



**EQUESTRIAN  
CANADA  
ÉQUESTRE**

**For DRESSAGE**

**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 follow experts:

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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*



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***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:

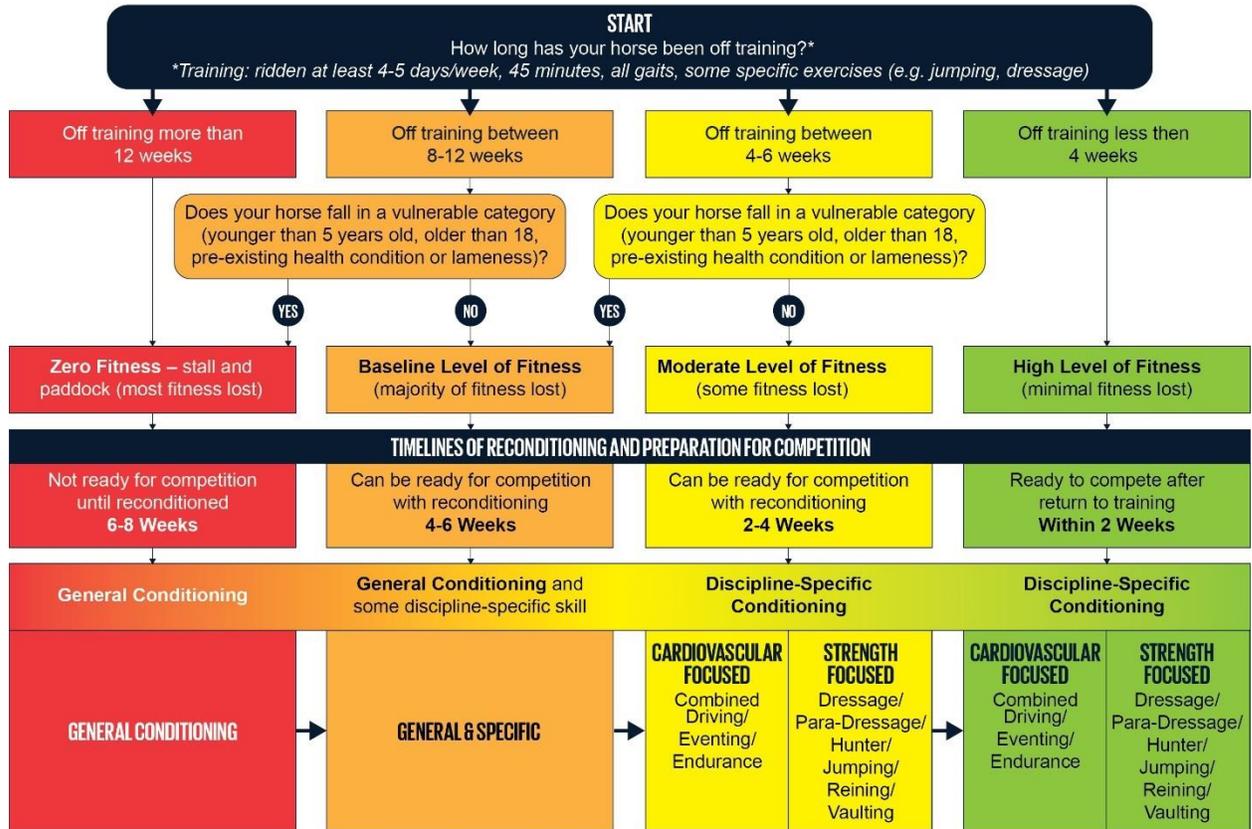
- Exercise 5-6 days per week;
- Exercise for 45-60 minutes per workout;
- Perform multiple bouts of trot and canter for periods of two (2) minutes each; and,
- Perform several consecutive repetitions of strength training exercises appropriate to the discipline.

**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



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## 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.



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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.

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## 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 DRESSAGE

*The following recommendations were prepared by Dr. Hilary Clayton as reconditioning guidelines for horses in dressage.*

**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.

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The current national and FEI level dressage tests cover a distance just over one (1) kilometre and take 5-8 minutes to perform at an average speed of 9-11 kilometres per hour. This is not a strenuous workload, so dressage horses generally do not need to develop a high level of cardiovascular fitness. As the horse progresses through the levels of competition, however, the need for muscular strength increases. This strength is required specifically in the muscle groups that support the development of collection and uphill balance. The requirements for para-dressage horses are equivalent to those for dressage horses competing at national levels but need to be considered in the context of the rider's classification grade; see [Section 2.2 Para-Dressage](#) for further detail.

Much of the conditioning can be integrated into training sessions with the help of an experienced trainer to ensure correct performance of the movements and to offer guidance as to when to progress to new exercises. The

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timetable suggested below is for guidance only and should be adapted to the individual horse's strengths and weaknesses.

It must be stressed that dressage horses should not be drilled in an arena every day. The reconditioning exercises described below can be performed in an arena, in a field or out on the trail. Performing the exercises in different locations not only helps to avoid injury, it also reinforces the learning process. Cross-training is encouraged since it has a beneficial effect in sparing horses from repetitive strain injuries, such as pulled suspensories. The type of cross-training depends on the facilities/equipment available and the type of activity enjoyed by the individual horse and rider. Examples are trail riding, hill work, poles, gymnastics, jumping, underwater treadmill and swimming.

### *8-12 Weeks Out of Training:*

Dressage horses that have been out of training for 8-12 weeks are likely to have retained a baseline level of fitness and can be ready to compete in 4-6 weeks.

During the first week, the workouts will be short in duration, around 15 minutes, consisting mostly of walking with posting trot being introduced later in the week. In the second week, the duration of the workouts increases to about 30 minutes, still mostly at walk but with gradually increasing amounts of trot, short periods at canter, and some suppling and strengthening exercises at walk, such as turn on forehand, turn on haunches, leg yield and lateral work.

Large diameter turns and circles develop lateral suppleness while improving strength and coordination in the back and abdominal muscles. Over time, the circle size decreases to a 10-12 metre diameter at all gaits. The exercise of spiraling in and out of the circle is particularly useful at trot and canter. Transitions within and between the gaits are strength-building exercises but it is important that they be performed correctly without falling onto the forehand. Starting in the third week, the work should include lengthening and shortening of the stride both on straight lines and on circles. This progresses to medium and collected exercises. Frequent transitions within and between gaits build strength. Start with transitions between consecutive gaits (halt-walk, walk-trot, trot-canter) and progress to transitions across nonconsecutive gaits.

Lateral work in trot and canter can be introduced in the third week with gradual increases in the angle and bending. Other dressage-specific movements can be introduced in subsequent weeks as the horse becomes competent in the basic movements.

### *4-8 Weeks Out of Training:*

Dressage horses that have been out of training for 4-8 weeks will have lost some strength and fitness but should return to their previous level in 2-4 weeks. The progression is the same as detailed above with a gradual introduction of conditioning in the first week. After the first week, sufficient fitness has been maintained to allow the horse to progress more rapidly through the conditioning sequence and be fit to compete in 2-4 weeks, depending on the technical quality of the training.

### *Less Than 4 Weeks Out of Training:*

For horses that have been out of training for less than four (4) weeks, the first few days should allow an easy introduction to ridden exercise followed by a rapid return to their previous level of fitness within two (2) weeks.



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## 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](http://www.equestrian.ca/industry/about/covid-19resources).

