

# Conditioning for the Therapeutic Lesson Horse

Dana Eklund & Karen Ososki



*Savannah Before and After  
Eagle Mount Bozeman, MT*



Equine-assisted and therapies (EAAT) horses not only give from their hearts, but they also show up for very physical and mental challenging work, day after day. Most therapeutic programs vary their horses' workloads and give them time off to help prevent lameness, burnout and behavioral problems. While this approach is essential for overall health, it is not enough to keep the horses fit enough to be able to perform optimally. To be able to optimally develop and perform, these horses need to be placed in a conditioning program designed to improve

overall fitness, strength and endurance. Once a horse is able to move athletically and freely, he becomes a more willing partner and is capable of working with comfort, calmness, and soundness.

To be capable of continuing their jobs over time, therapeutic horses need a healthy conditioning program to maintain physical and mental soundness. The goal of conditioning is to enable the body systems to endure increasing levels of exercise without causing any system to fail. EAAT horses do a lot of slow movement, but need to work several

## “It takes a village”

EAAT Programs are often given horses with pre-existing lameness issues or aged horses that need extra care to remain in the programs. In addition to a healthy conditioning program, these horses are more likely to maintain body and mind soundness from a holistic healthcare approach.

A holistic healthcare approach may include farriers, dentists, veterinarians, massage therapists, acupuncturists and more.

To have the horses treated by so many professionals can be financially challenging. Programs can save money by working with professionals in the process of earning certification. Services may be provided at reduced rates or at no charge while gaining experience. These services are invaluable to keeping the herds sound.

## Healthy and happy horses are vital to ensure participant safety.

hours a day. The program needs to address the physical stamina and the cardiovascular endurance demands created by heavy, unbalanced participants.

When carrying riders, the goal is for the horse to sustain the body position and balance he naturally has without the rider, and to move easily and without restraint under the rider's weight. For the horse to be able to obtain this unrestrained movement, he must be fit. When the horse is fit, he can relax and move unhindered. Unfit horses can experience sore backs or lameness issues such as pulled muscles, tendons, or ligaments.

This program session will concentrate on how to improve performance and maintain mental and physical soundness for the therapeutic equine through a conditioning program designed specifically for them and will address the volunteer and staff challenges in designing and maintaining a conditioning program. For the past four years, Dana Eklund, Equestrian Assistant Director at Eagle Mount Bozeman, (a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center) in Bozeman, MT, has successfully utilized training based on the Refined Performance Horsemanship (RPH) Program

founded by Karen Ososki. Ososki combined different discipline and training elements to create a holistic approach to horse training and conditioning that results in relaxed and willing minds and fit, balanced, and supple bodies.

For an equine athlete to remain healthy, the horse needs to have its body and mind strengthened and conditioned over a significant period of time. To perform to its highest level of potential, the horse needs to be encouraged into a ‘healthy frame’ or ‘position’ that allows it to develop the necessary muscles for balance and throughness. When these muscles have been developed through a careful and complete conditioning program, the equine athlete will be able to enjoy moving freely without injury for many years.

Eagle Mount Bozeman is currently establishing and executing a complete herd-conditioning program. A few of the horses in the conditioning program will be used as examples in the presentation.

## Where to start?

### Using Volunteers

An advantage to an effective conditioning program is that

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*Savannah and Emily placing 1<sup>st</sup> at Special Olympics*

*Eagle Mount Bozeman, MT*



## Refined Performance Horsemanship Conditioning Program Steps for Therapeutic Lesson Horses

The RPH conditioning program for therapeutic horses focuses on developing cardiovascular, muscular, and skeletal (postural) foundations that are biomechanically healthy. This conditioning program includes:

- Establishing baseline condition and soreness scores for each horse
- Formulating a fitness plan for each horse and tracking their improvement
- Incorporating Equine Biomechanics principles for healthy postures
- Accumulative, progressive long-slow distance work for endurance
- Interval training for cardiovascular conditioning
- Cavalletti and low gymnastic jumping for strength training and suppling
- Groundwork exercises for suppling and mental relaxation
- Carrot stretching exercises for core–strength development

volunteers of all experience levels can be used in the hands-on conditioning implementation. Enthusiastic volunteers with little experience can be used to hand-walk horses. Power walking is a highly beneficial form of exercise for the horse and something a person can do while they improve their confidence and horse handling skills. The volunteers with intermediate experience can power walk horses under saddle, and do conditioning groundwork. When the riding skills aren't quite strong enough for them to effectively condition at the trot and canter, walking and groundwork are still beneficial to the horse, again, while the volunteer continues to strengthen their skills. For the advanced riders, they can follow the conditioning program at the trot and canter, with cavaletti and hill work as appropriate. The beginner and intermediate riders can also help with warming the horses up at the walk and cooling them out; this is efficient, if a center has few advanced riders to help with conditioning. There is room for everyone to help implement a program like this!

