

Rope-Horse Workout

Conditioning your tie-down roping horse can prolong his competitive career, decrease lameness and give you a winning edge.

By Jan Murawski Evans

A tie-down roping horse is highly trained with specialized skills. He must be able to break from a dead standstill like a jackrabbit, run 40 to 60 feet and slide to a stop just as quickly as he started. Because tie-down roping is fast and competitive, the roper depends on his horse for speed and precision.

Summer rodeo circuits mean hours of travel, intense competition, heat and more travel to the next event. Highly trained roping horses must be conditioned properly to withstand such stress and to prevent performance-hindering or career-ending injuries. Top tie-down-roping horses are usually in their mid-teens, making conditioning young horses vital to their usefulness and longevity.

Mike Hadley, Cañon City, Colorado, roped successfully on his horse "L.A." when the horse was in his early 30s. Here's how Hadley keeps his horses in competitive condition well into their golden years.

Timing: Start Early

Hadley rests his horses during the fall and winter, riding them only in the late spring to condition them and during the summer rodeo circuit. He starts conditioning his roping horses four weeks before the first competition. This allows time to strengthen the horses' muscles and joints, and develop their heart and lung capacities for quick bursts of speed.

At least a week before Hadley starts conditioning his horses, his farrier corrects the shapes and angles of the horses' hoofs after months of being barefoot, and shoes them. This week of rest helps the horses adjust to walking on steel again before adding the rider's weight. ➔



A roping horse's fitness coincides with his performance in the arena.

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Where to Work

Being ridden in good ground conditions helps keep Hadley's horses sound. The trainer keeps his arena footing soft, but not too deep or wet. He says horses' hoofs will sink almost down to the hair-line if they're in good footing.

Realistic Regimen

Four weeks before the first competition Hadley starts his conditioning routine. At least an hour before he intends to ride, he saddles his roping horses and ties them in the arena. This accustoms them to the saddle, cinches and protective leg boots again after several months off.

The time spent standing under saddle relaxes the horses, putting them in a learning mindset. It also allows them to get ready to work without feeling anxious every time they're tacked up. As the horses stand, Hadley finishes chores in the arena or watches his wife ride her barrel horses.

The first week of conditioning starts with a five- to seven-minute warm-up at the walk. One lap around Hadley's arena is 900 feet, so he rides the horse at a walk for three circuits, then speeds up into a trot for three laps, or about a half-mile. He rides at a long- or extended trot - the speed just before the horse naturally breaks into a lope.

Once the horse is moving well at the long-trot after the half-mile, Hadley lopes the horse. Because a right-handed roper always wants his horse to break out of the box on the right lead, he lopes the horse in large circle to the right, until sweat appears behind the horse's ears at the bridle. When the horse breaks a sweat at his ears, it shows that his body temperature has warmed up and has

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Web Extra

For more tips on caring for your roping horse, visit www.westernhorseman.com, and click on "Roping-Horse Care."



Quick sprints and stops are stressful on a tie-down roping horse's muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints. Proper conditioning helps strengthen these structures, thus reducing the risk of lameness.

pushed at his current conditioning level.

Next, Hadley cools down the horse by riding at a walk until the animal breathes normally. He performs this routine at least three days a week, alternating with rest days.

During the second week, after the horse stands saddled for at least 45 minutes to help the horse understand that being saddled means it's time to relax, Hadley again walks about a half-mile in five to seven minutes. He trots the same distance, then

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Roping-Horse Conditioning Schedule

Timeframe	Exercises
Five weeks before first roping	Get horse shod, have veterinarian check teeth, update vaccinations, deworm, etc.
First week of conditioning	Three times a week on alternate days, saddle the horse and allow him to stand tied 45 minutes to an hour. Warm up at a walk approximately a half-mile (five to seven minutes); long-trot a half-mile; lope until sweat shows at horse's ears; walk to cool down.
Second week of conditioning	Three times a week on alternate days, saddle the horse and allow him to stand tied 45 minutes to an hour. Warm up at a walk approximately a half-mile (five to seven minutes); long-trot a half-mile; lope approximately twice as long as previous week, or until sweat shows at ears; walk to cool down.
Third week of conditioning	Three times a week on alternate days, saddle the horse and allow him to stand tied 45 minutes to an hour. Warm-up at a walk approximately a half-mile (five to seven minutes); long-trot a half-mile; lope a half-mile; walk to regain normal breathing; lope a half-mile; walk to regain normal breathing; lope a half-mile; walk to cool down.
Fourth week of conditioning	Three times a week on alternate days, saddle the horse and allow him to stand tied 45 minutes to an hour. Warm up at a walk approximately a half-mile (five to seven minutes); long-trot a half-mile; lope a half-mile; walk until horse breathes normally; lope a half-mile; walk approximately a half-mile; tighten cinches and leg boots; from a walk, gallop about 150 feet and slow to walk; repeat twice; walk to cool down.
At the rodeo	Saddle at least 45 minutes prior to run. Warm up at a walk five to seven minutes; lope (or trot if footing is hard); wind-sprint if possible; warm up until "a crack of sweat at the ears" shows. Tighten cinches and leg boots; clean the horse's feet before the run.
Between rodeos	Monday is rest day. Warm up at a walk five to seven minutes; trot a half-mile; lope a half-mile; wind-sprint; rope four calves three times a week.

