



**EQUESTRIAN
CANADA
ÉQUESTRE**

For EVENTING

**RETURN TO COMPETITION GUIDELINES FOR THE
SPORT HORSE FOLLOWING A BREAK IN TRAINING
DUE TO COVID-19**

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Foreword

Equestrian Canada (EC) created the Return to Competition Guidelines for the Sport Horse Following a Break in Training Due to COVID-19 to support your horse's safe and progressive return to competition and ensure their health and welfare upon the lifting of competition suspensions related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The document was completed in consultation with the following experts:

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- Dr. Hilary Clayton BVMS, PhD, DACVSMR, FRCVS – Professor and McPhail Dressage Chair Emerita, Michigan State University;
- Dr. Jan Henriksen DVM – FEI Permitted Treating Veterinarian; Canadian Eventing Team Veterinarian for the Lima 2019 Pan American Games; private practice veterinarian;
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- Dayton Gorsline – EC Jumping Youth Development Program Advisor, former member of the Canadian Equestrian Team;
- James Hood – EC High Performance Director;
- Kristy House – EC Manager, Welfare and Industry; and, • Rachel Huebert – EC Manager, Technical Development.

Special thanks go to the many members of each discipline community who provided support in the development of their discipline-specific guidelines.

Please note: The information in this document are **guidelines**, not rules or mandates, and are intended as a resource for those who choose to use them.

Across all levels of sport, competing horses rely on athletes to do what is best for their health and welfare. It is imperative for anyone involved in horse training and riding/driving to speak with their trainers, coaches and veterinarians about properly conditioning your horse for the return to competition, as collectively, you know your equine partner better than anyone. This document is designed to provide both general and discipline-specific guidance and considerations for the return to competition following a break in training due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stay tuned for additional educational material that will become available by the end of May 2020 to support your return to competition planning. EC has partnered with Dr. Clayton for the creation of three online modules:

- *Conditioning Sport Horses: Principles*
- *Conditioning Sport Horses: Cardiovascular*
- *Conditioning Sport Horses: Strength*



Remember to follow the health guidelines provided by your local, regional, provincial/territorial and federal governments as you resume activity, as these agencies or their designees are responsible for determining when and how each area of the country reopens.

1. Key Considerations

The progression of a conditioning program should be such that fitness and strength improve in parallel with the development of technical skills. Once a horse has learned a technical skill, they tend to retain it but may need work on refinement, whereas fitness must be maintained by regular exercise.

A horse that is out of training for longer than one month loses cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength and resilience in the bones, muscles, ligaments and tendons. After several months, strength regresses to pretraining levels. These deficiencies need to be addressed before returning to full training and competition at their previous levels.

Even though a horse is capable of performing the skills required by a sport, the return to full training and competition should be delayed until adequate fitness and strength have been restored by a targeted reconditioning program.

1.1 COVID-19 EFFECTS ON EQUESTRIAN SPORT

Athletes have had different levels of access to their horses due to varying COVID-19 restrictions across the country, resulting in a spectrum of reconditioning scenarios. These scenarios range from horses that have had no exercise at all to those that have remained in full training programs throughout the pandemic. For horses that have had limited or no exercise, it takes time to for them to return to full fitness.

Determining the time required to recondition a horse to their previous fitness level depends on:

- Previous fitness level;
- Duration of the layoff; and,
- Type and amount of exercise during the full or partial layoff (partial training preserves some level of fitness).

1.2 BEFORE COMMENCING RECONDITIONING

Regardless of how long horses have been out of their full training program, athletes should attend to the following before commencing reconditioning:

- If farrier services have been interrupted, it may take more than one trimming/shoeing cycle to restore normality;
- **Check saddle fit.** Lack of conditioning is associated with muscle loss and changes in the shape of the horse's topline. In some cases, a corrective pad may allow for muscular redevelopment. As the back shape changes during conditioning, some horses may need temporary shims or periodic saddle re-flocking. It is best to seek the advice of someone with proper saddle fitting experience; and,



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- Adjust the amount/type of food in accordance with training level and nutritional needs and based off of behaviour indicators.

Core muscle training from the ground can start immediately for all horses. This includes baited stretches (e.g. using a carrot as enticement), stimulated movements to raise the withers, lift the belly and tuck the pelvis, and balancing exercises to activate and strengthen the muscles that transmit forces from the limbs to the trunk. These exercises protect against injury and should be part of routine care for all horses. It is important to ensure you understand the core safety principles of stretching for both the handler and horse.

