



**EQUESTRIAN  
CANADA  
ÉQUESTRE**

**for ENDURANCE**

**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;
- Dr. Yves Rossier DVM, IPSAV, Dipl. ACVIM – FEI Official Veterinarian for Dressage, Driving, Eventing, Jumping and Reining; National Head FEI Veterinarian for Canada; Member of the FEI Veterinary Committee; EC Equine Medication Control Committee Chair; Professor, Université de Montréal;
- 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:

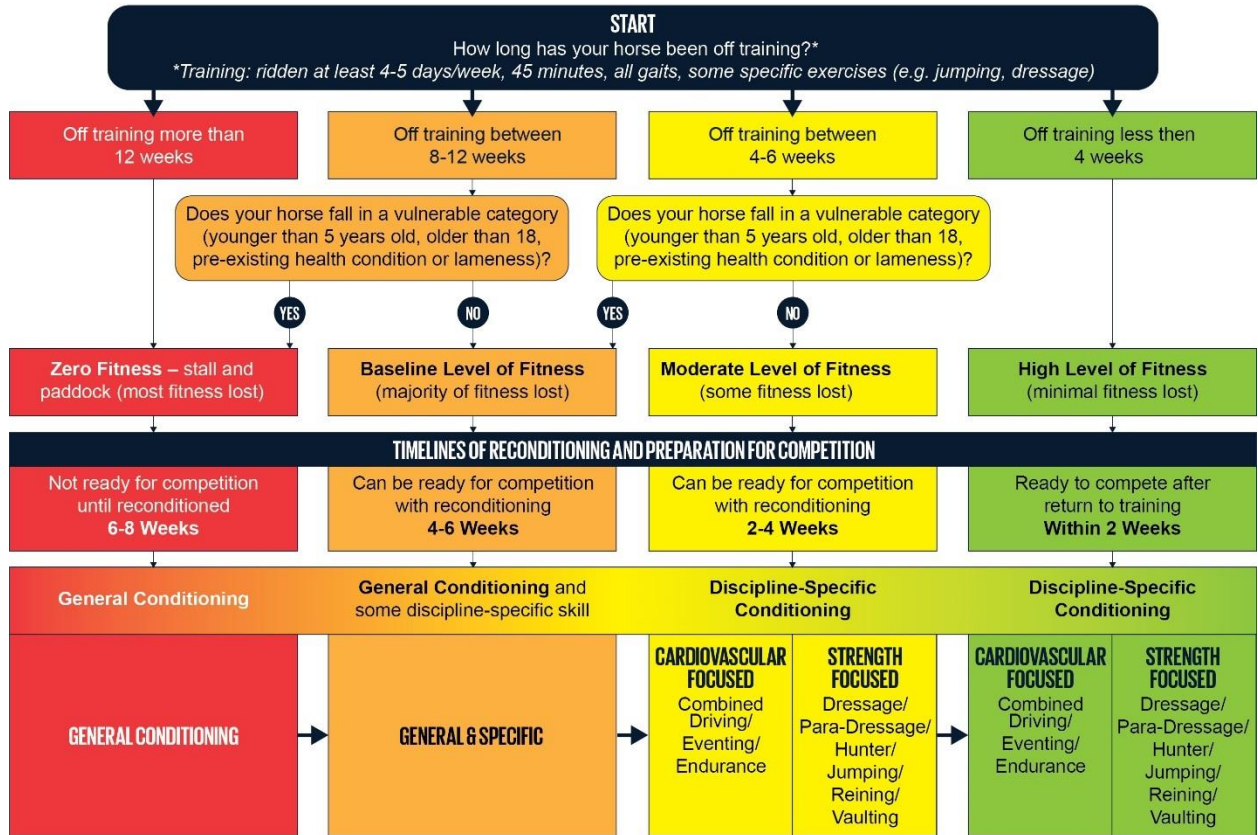
- Exercise 5-6 days per week;
- Exercise for 45-60 minutes per workout;
- Perform multiple bouts of trot and canter for periods of two (2) minutes each; and,
- Perform several consecutive repetitions of strength training exercises appropriate to the discipline.