lopes until there's sweat at the horse's ears. Depending on the horse's age and condition, he might lope almost a mile before he breaks a sweat. Hadley cools down the horse at the end of each session.

The third week consists of standing saddled, walking a half-mile, long-trotting a half-mile, loping a half-mile, walking until breathing returns to normal, loping a half-mile, walking a half-mile and loping another half-mile.

The fun starts during the fourth week of conditioning. Hadley allows the horse to stand tied. Then he walks the horse a half-mile, long-trots a half mile, lopes a half-mile, walks to regain normal breathing, lopes a half-mile, walks a

Decrease Common Roping-Horse Lameness

Tie-down-roping success depends on lightning-fast starts and sliding stops, which place tremendous pressure on the hindquarters and feet. Many promising roping horses' careers are cut short by lameness. That's why conditioning is so important to prevent the following common lamenesses.

Navicular is a lameness of the foot often caused by poor footing and improper shoeing. Gradual conditioning under good footing can help prevent this debilitating lameness by strengthening the deep flexor tendon that connects to the navicular bone in the hoof and keeping a stable balance of the bones in the hoof. Stopping hard puts extreme concussion on the front feet, so the conditioning regimen should avoid fast stops except when necessary for training or competing.

Hock injuries are common in horses with less than ideal hock conformation. Because curbs are commonly associated with the forceful starts a roping horse needs to catch a calf, gradual conditioning can strengthen the plantar ligament, so it'll be strong enough to support the hock.

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Mike Hadley



Cathi and Mike Hadley train rodeo horses in southern Colorado.

Mike Hadley, Cañon City, Colorado, considers himself a "late bloomer." He started roping at age 16 on one of his father's old team-roping horses. Now he knows that he'd have progressed faster if he'd learned more about horsemanship and riding before he started roping.

A Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association competitor since 1986,

Hadley has qualified for the Mountain States Circuit finals 16 times. He won the Colorado State Calf Roping Champion title for the Colorado Pro Rodeo Association in 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001 and 2003.

In June, Hadley starts competing in summer rodeos in Colorado, Nebraska, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, finishing in September. He travels with his wife, Cathi, a barrel racer.

Because his horses are so important to him, Hadley encourages ropers to learn more about caring for horses and is always eager to share what he's learned through the years. Contact Hadley at 719-275-4781.

half-mile, then gets off and tightens both cinches, and checks the horse's boots. He lines the horse up in the middle of the arena, starts at a walk then gallops about 150 feet, easing back into a walk. He repeats this process three times, ending with a cool-down walk. The short gallops or wind sprints condition the horse at the speed necessary for competitive roping.

Competing: Conditioning Continues

The routine Hadley follows during the rodeo circuit is just as important as the conditioning regimen he follows during the weeks before competition. After a horse has braced himself in a trailer for hours, a proper warm-up is vital not only for successful competition, but also to prevent debilitating lameness.

Hadley saddles his roping horse at least 45 minutes prior to his run. He uses the warm-up facilities on the rodeo grounds to complete his routine. The warm-up starts with walking five to seven minutes and loping, tightening the cinches as necessary. He wind-sprints about 60 feet

and lopes circles to the right to accustom the horse to using only the right lead until the horse shows "a crack of sweat at the ears," he says. This signals Hadley that the horse is warmed up.

Just before his run, Hadley rechecks leg-boot fit and makes adjustments if necessary, cleans any stones from the horse's feet and tightens both cinches.

During the rodeo season, Hadley gives his horse Monday off after the rodeo weekend. His stay-fit strategies during the competitive summer rodeo season include warm-ups and roping calves three times during the week.

A Winning Combination

The strain of fast starts, sliding stops and pressure from stopping and holding a speeding calf can take a toll on a tie-down roping horse's muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints. The weeks spent conditioning a roping horse can be compensated by the longevity of the horse's useful life, as well as years of trips to the pay window.

The author lives in Cotopaxi, Colorado. 🐾