1.3 DETERMINING HORSE FITNESS LEVEL

Before establishing a reconditioning plan, it is important to establish the horse's current fitness level. The horse's fitness level can be described according to four levels of fitness:

Zero Fitness: Horses that have either never been fit or have lost fitness due to a complete layoff for 12 weeks (three (3) months) or longer, depending on their fitness level when the layoff began. Horses with zero fitness have limited capacity for exercise under saddle and should be brought back to their previous level of fitness slowly.

Baseline Fitness: A horse with baseline fitness is able to:

- Exercise 4-6 days per week;
- Exercise for 30 minutes per workout; and,
- Trot and canter continuously for periods of two (2) minutes.

Baseline fitness is the **minimum** level of fitness required to compete in many equestrian disciplines.

Moderate Fitness: A horse with moderate fitness is able to:

- Exercise 5-6 days per week;
- Exercise for 45-60 minutes per workout;
- Perform multiple bouts of trot and canter for periods of two (2) minutes each; and,
- Perform several consecutive repetitions of strength training exercises appropriate to the discipline.

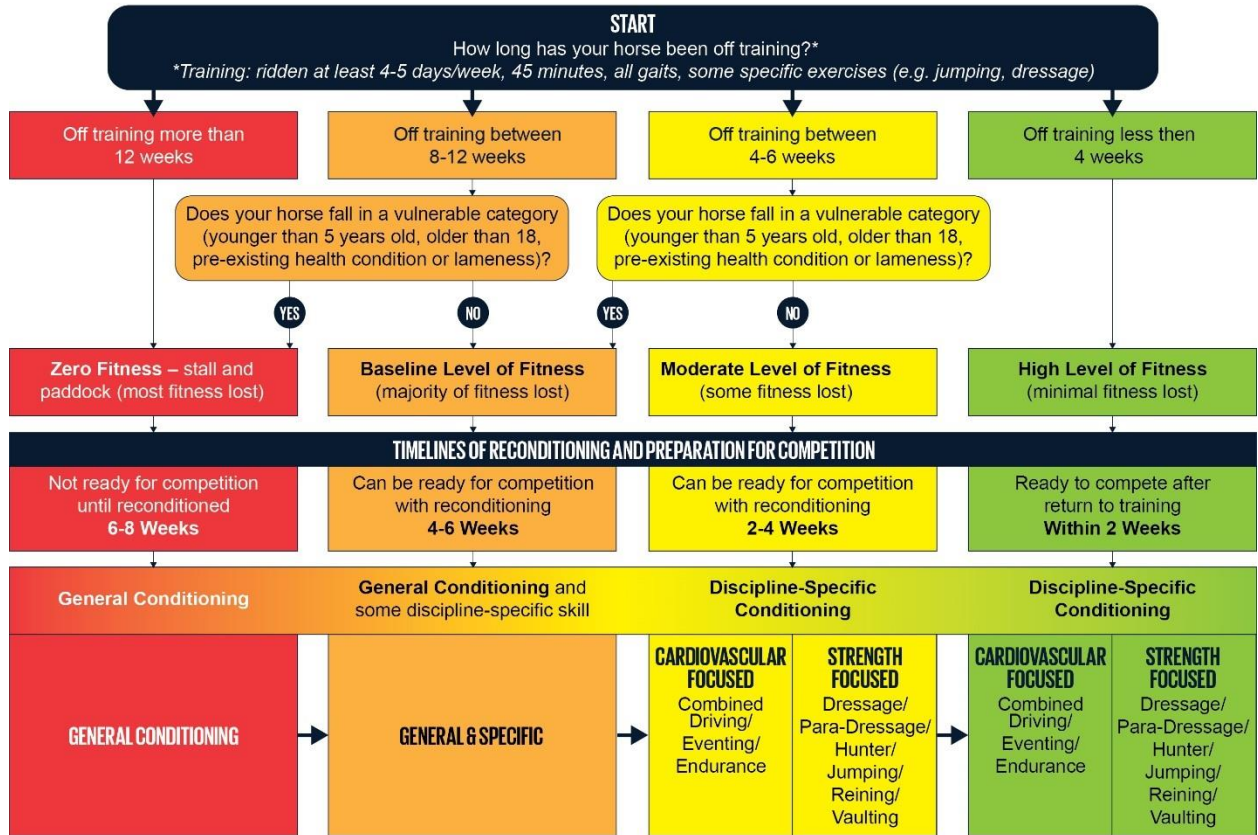
High Fitness: A horse with high fitness fulfills all the requirements for a moderate fitness level plus the discipline-specific requirements for cardiovascular fitness and/or muscular strength required to compete at an advanced level. These requirements can vary greatly between disciplines.

