

TRAINING

Core-Building for Better Carriage

Here are some exercises that can be performed in-hand or under saddle to strengthen the horse's important core muscles.



The core helps support the trunk and when engaged, lifts through the back and gives the horse a strong topline capable of carrying a rider and jumping or performing dressage movements. (antje.rotpunkt - stock.adobe.com)

By: Sheri Spencer, CEMT PTS | October 20, 2023

One of the best ways to improve the horse's longevity while promoting their well-being and soundness is by ensuring they are fit and developed well enough to support the weight of the rider while carrying themselves properly.

Horses that drop or hollow their backs, regardless of the reason, are at increased risk of injury in various ways. Back pain is almost certainly inevitable, and such posture discombobulates the entire musculoskeletal system, impairing movement, and can snowball into an avalanche of other issues if left unaddressed.

The following exercises are intended to strengthen the horse's 'core' muscles and can be performed in-hand or under saddle. The core helps support the trunk when being exercised or ridden. When engaged, they lift through the back, giving the horse a topline capable of carrying a rider and jumping or performing dressage movements.

Depending on the experience and fitness level of the horse, it may be beneficial to introduce these exercises in-hand. Most need only be performed a few times per session. With each, focus on a steady rhythm and correct posture, but it is better to let the horse go slowly and figure it out. Encourage them to think it through, and they will be more likely to work the desired muscles as well.

Pole Work

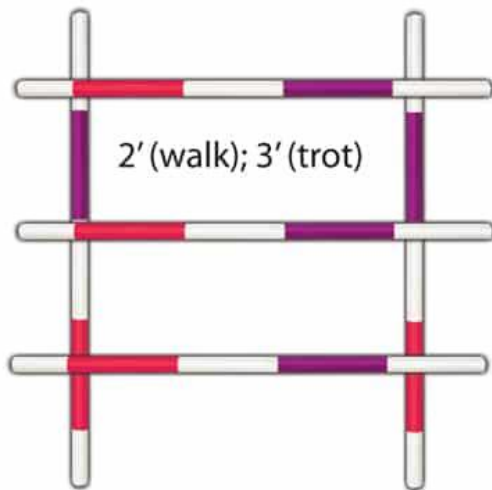
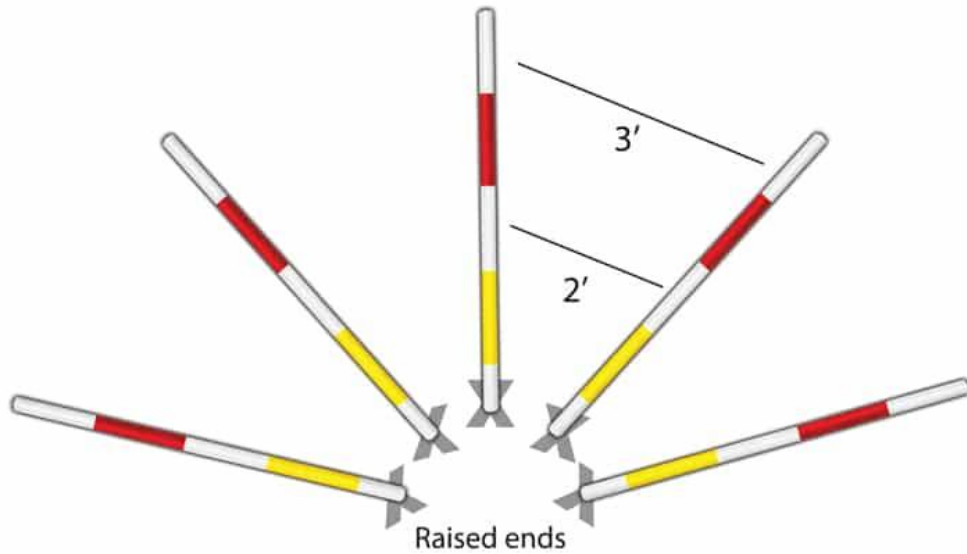
The possibilities with poles are almost endless, and studies have now proven their effectiveness at targeting specific muscle groups for core support including the longissimus dorsi (muscles that run parallel to the spine) and rectus abdominus (muscles that run parallel to the ventral midline along the abdominals).

Interestingly, pole exercises performed at the walk actually target more of the supporting trunk muscles than at the trot; this is likely due to the absence of the momentum that would otherwise help them over. (Compare running up the stairs with taking one step at a time. One requires more cardio but less effort, the other more effort.) Raising the poles encourages even more engagement through their flexor chain, stretching the neck and back and requiring more hip flexion.

