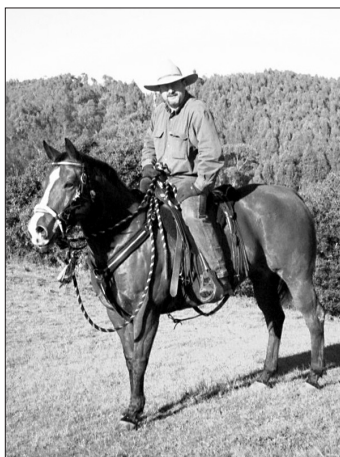


Are you ready for summer fun?



In 2003 Garry Stauber completed a 1350 mile, 3 ½ month horseback trip, riding the length of California with a packhorse.

He is on the Board of Directors of the Ohlone Riders of the Backcountry Horsemen of California, DreamPower Horsemanship Foundation, and the Aromas Hills Trail Club. He is also a member of the Long Riders Guild. Garry has written articles for Trail Rider and the Bay Area Equestrian Network (www.bayquest.com). Garry's trip is chronicled on his website at www.dream-adventures.com and on the Long Riders Guild site at www.thelongridersguild.com/LRG.htm.

Summertime is here, bringing trail rides and horse camping adventures. Are you and your horse ready for this year's activities? I learned the importance of conditioning the hard way this year.

I bought a few horses during the off-season. Getting them all in shape and ready for the riding season took more time than I had allotted, and I was behind in my preparation schedule. The first trip on the calendar was a three-day horsepacking and camping trip, taking us about 12 miles into a wilderness, mountainous state park.

I was riding one of my newer horses and he began showing signs of fatigue and soreness, so I hopped off and started walking beside him. This was something I did often last year, and thought nothing of it, when I was riding my trip the length of California. But this year, after just a couple of hills and miles, I realized I was not in the shape I was in last year. Neither my horse nor I was up to these steep grades. I wasn't about to punish my horse for my poor planning, so I kept walking to our planned campsite for the night. Fortunately, my packhorse was ready for the trip and she patiently carried her load. After an 8 mile hike up and down steep mountain slopes, I was dead tired. I re-learned the importance of being prepared to walk home if my horse's conditioning fails, or they are injured or throw a shoe miles from home.

Riders often pull their horse out of the barn or field for a couple hours of riding only on week-ends. But is this really optimal or fair to our horses? A trail ride often requires increased cardiovascular strength, because of elevation changes and a variety of obstacles that can easily tax the unfit horse.

Conditioning is important for our horses when we request or need them to perform. Trail or pleasure horses may have different conditioning and feed requirements than a performance or competition horse, but conditioning is still required. Your un-ridden Buttercup will be hurting on a trail ride, just like you or I would, if we suddenly went on a 3 to 4 hour walk after being couch potatoes all winter. Unfit horses that are overworked are very susceptible to accidents or diseases, just like humans. I will come back to our human conditioning later.

Exercise or conditioning needs to be regular and consistent. Finding time to exercise your horse and yourself may be difficult, but it is very important. This year my plan was to train all of my horses to pack as well as to ride, with every horse ready for any adventure I chose. Your horse's conditioning and training should be based on your goals. Everyone's training procedures will be different, as everyone has different plans and goals for their horses.

It is not important that your horse always be in peak endurance condition, unless you are calling upon that regularly. It is best to have your horse in a basic conditioned state that can be optimized in a week or two, with just a small amount of additional work.

Pastured horses walk or run approximately 20 miles a day during natural grazing, and when they just do their usual horse things. As my horses are pastured, a ride or work-out twice a week, with an additional week-end ride, is probably sufficient for basic conditioning, since most of my week-end trips are only 4-5 hour rides. As spring turns into summer, I gradually increase the length of their work-outs. A work-out should always include 15 minutes of walking in the beginning, to get good circulation and blood flow. Ending your work-out with the same 15 minute cool-down walk is also important.

The most effective conditioning program involves mixing walking, trotting and running. Walking builds muscle, trotting improves cardiovascular performance and balance, and running increases endurance and cardiovascular strength. I never trot or lope my horses more than 7 minutes straight. This is an old Cavalry training concept that has passed the test of time, taught in the horsemanship manuals given to Cavalry soldiers. If I trot, lope or gallop my horse, then I double or triple the time walking, before doing it again. If it is early in the training season, I might quadruple the amount of time walking, before increasing the pace again.

Being consistent is the key, which brings me back to that subject of human conditioning. Most equestrians agree that abdominal strengthening is the most important physical conditioning for riders in general. The abdominal and oblique muscles connect the rider to the horse and help the rider stay in the saddle. Being in better shape improves your balance and flexibility, enhancing yours and your horse's comfort and enjoyment of every ride. Increased upper and lower body strength will enhance your riding skills and endurance. Work towards a gradual but complete human conditioning program, just as you do for your horses.

A lesson I learned this off-season is that getting out of shape is much easier than getting back in shape. On this trip I learned to be prepared to walk, as walking is sometimes necessary on a trail "ride." Walking is the easiest exercise to start with, in your own conditioning program. It can also be an important strength to call upon when trail riding. As a trail rider, when you ride away from civilization, you should be prepared and able to return on your own two feet. Have fun conditioning your horse and yourself for this year's trail adventures. **R!**

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