The horse's fitness, according to the definitions above, will help direct the stage at which the horse resumes training and conditioning exercises. These definitions can also support the athlete in tracking the horse's progress through the reconditioning process.



The below infographic is a guide to help you determine your horse's current fitness level and identify the appropriate reconditioning plan.

HORSE FITNESS LEVEL DECISION TREE



1.4 GENERAL CONDITIONING

The following general conditioning information offers guidance for establishing a baseline fitness level for horses competing in any discipline. Beyond a baseline fitness level, the exercises become more discipline specific, taking into account the cardiovascular and muscular strength requirements of each discipline.

Assuming horses that are now at a zero fitness level were fit for competition prior to the COVID-19 restrictions, the reconditioning program should start slowly to allow all parts of the body to improve fitness and strength; this includes the back beneath the saddle, the hooves and all musculoskeletal tissues. Gradual progression is important to avoid discomfort, injury and any subsequent behaviour issues. **Be conservative for the first couple of weeks.**

Here is an example of a gradual general conditioning progression:

Week 1:

- 15 minutes of walking per day including transitions to halt, rein back and leg yield.

Week 2:

- 30 minutes of walking per day;
- Up to two (2) minutes trotting divided into periods of about 20 seconds; and,
- Large (20 metre) circles and easy lateral exercises.

Week 3:

- 30 minutes walking per day;
- Up to four (4) minutes trotting;
- Two (2) minutes cantering divided into periods of about 20 seconds;
- Decrease circle diameter to 15 metres as the horse develops the strength and coordination needed to bend correctly; and,
- Increase the number of transitions.

Week 4:

- 30 minutes walking per day;
- Up to a total of 10 minutes trotting;
- Cantering split into shorter segments;
- Increase the number of transitions between consecutive gaits (e.g. halt-walk, walk-trot, trotcanter) and changes of speed within the gaits to develop strength and balance; and,
- Decrease circle size and use spiral exercises according to the horse's ability.

Thereafter:

In subsequent weeks, the amount of trotting and cantering can be increased incrementally with more frequent transitions. Depending on the discipline and facilities available, poles, gymnastics, jumping, hill work and longer sets of trot or canter may be introduced.

Depending on the facilities available and the horse's rideability, conditioning exercises can be done in the arena or on trails.

Cardiovascular fitness develops quickly; as horses start feeling good, they become more eager to train.



Athletes may be tempted to do more but should remain cognizant of the fact that the development of strength and resilience lags that of cardiovascular fitness. **It is the athlete's responsibility to regulate the workload.**

1.5 CONDITIONING SETBACKS

When conditioning resumes, observe the horse carefully for the development of problems or a recurrence of old injuries. Pay special attention to the following:

Training: Many injuries in sport horses are repetitive strain injuries. There is a very real risk of this type of injury if unfit horses are drilled in an arena day after day in an effort to hasten the return to competition. Trainers and athletes are strongly urged to use the principles of cross-training and allow easy days between hard training days to minimize the risk of injury.

Behaviour: Changes in behaviour should be considered in relation to the horse's diet and the amount and type of exercise being done. During the reconditioning period, it may be difficult to determine whether changes in behaviour are related to the horse feeling fresh and eager/excited to train again, or indicate something that requires further attention, such as nervous tension, anxiety from a previous negative experience or pain. A veterinary evaluation is recommended if bad behaviour persists beyond a few days so that the reconditioning program can be adjusted or therapy initiated.

Pre-existing Conditions: The reconditioning program must take account of any pre-existing conditions (e.g. chronic respiratory disease, metabolic or digestive problems, back and pelvic weakness or pain, lameness) and be modified accordingly. This may include a slower progression in exercise intensity, a modified diet or more emphasis on certain forms of exercises and conditioning. Veterinary and coaching advice will be important in planning any necessary modifications to the reconditioning program.