## Leading

All the proper conditioning in the world can be quickly undone in the therapeutic riding class if the horse is traveling in an unhealthy way. The word unhealthy is used here to describe a manner of going that does not contribute positively to overall fitness. Examples of this can include: a quick, tense, pace with the horse traveling upside down, a horse ducking behind the vertical to avoid pressure, or a horse that is not tracking up. In our industry, our goal is to have a properly fit and balanced horse that will travel with ears level to the withers. At the walk, the head needs to gently swing back and forth and with the barrel swinging out of the way for the hind end to come through. Not only does

## Schooling

*The proper work without the proper support is like creating a house of cards- both must happen hand in hand or the house will fall.*

Conditioning and schooling need to go hand in hand. Whereas conditioning is like going to the gym, schooling is equivalent to taking tennis or golf lessons. Schooling is training movements and skills with repeated practice to further the horse's training. Schooling exercises center around a horse's mental and motor control. Many horses are schooled beyond their conditioning, resulting in soreness or lameness issues.

A schooling plan needs to take into consideration any specific coordination or mental challenges presented by a specific discipline. EAAT horses need to be schooled in exercises and movements required by participants in Paralympics, Special Olympics, and advanced lateral work with able participants. The horses need to be properly schooled in the specific exercises and movements in advance so that the participants can easily learn these exercises and movements.

The RPH schooling program incorporates the classical training scale that has been successfully used to encourage healthy progress in performance horses. Relaxation, balance and appropriate hand contact are at the foundation of the scale. Followed by throughness, impulsion, straightness, and at last collection. By progressively bringing the equine athlete along at an appropriate sustainable timeline, one is able to maintain the healthy mental and physical well being of the horse.

## A Proper Warm-up

Both conditioning and schooling sessions need to start with a proper warm-up.

Relaxed and warm muscles are energetically efficient while tense and stiff muscles result in an overall increase in energy expenditure. Warm muscles contract more powerfully and warm fibers are more pliable. This reduces the risk of injury due to tearing of the muscle fibers.

Cold muscles are not as flexible and elastic as warm muscles and are prone to such injuries as: muscle, ligament, and tendon strains; muscle spasms; stiff gaits; and maybe even torn muscles or tendons. Dr. Hilary M. Clayton in her book, "Conditioning Sport Horses", writes, "It can be a mistake to perform suppling exercises at the start of the warm up while the tissues are cold because the fibers in the muscles, tendons, and ligaments are more susceptible to overstretching injuries."

### Warm-up Example:

- 10 minutes of active forward movement at the walk
- 10 minutes of active trot or canter on the lunge
- 20 minutes of groundwork exercises
- Relaxation exercises
- Suppling exercises

Help keep your horse healthy, and avoid muscle strain and resulting performance issues by routinely practicing a sufficient warm up routine. The warm ups should be short so as not to promote fatigue.

this provide maximum therapeutic movement benefit to the rider, it allows the horse to use it's back in a biomechanically healthy way so they are able to properly support their rider without excess strain.

Eklund encourages all of the volunteer leaders to "lead a horse the same way you would ride it." Shoulders over hips, eyes forward, weight in your legs, and a good posture are essential for helping the horses to stay balanced during leading- if we are riding, we would not turn our body to the right and pull on our right rein if we wanted to stop. To stop, we would keep our eyes forward, breathe out, and stay balanced while we cued our horse.

To test your horses body and mental awareness, try leading them around without halter or lead rope. With their head staying at or near your shoulder, practice stopping, starting, and turning in sync. When you stop, do they stop with the front feet square? Will they take all cues and directions in a relaxed manner without you *needing* a rope or halter? If so, congrats! Your horse probably has good body awareness, knows how to travel in a healthy way, and will probably not face early burnout. All horses have the potential to learn how to travel like this; however, it is up to us to teach and support them appropriately, which means minimizing micromanaging and teaching them how to use their bodies in a healthy posture.

By following a conditioning and schooling performance plan based on proven foundation principles, EAAT equine athletes will be able to attain the level of performance that therapeutic centers are seeking and help enable these athletes to continue at a performance level for many years.

## Presenters

Karen and Dana presented at the 2012 PATH International Conference. Their co-keynote presentation focused on - "Improving performance and maintaining mental and physical soundness for the therapeutic equine through relaxation, suppleness, balance, and biomechanical principles incorporating groundwork exercises." See "Strides" Summer 2014 for RPH's groundwork article.

Dana Eklund, PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor and Equestrian Assistant Director and Head Instructor at Eagle Mount Bozeman, (a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center) in Bozeman, MT. Dana has a B.S. Degree in elementary education.

Karen Ososki, named one of America's "Top 50 Riding Instructors" by the American Riding Instructors Association and a 2014 featured "Ride with the Best" clinician at the legendary Ohio Equine Affaire, she is an internationally sought-after clinician with a demonstrated ability to improve performance in equines of all disciplines, while maintaining and enhancing their mental and physical soundness. [www.KarenOsoski.com](http://www.KarenOsoski.com)



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