

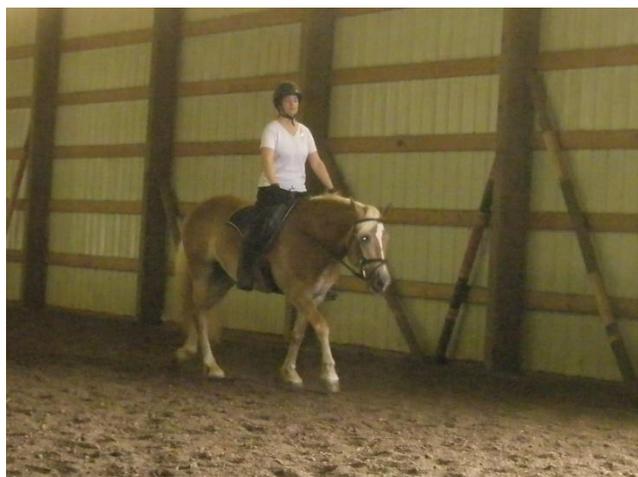
# Walk Breaks

By Danica Yates

The significance of taking walk breaks can often be overlooked in the process of training sporthorses. Each of the three gaits is important and should be developed evenly. Developing a relaxed, forward free walk can help improve the other gaits. Walk breaks should be used with intention. Timing and technique can make the most of your time spent in breaks. Walking can serve as a useful training tool both mentally and physically.

When you take walk breaks make sure your horse is moving out in his walk. Often when horses take a break on a long rein, they 'go to sleep' in the gait. You want to encourage your horse to take big open steps even when he is walking to encourage reach in his stride and freedom in his back. I tell my students "no slugs" when I see that a horse has fallen behind the leg. Staying in front of the leg with big open steps is the most beneficial for your horse's body. Walking forward works and stretches the correct muscles for developing free movement. Think of yourself walking: in the mall shopping you take little mincing steps and can come home with sore muscles and sore feet. However, if you are 'walking forward' on a hike or other outing, walking can be a useful tool for stretching and relaxing. Also, it is very important in dressage and jumping to always 'think forward' whenever the horse is being ridden in the ring. Even in the breaks, do not let the horse fall behind your leg- he should learn to stretch his walk without constant reminders. Developing a good free walk can help improve the forward motion and freedom in the other gaits.

Walk breaks can be used as an important training tool for horse and rider. When a horse has done something very well, I will come back to the walk and 'make a fuss over him' petting and giving verbal praise and then let him walk for a minute on a long rein. This is a very powerful way of letting the horse know that he has done what you asked correctly. When horses are learning, they will remember this positive reinforcement and associated it with their actions. Some riders like to give treats from the saddle as further reinforcement of the praise. The free walk is a valuable time to let the horse think about what has just happened in his training. The still moments are important as well as the busy ones. The breaks create a space where your horse can process your cues and not become overwhelmed. Jumpers who become revved up in their work will benefit from frequent halts and walk breaks. Once relaxation is reestablished, an even tempo down to your next fence may be easier to achieve. Walk breaks are important for the rider as well. If you ever feel yourself becoming frustrated,



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walk and think about it. It is always better to slow things down and figure it out than to keep pushing and make mistakes. Walk breaks are useful times to relax your body and mentally check up on your position and schooling plan for the day.

Dressage and jumping are physically and mentally demanding sports. For all horses and especially young horses, it is important not to mentally push them too fast. I use the same training principles of rhythm, relaxation and contact with any age horse. I require the same responsiveness and attention from with my three year olds as with any horse; I just make sure to give them lots of walk breaks and appropriate length work outs. Again, relate it to yourself- have you ever felt an 'information overload?' Sometimes it is not harmful, so much as it is ineffective. Don't try to pack too much in one session. Make sure if you begin working on a task with your horse, that you do not get off topic. It is important to follow through with the work you begin, so that your horse can learn a clear and decisive lesson by the end of your ride. For example, if you are working on sensitivity to the half halt, you can use transitions within and between gaits on various patterns. The goal is to achieve some good reactions before you are done. Don't settle for a mediocre, mildly respectful half halt and start work on a half pass or jumping a forward line. Follow through with your objective. As well as his mind, dressage and jumping are quite demanding on a horse's body, working horse's muscles, joints, tendons and ligaments. Especially for the heavy built horses, suspension and impulsion put significant impact on his physical systems. Overuse injuries such as suspensory ligament injuries can occur in normal training.

With training horses, I work by the maxim, "less is more." (\*Thank you Bob McDonald for your tutelage!) The goal is to school effectively and school less. Every jump you take or every day you school wears on the horse's body, so make each one count. Drilling over and over again, I believe, is not the most effective way to train. Riding each pattern or jump with intention is effective. Get it correct and stop. There is no need to ride on and on when the horse has made an effort for you and done what you have asked. Reward his good efforts and save him. Some horses need more schooling than others, but generally with sporthorses, 4-5 days per week is sufficient work to train them effectively. A workout may last 20 minutes up to 1 hour. Just remember that the precision and exertion of the sports differ from trail riding or other pleasure riding which can go on for hour after hour with minimal impact.

Free walking is a fabulous way to condition your horse with minimal impact on his body and mind. 30-40 minutes of walking a day will only add to his relaxation and fitness. If your barn has a hot walker, a brisk walk on that should be incorporated into his workout plan. Try incorporating 15 min of walking into the beginning or end of your ride. It is a good time to bond with your horse as well. I always come out and give my horses at least a few times around the ring to simply walk and stretch. It sets the right tone for the ride rather than getting on and demanding something from them right away. Allow your horse and yourself the time to walk together and breathe.

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