses are herd animals, a natural environment makes them feel safe and comfortable. Hadley's large runs offer her horses enough room to exercise without hitting fences and hurting themselves.

energy on distractions, which maximizes his performance around the barrels.

Competing: Conditioning Continues

Proper warm-up before running barrels is another step in Hadley's routine. She uses the same five- to 10-minute warm-up, then trots five to 10 minutes, until the horse is sufficiently

Web Extra

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Cathi Hadley

Raised in Lakewood, Colorado, as the daughter of a stable owner, Hadley has ridden for as long as she can remember. She started barrel racing at age 12, and she's been hooked on the sport ever since.

The horsewoman competes in the Women's Professional Rodeo Association Mountain States Circuit during the summer months and at jackpots the remainder of the year. Hadley's been a top-12 finalist at the Mountain States Circuit finals numerous times.

The trainer currently resides with her husband, Mike, in Canon City, Colorado. In 2003, the couple completed their new indoor arena at their home, where they host barrel-racing and calf-roping events. Contact Hadley at 719-275-4781.

prepared shortly before her run. Cool-down after competition involves walking to relax the horse and allowing him to catch his breath.

Between rodeos or jackpots, Hadley keeps the horse fit by riding three times a week at the walk to warm up, long-trotting for 15 minutes, loping five to seven minutes and walking again until cooled out.

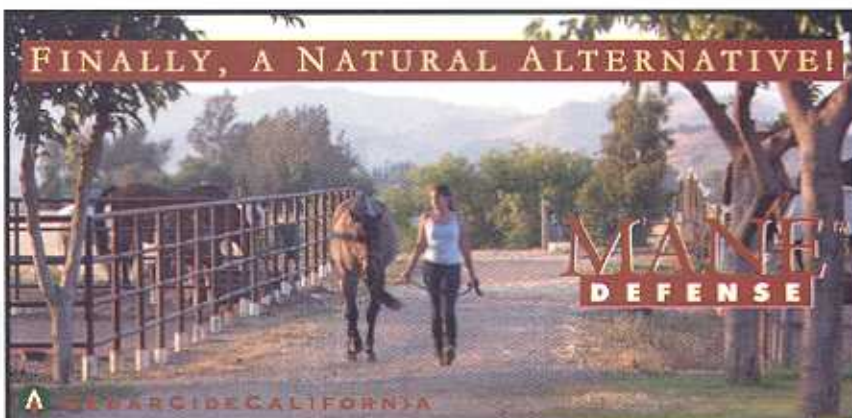
During the rodeo or jackpot season, the experienced barrel horse doesn't need training because he knows his job. If Hadley and the horse seem out of sync and need a tune-up, she runs the barrels once mid-week prior to weekend competitions.

Create a Winning Combination

Because a healthy, sound horse can perform with agility at maximum speed, it makes sense to properly condition a horse before a competition. With several weeks of preparation, a barrel horse can have many sound, successful seasons.

The author lives in Cotopaxi, Colorado.

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