Lameness: Lameness can develop at any time during training. In some horses, it will be quite obvious, while in others it may initially be very mild or only evidenced by a subtle change like a decrease in gait quality (e.g. loss of suspension, reluctance to go forward) or reactive or hesitant behaviour. If training continues, the lameness may progress and the injury become more serious. It is therefore important to be observant of changes and seek veterinary advice early if the horse shows even a small change in attitude, behaviour or movement.

1.6 ADDITIONAL STRESSORS

Several additional factors contribute to stress and fatigue at competitions. When competition resumes, athletes, coaches, trainers and barn managers should do what they can to reduce stress due to the following (especially in young horses):

- Travel;
- Stabling at showgrounds (e.g. lights, noise, neighbours, disrupted routine, lack of turnout);
- Increased number of workouts (i.e. training sessions, classes) per day;
- Weather (e.g. heat, humidity);
- Different or suboptimal footing; and,
- Withholding medications due to medication rules.



2. Discipline-Specific Conditioning

This section offers practical examples and considerations relative to each individual discipline. Disciplines have been categorized into two general areas: those that are more heavily reliant on cardiovascular fitness and those that rely predominantly on strength.

Discipline Breakdown:

Cardiovascular

Combined Driving

Endurance

Eventing

Strength

Dressage/Para-Dressage

Hunter

Jumping

Reining

Vaulting

Please note that this information was created by discipline-specific veterinary representatives alongside discipline-specific coaches, trainers and athletes, and is meant to be interpreted from their point of view.

2.1 EVENTING

The following recommendations were prepared by Dr. Jan Henriksen as reconditioning guidelines and sample training plans for horses in eventing.

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Across all levels of sport, competing horses rely on athletes to do what is best for their health and welfare. It is imperative for anyone involved in horse training and riding/driving to speak with their trainers, coaches and veterinarians about properly conditioning your horse for the return to competition, as collectively, you know your equine partner better than anyone. This document is designed to provide both general and discipline-specific guidance and considerations for the return to competition following a break in training due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Remember to follow the health guidelines provided by your local, regional, provincial/territorial and federal governments as you resume activity, as these agencies or their designees are responsible for determining when and how each area of the country reopens.

Eventing is one of the most physically taxing disciplines in equestrian sport. Knowing that, we need our riders, trainers and coaches to be vigilant during these unprecedented times. Eventing has had many bumps in the road the last few years and, given that many horses have missed time training because of COVID-19, we need to be smart about reconditioning to keep our sport and participants safe.

Questions that we need to ask:

- How much time has my horse had off from training?
- Did my horse have any soundness or health issues going into this rest period?
- What was my horse's level of fitness when COVID-19 started?
- Has my horse lost weight or muscle during the pandemic?



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- Is my horse shod, up to date on vaccinations and in overall good health?

Never underestimate the advantages of walking to increase fitness, especially if you have hilly terrain in your community. Walking may not be the most exciting part of riding; however, it can be great for your partner's fitness.

Zero Fitness (missed 12+ weeks or 8-12 with additional health or age risks):

The basic premise for a reconditioning program will be covered in this section. You can step into this program at a level that is consistent with your horse's current level of fitness.

If your partner has done nothing or close to nothing since the start of COVID-19, then you need to prepare for a more diligent and planned reconditioning program.

A sample reconditioning plan at this level would be:

- Start with walking 10-20 minutes daily and increase by five (5) minutes every few (3-4) days until you are walking over 30-45 minutes under tack;
- Then, start trotting 3-5 minutes a day and increase by five (5) minutes every 4-7 days depending on the previous level of fitness; ○ Break this trotting up into 20-30 second intervals;
- Once you have been trotting 15-20 minutes, you can start cantering for a few minutes each day in a similar time frame and interval as the trot conditioning;
- Begin to add in lateral work, ground poles and gymnastic exercises; and,
- After a few weeks of pole and gymnastic exercises, gradually start jumping, increasing height at safe and appropriate increments.

Once canter conditioning has started, it is time to start doing more lateral movements, ground poles and gymnastics. After a few weeks of gymnastics, gradually start jumping, increasing the heights at a safe increment.

Baseline Fitness (missed 8-12 weeks):

If your horse is at this level of fitness, they should;

- Exercise a minimum of 30 minutes daily for 4-6 days per week; and,
- Be ready to start increasing the intensity of that schedule.