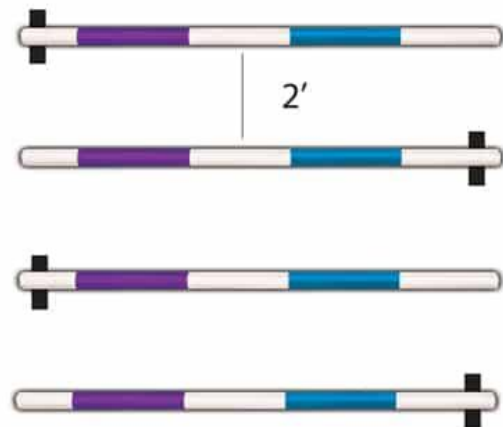
Place poles 2-2.5 feet apart and begin by simply walking through in both directions a few times, encouraging the horse to stretch his neck and pay attention to his feet.

Placing 3 to 6 poles parallel in a single grid is sufficient to develop proprioception and target the desired muscle groups.

Increase the intensity by raising the poles to deepen the articulation of the joints. Note that you will need to shorten the distance slightly with increases in pole height.



Trot poles raised with poles



Walk poles with alternating raised ends

Examples of Pole Exercises.

At the trot, although the momentum of the gait helps them, done correctly and mindfully, they will help develop overall expression, cadence, build topline, and help develop better evenness in their stride. The optimal distance between trot poles may vary slightly depending on your horse's stride, but 3 ft is good place to start. Like the walk poles, 3 to 6 in succession is plenty. If the horse barges over them with an inverted frame, however, regulate the rhythm, or return to the walk exercises, reinforcing the correct posture.

Once the horse is comfortable with the standard parallel grid, you can play around with raising alternating ends, or raising all on one side, or both, and going through them both ways. Do pay attention to signs of fatigue and rest and reward accordingly.

To increase the challenge further, setting up a fan shape with 4 to 6 poles adds additional layers to the concentration and proprioceptive awareness required. Fans can be set up with the narrow ends 2 ft apart, and the fanned out ends 3 ft apart, or adjusted to fit on the curve of a circle. Fans are handy, too, because you can use them for both walk and trot exercises without having to adjust distances. Your horse must find his way over and learn to adjust his stride length in addition to the other benefits. With the fan, you can also raise one or both ends to increase joint articulation and effort required.

There is an endless myriad of ways you can set up and play with poles, but keeping it simple still achieves the desired results.

Reversing with Good Posture

Reversing can be a lot more challenging than you might think. It's a core conditioner, requiring the abdominals and the muscles of the flexor chain to fire. To do it correctly, however, you'll want to ensure a neutral spine and neck as you back up for 4 to 10 steps.

Increase the challenge by turning the reverse into a schaukel. Reverse 4 to 6 steps from square and immediately walk forward again for 4 to 6 steps, and repeat. Be sure the horse remains straight throughout his body with a neutral neck carriage. Pay attention to

signs for fatigue and be mindful of asking for more than the horse is able, physically or mentally..

Mobilize the Shoulders

There are several ways you can ask for shoulder mobility, which forces the horse to take more weight on their hindquarters and engage their thoracic sling.

For a young or unfit horse, you can begin by asking for a turn-on-the-haunch from a halt. Ask for enough 'forward' at the same time as 'sideways' to encourage walking steps with the hind end, avoiding planting and pivoting. Once you've developed a basic understanding of the lateral aid, you can incorporate this concept into more movements.

Under saddle, incorporate leg yields to develop the shoulder girdle and core stability. Executed along the rail or by riding the quarter-line to the rail will familiarize and help condition the movement for both horse and rider before moving on to more challenging exercises.

This can be performed at the walk or trot, but best introduced at the walk: on a circle, ask for 4 to 6 steps of shoulder-in, then straighten for 4 to 6 steps, and ride 4 to 6 steps haunches in. Straighten as before and repeat. This deepens engagement of the thoracic sling, while also developing the adductor muscles of the hind limbs. Be sure to perform this exercise in both directions and with reasonable expectations for the horse's level of education and fitness.

Fun with Hills

Don't miss opportunities outside of the arena as well. Either in-hand or under saddle, you can make use of a shallow ditch by serpentine along its length. Walk down into the ditch at a slight angle and up the other side, turning to go back down into the ditch as you crest the hill, and so on. This exercise will help strengthen lateral stability in addition to the core muscles.

Leg yielding up a hill is another exercise that really forces deep engagement of the thoracic sling along with the other benefits of hill work. As you ride up a long slope, ask for 4 to 6 steps moving laterally (ideally starting in their stronger direction), then straighten for a few steps, and ask for a leg yield off the other leg.

Educating and developing the horse in ways that strengthen and support their backs is the kindest favour you can do for a ridden horse. Train the habits you want to create, ensuring the horse is performing with a correct posture, and they'll develop the foundation needed to carry themselves while drastically improving their likelihood of carrying you as well for years to come.