**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.

## ENDURANCE

*The following recommendations were prepared by EC certified Endurance Technical Delegate, Terre O'Brennan, as reconditioning guidelines for horses in endurance.*

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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.

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Endurance is one of the most physically demanding disciplines in the equestrian community. Knowing that, riders, trainers and veterinary control judges need to be mindful of the possible adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our equine partners. This includes both their physical health with regards to parameters such as conditioning and basic care (e.g. vaccinations, dental work, physiotherapy/chiropractic that may have been missed due to COVID-19 restrictions), as well as their emotional or mental health (due to decreased turnout, separation from herd mates, change of stabling, etc.). All of these factors will affect the level at which the horse should return to competition.



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### *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 outbreak?
- 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):*

Here is a basic premise for a return to competition program. Based on your individual horse, you can step into this program at the appropriate level.

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 some trotting 3-5 minutes a day and increase by five (5) minutes every 4-7 days depending on previous level of fitness;
- However, break trotting up into 20-30 second intervals;
- Once you are trotting for a total of 15-20 minutes, you can start cantering for a few minutes each day in a similar time frame and interval as the trot conditioning; and,
- **Monitor your recoveries.** Your horse's pulse should always recover to 60 beats per minute or less within 15 minutes of ending exercise. If you are not seeing this level of recovery, you need to decrease the intensity or investigate the possibility of pain or a developing health issue.

### *Baseline Fitness (missed 4-8 weeks):*

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

- Be exercising 25-40 kilometres per week, broken up over multiple days; • Be ready to start increasing that exercise in either duration or speed; and,
- Be ready to incorporate hill work.

Carefully monitor body weight and soundness, as well as recoveries.

### *Moderate Fitness (missed 4-8 weeks):*

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

- Be able to train 25-40 kilometres per week at moderate speed (9-12 kilometres per hour);
- Recover quickly after short, steep or long, slow climbs and descents;
- Recover well at the end of the workout, including cooling with normal sweating and drying; and,
- Show no visible stiffness, swelling or discomfort in the hours following the workout, including the next day.



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### *High Fitness (missed less than 4 weeks):*

Horses in this category are:

- Exercising 40 kilometres per week or more;
- Handling increased speed and elevation changes well; and, • Recovering well and maintaining body weight, appetite and attitude.

To be ready to return to competition, be sure that your partners are handling this amount and intensity of exercise 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 intensity every 2-3 days. On average, it takes approximate four (4) weeks for a horse to start to lose their fitness.

### *Maintenance and Therapies:*

It may have been impossible during the COVID-19 restrictions to provide our partners much of the care to which they are accustomed. Dental work, for example, may have been missed, along with non-essential but valuable therapies such as chiropractic and massage. If it remains problematic to provide these, be aware that the horse may be experiencing some level of discomfort and decreased ability to perform. If your farrier schedule was disrupted, be aware that it may take several sessions to return the foot to perfect balance.

### *Attitude and Stress:*

Competition involves mental and emotional stress, as well as physical fitness, and additional consideration should be given to these aspects of our partner's condition. They may well have suffered from isolation and uncertainty much in the same way we have.

- Trailering. It may have been some time since the horse was transported. Is the trailer well maintained? Is the horse as comfortable loading as previously? Prior to a long trip for a competition, taking a shorter trip to an enjoyable training session may be valuable.
- Prior to isolation and social distancing, many of us routinely rode with friends or family. If you have transitioned to riding alone during training, be aware this may be more stressful to your horse.
- If you have had to change stables or separate your horse from herd mates, this can also be a huge stressor that should be considered. Monitor body weight, appetite and attitude carefully. Watch for indicators of gastric ulcers.



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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).