

Planning to get your horse fit?

Whether you want to showjump, event, compete in dressage or explore the countryside on horseback, you can make big improvements to your horse's fitness and wellbeing with just a little bit of planning.

In the past, getting your horse fit meant hours of trotting on the road and then galloping until the cows came home. Advances in veterinary technology and tools like heart rate monitors have helped to demystify the science bit behind getting horses fit – but there's definitely a knack to planning a custom fitness program for your horse. Maggie Pattinson runs OntheHoof personal equine training, offering customised fitness and rehabilitation programmes for horses and riders. Here, she works with a rider preparing their young horse for their first season eventing.

Our expert

OntheHoof's Maggie Pattinson believes every horse needs to be fit for the job – whether that's 100 mile endurance rides, eventing, dressage or hacking – and works with riders to develop plans to help keep their horses fit and injury-free.

Our rider

Kelly McCarthy-Maine owns Lola Rose, a 17.2hh, 6-year-old Shire X Holstein mare. The pair, who won training with On the Hoof personal training courtesy of South East Rider, worked with Maggie to prepare for their first season of eventing. "During the hours and hours of walking, Lola and I really got to know each other. Watching her muscle up before my eyes was hugely rewarding, too. Lola has all the heart, talent and scope in the world, and knowing I had prepared her tendons, ligaments and body for the demands of the sport made me feel like I was giving her the best chance to reach her potential".

Stage one – explain

"Maggie's consultation couldn't have come at a better time. Lola had been off for a few weeks off with an active splint and the vet had just given us the go-ahead to get back to work. Over a cup of tea, Maggie listened while I prattled on about my horse, a wide-ranging tale covering the first time I saw her ad, a long drive and a handshake, snow and a trip to A+E... as well as important details like her age and breeding, what she's done previously and whether she has any weaknesses or was recovering from injury. Then it was on to our horsey plans, which Maggie helped me break down into long and short term goals", explains Kelly.

Starting point

"Our short term goals were to go to a couple of jumping and cross-country schooling clinics, our slightly longer term goal was to start competing in showjumping and dressage, working our way towards our main goal of British Eventing one-day events by the end of the season.

Stage one: Maggie says

"Lola is an enormous young horse with a huge frame to fill. It's especially important with young horses to make an initial investment in their base fitness – this is their foundation for a long and sound career.

“With this in mind, I prescribed a two-week walk programme, starting with two twenty-minute sessions a day, building up to two forty-minute sessions on firm ground. The first few sessions would (ideally!) be on a long rein, with Kelly gradually asking for a contact, mini-half halts and some lateral work by the end of the two weeks. I also suggested Kelly learn how to strap Lola, which can really help big horses fill out and showed her how to record Lola’s resting heart rate”, Maggie explains.

Stage one: Kelly says

“As Lola hadn’t been ridden for several weeks, I did the first day of walking in hand: two sessions of about twenty minutes. The second day I got on and we did the same circuits. Incredibly, by day three, Lola was working long and low, swinging along in a ground covering walk”, Kelly says.

Strapping how-to:

Strapping can boost circulation, build muscle and improve your horse’s overall tone. Strapping involves banging the big muscles on your horse’s body in a rhythmical way using a leather strapping pad or a thick, folded towel. The benefit comes from an increased blood supply to the strapped area and the muscle tensing in preparation for the next bang. If your horse has never been strapped, start with five ‘bangs’ on each area – sides of the neck, quarters and thighs – and build gradually to ten ‘bangs’ over a few weeks.

Equally important is just how to groom properly and efficiently, without annoying but not just to keep clean but circulation and to "feel" that all is well or for any changes!

Stage two: Maggie says

“The heart rate monitor can give fascinating insight into your horse’s fitness, but it can also reveal whether they find getting tacked up, walking to a school, or even seeing their rider or trainer worrying. If a horse is tense, he won’t breathe properly and his body will be more prone to injury”, explains Maggie.

“I like I use the heart rate monitor see what the horse’s resting heart rate is, how they cope with different paces and levels of exertion, as well as to determine the horse’s rate of recovery – a key indicator of their fitness and readiness to work.

“We want the heart rate to stay between 60-80bpm for base fitness work. Lola started with a resting heart rate of 40bpm and which had risen to 54bpm by the time Kelly mounted and we walked to the track. We did a little walk, trot and lateral work, stopping at intervals to monitor her recovery rate. She recovered reasonably well, but her heart rate slipped above 80bpm a few times, especially when Kelly asked her to move laterally at the trot, indicating she found this a little stressful, physically difficult – or both”, Maggie explains.

