

TRAINING

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Indirect bend at
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SMART *Warm Up*

Michael Langford explains the importance of a good warm up plan for both you and your horse

Having a good warm up programme is very important for any horse regardless of which discipline you are doing. It's important that we get our horses not only physically soft and supple but also with us mentally so that they focus on the job that we are asking them to do.

I use my warm up as an assessment of my horse. It's important that I don't miss anything at the basic level of warming up as this may cause problems when I move things up a gear. I want to know that when I touch the rein or use my leg that my horse is going to respond without hesitation or question and, most importantly, in a willing manner.

An easy way to ride the basic exercises without forgetting anything is to break your horse down into parts. At the most basic level I think of my horse as three parts - the head and neck being one, the shoulder and hip being the other two. When they are good through their body on one rein I move on to the other, repeating the same programme going the other way.

Take your time when warming up and don't rush to go to one hand. I'll only take my reins in one hand once my horse is working well two handed and I won't hesitate to go back to two hands if things aren't going to plan further down the line.



Working on
forward motion

MICHAEL'S WARM UP

1 HEAD AND NECK

I start my warm up walking circles, asking my horse to bend through his neck in both a direct and indirect bend. I expect him to give his face with no resistance and have no change in his stride or in his body when I pick up on the rein. I'll spend as long as I need to work on this until I feel him completely relax.

2 SHOULDER

Next I start moving the shoulder out of the circle. I do this by sitting a little weight on the outside of my seat, squeezing the inside leg and slightly lifting the inside rein. I want to feel my horse lift his inside shoulder, soften through the inside of his body and move out underneath me. Typically I'll only do this a few times on each rein until I'm happy that the horse is soft and listening.

3 HIP

I then move on to working the hip. I continue to work on my circle pushing the hip to the inside while maintaining the rhythm of the walk. It's important to get your horse soft through the hip as it will help with lope departures and lead changes among other things. I also work a little on stopping and backing before going into the jog, making sure that the horse stays soft and straight when I ask him to stop from the walk.

4 JOG

Once in the jog I work through the same exercises with the same goals. I like to trot my horses out a bit to encourage them to drive from behind. While most classes require a western jog it is still important to maintain collection through having an elevated shoulder and ribcage with the drive coming from behind. It's easy to focus on going slow with the head down as that's what the classes require but often the quality of movement is lost. I focus on quality of gait and softness first and going slow second!

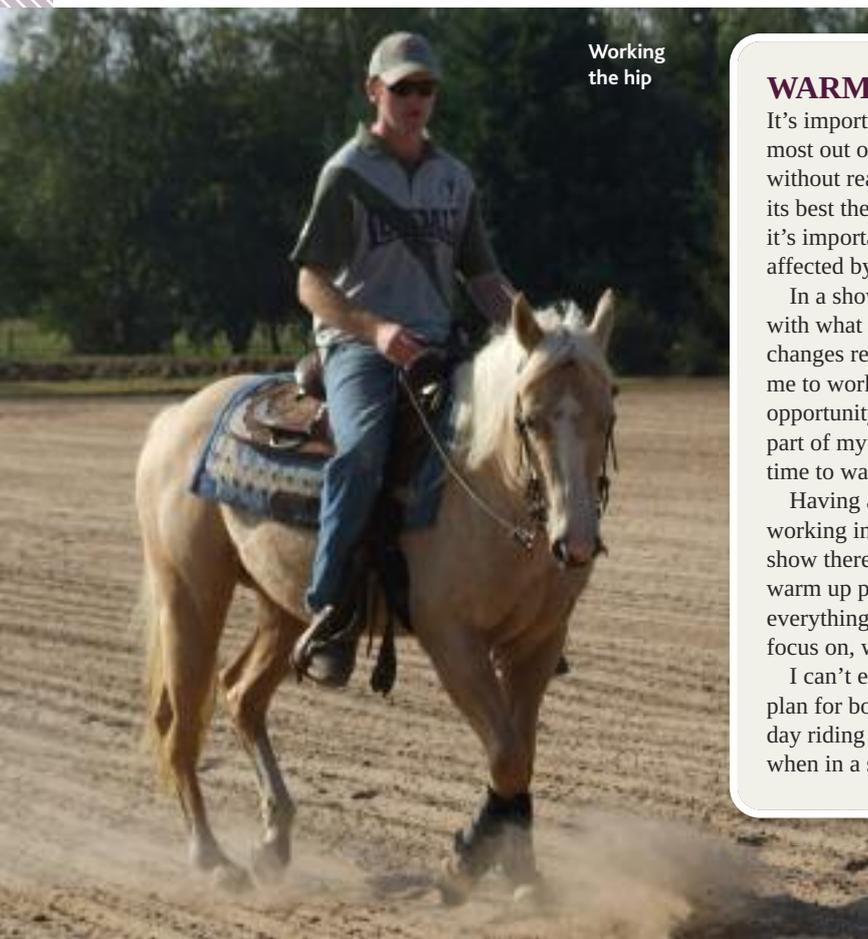
5 LOPE

Once I'm happy with the jog I'll move onto the lope. Quality of movement and softness are again the most important things to me. When reining I like to lope my horses until I feel they are properly warmed up and relaxed before I start working on anything manoeuvre specific.

6 MANOEUVRES

For the reining class, which has specific manoeuvres, I'll work on speed control on circles, then leads changes before moving on to stopping. When I work on my spins depends on the individual horse and what works best for them. For any class that requires a change of lead, hip control exercises and counter canter work are important elements to incorporate.

Counter canter is great for lead changes and lope departures



Working the hip

WARM UP FOCUS

It's important to fully understand the warm up exercises to get the most out of your horse. I often see people going through the motions without really achieving anything more. I find it rare that a horse is at its best the first time I ask it to do something. When you go to a show it's important to take your warm up programme with you and not be affected by what others are doing.

In a show environment it can be easy to lose focus and end up going with what everyone else is doing. My warm up programme never changes regardless of what is happening around me. If it is not safe for me to work my horse in as I would at home then I will wait until the opportunity arises. I'd rather sit still for five minutes than miss out part of my programme. Because of this I always give myself loads of time to warm up.

Having a solid programme can really help a novice horse cope with working in a new environment. The first time I take a young horse to a show there is a good chance that he may be a little on edge and a good warm up programme is something that he'll be familiar with when everything else is new. This can give him confidence and a point to focus on, which can really help him relax.

I can't emphasise enough how important it is to have a warm up plan for both horse and rider. It will prove invaluable in your day to day riding and training, and will help you focus and your horse settle when in a strange environment or at a show.