Moderate Fitness (missed 4-8 weeks):

If your horse is at this level of fitness, they should;

- Exercise a minimum of 30-45 minutes daily for 5-6 days per week;
- Handle several trot and canter sets for periods of 2-3 minutes;
- Train at just below competition level readiness with impulsion, cadence and balance; and
- Before returning to competition, be sure that your partners are handling this workload and recovering well.

High Fitness (missed less than 4 weeks):

Horses in this category are:

- Exercising 5-6 days per week for a duration of 45-60 minutes;



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- Handling several trot and canter sets for periods of 2-3 minutes; and,
 - Training at competition level readiness with impulsion, cadence and balance.

To be ready to return to competition, be sure that your partner is handling this reconditioning and recovering well. If you are closer to the four (4) week mark of missed training, be sure to take a few weeks to assess your horse's fitness level by starting out with an easier schedule and increasing exercise time and intensity every 2-3 days. On average, it takes approximate four (4) weeks for a horse to start to lose their fitness.

Advice from Canadian International Level Riders:

Below is a synopsis of some of the advice that Canadian international level athletes have come up with to help your return to competition. The following is a collaborative effort that includes many opinions that have a similar goal in mind. This is based off of a 4-6 week absence from a full training program. Adjust accordingly if you have missed more or less time than 4-6 weeks.

Training Level or Below:

- 7-10 days of walking, hacking and stretching;
- 7-10 days of training on the flat (mostly trotting) and ground poles (if ready);
- 7-10 days of trots sets and grid work with canter introduced; and then,
- 7-10 days of regular conditioning with jumping and some galloping if necessary.

Gallop sets are generally not necessary at this level and trot sets should be enough to keep your horses fit, as long as they are 20 minutes or more.

Preliminary Level:

Similar plan as Training Level, however you should be doing one (1) day of gallop sets once you have started to get closer to a level of fitness you are comfortable with for competition.

An example would be 15 minutes of trot with 2-3 repetitions of 4-minute canter sets, working up to four (4) sets.

Intermediate and Advanced Level:

The large portion of riders and horses at this level already have a solid conditioning program in place. The only advice we would give at this point is that you should have 1-2 days per week that involve gallop sets.

Regardless of your level of competition, riders should vary the activity and intensity of their training programs so that your horses are more likely to enjoy their training. Also, you should be monitoring how your horse is recovering from and handling its current level of training on a daily basis. If you feel that your horse is too tired or not recovering well from its daily program, then you should back off or continue at the current level before increasing the intensity. Additionally, if your horse is having issues with soundness or overall performance, we recommend that you consult with your veterinarian or trainer before making any changes or increasing the intensity.



3. Biosecurity

Biosecurity at the farm level can be defined as management practices designed to reduce the introduction of diseases onto a farm and minimize their spread within and off the farm. Developing a farm or facility biosecurity plan involves achieving the right balance between mitigating disease risk and prevention. Details on developing and maintaining a biosecurity plan are provided in the [Canadian Food Inspection Agency \(CFIA\) National Farm and Facility Level Biosecurity Standard for the Equine Sector](#).

Please check with your Provincial/Territorial Sport Organization (PTSO) for any additional biosecurity materials that may be available. It is helpful to have knowledge of horse and human diseases, modes of transmission and protection methods for horses and people. This information and more are included in the CFIA User Guide that accompanies the National Farm and Facility Level Biosecurity Standard for the Equine Sector. Along with these resources, work with your farm or facility veterinarian and industry experts on developing a biosecurity plan that is appropriate for your operation.

The following posters can be printed and displayed around the barn to help communicate biosecurity protocols:

[Disease Prevention - Horses](#)

[Disease Prevention - Equipment / Supplies](#)

[Tips to Protect Your Horse Away from Home](#)

[Managing New, Visiting & Returning Horses at Your Facility](#)

3.1 ADDITIONAL EC COVID-19 RESOURCES

EC has worked with industry experts to create recommendations for equestrian facility operations in the COVID-19 landscape.

Please note: We recommend following all current local, provincial/territorial and federal recommendations and directives. Horse and human safety are paramount when making amendments to common horse and human interaction routines.

The [Return to Business Operations Framework](#) is designed as a framework for equine and equestrian facilities to develop a return to business operations plan based on protocols provided by provincial/territorial and federal health organizations. Facilities that develop a plan based on this framework will be prepared to resume operations as soon as provincial/territorial and federal legislation allows.

Additional resources relating to COVID-19 can be found at www.equestrian.ca/industry/about/covid-19resources.