Stage two: the homework

“Though I am already seeing changes in Lola’s tone, I’d like Kelly to do another two weeks of mostly walking, building to about an hour and a half a day with no more than 15 minutes of trot.

“Lots of lateral work in straight lines in walk – a few steps and a break, a few more steps and a break – will help build muscle to make it easier for her. She is also ready

to go hacking and cope with varied terrain: hills, roads and bridleways will all help her build base fitness and keep her interested”, Maggie explains.

Stage three

Maggie returns in a couple of weeks and attaches the heart rate monitor to test Lola’s base fitness – the extra time spent in walk has improved her rate of recovery and her heart rate stays nicely within the 60-80bpm base fitness zone.

While base fitness work would continue, Lola’s was now ready to start developing her cardiovascular fitness. “You improve your horse’s fitness by making the heart guess what it’s got to do next. Lots of transitions, halting for five seconds and bursts of intensity will very quickly improve fitness – and save your horse’s legs from needless strain”, explains Maggie.

Breaking the track into quarters, Maggie has Kelly transition from working trot, working canter, free walk on a long rein and lateral work, to medium trot and galloping and has Kelly call out the reading from the heart rate monitor as she goes by.

The results from the heart rate monitor were encouraging – Lola’s heart rate peaked at 180bpm – **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? IS THIS A GOOD ZONE FOR BUILDING? WHAT IS MAXIMUM HEART RATE, OR WHEN DOES LACTIC ACID START BUILDING? We've just blipped into the anaerobic zone, nowhere near a max heart rate but a working heart!**

Stage three: the homework

Maggie outlined a fitness plan for Kelly to follow for weeks five to eight:

“You have done a lot of work together over four weeks, take it easy for the fifth week – hack, wander around on a long rein and give Lola a few days off.

For the sixth week, repeat the interval work we did on the track and incorporate some time in the school working over poles. In the seventh week, book a lesson with a good trainer, explain where you are in the fitness program and have a little jump.

Week eight, return to walking and hacking to consolidate the fitness work and iron out any stiffness from the increase in work”, explains Maggie.

Stage three: Kelly says

“Lola started changing shape before my eyes, developing muscle over her back, and tone and definition on her neck, shoulders and quarters. The discipline of halting and working laterally at a walk also helped her mature in her mind. She’s a bit wary by nature, but the low-adrenalin time we spent walking and hacking, and seeing a bit of the world in slow-motion developed our confidence in each other”, Kelly explains.

“Our first jumping session was fantastic, our trainer was pleased we had put the hours into a fitness programme and is helping us with the next phase of our training”, says Kelly.

Stage three: Maggie says

“I was really pleased to see the changes in Lola, both physically and mentally. She stood on the buckle while I took details from the monitor, was much more accepting towards lateral work and has filled in nicely”, Maggie explains.

Stage four and beyond

Fitness work doesn't stop at the end of your fitness program – you could say it is just the beginning! Interspersing intense periods like the build up to a competition, travel and competing with a week of walking will consolidate your horse's base fitness and help prevent injury.

Stage four: Kelly says

"A custom fitness plan to match our short and long term goals allowed us to slowly build towards each target – a week of walking in between adventures kept everything nice and calm, too", says Kelly.

"We had a great first season, showjumping at the Riding Club National Championships, three double clears at British Eventing one-day events and an extraordinary gallop through the waves on Holkham Beach. Most importantly of all, I have a fit and happy horse", says Kelly. "I'll definitely be ringing Maggie to help us prepare a fitness plan for next season, too!" explains Kelly.

Stage four: Maggie says

Keep to a similar plan now and increasing and decreasing in line with the events/competition programme -- always listening for Lola to tell you - "it's too much, too little or there's a problem" don't be afraid to REST and watch out for the growth spurts and body changes which will continue to occur.

The fitness program explained:

Week 1 + 2: Walking, building from 20 minutes to two forty minute sessions, twice a day

Week 3 + 4: Walking, building to an hour and a half per day with no more than 15 minutes trotting

Week 5: Hack, take it easy, give Lola a few days off

Week 6: Intervals on the track, hacking, including hill work, schooling including pole work

Week 7: Schooling, travel to trainer, pole work/small jumping clinic over two days

Week 8: Walking and walk hacking

Week 9 and beyond: Schooling and competing, interspersed with a week of down-time walking and hacking