

## BASIC CARE OF THE FIELDHUNTER

This short synopsis is offered as a collection of helpful hints to keep your fieldhunter going throughout the hunt season. It is not meant to be a veterinary guide, nor a book of rules, it is a sharing of many years of trial and error and horse management experience.

The Fieldhunter is a saint among horses. He is expected to leave his nice warm barn happily and load into a cold, dark trailer in all kinds of weather. He is expected to stay clean enough that he does not need weekly baths, but be able to tolerate one in cold temperatures if he is unpresentable. He is expected to remain quietly tied to his trailer with all manner of commotion going on and behave under saddle when every other horse around him is exploding. He is expected to be obedient at all times and tolerant of poor footing, poor riding, badly presented jumps, being bumped, jostled, kicked at and cut off, dogs underfoot, and four hour galloping foxhunts, three days apart for eight months a year, on top of which we expect him to **STAY SOUND**.

Would we put up with this kind of schedule??? I think we not only would not, but, could not, yet, somehow, we expect it of our patient Fieldhunters. We must, therefore, try as valiantly as they do, to provide them with the wherewithal to carry us through the entire foxhunting season. An adequate conditioning schedule prior to hunting season goes without saying. A written recommended conditioning schedule is available from the hunt.

The feeding schedule for a working hunter must be tailored to the individual metabolism, work load, appetite, and quality of feed. It is a must that he be wormed on a regular basis in order to get the most use from the feed offered. His teeth, too, must be checked and floated (points filed). These small things can make the difference between proper nutrition and a horse without enough fuel in his furnace. Generally, a good alfalfa/grass mix or quality grass hay will give your hunter enough protein and forage for his use. The mixed hays should be more grass than alfalfa for fieldhunters. Since alfalfa offers more TDN (total digestible nutrients) than grass hay, you may need to supplement straight grass hay more generously. He needs a diet high in carbohydrates, and his weight needs to be monitored closely. A heavily hunted horse uses an incredible amount of calories during the season. If more grain than ordinary seems to make him jittery or harder to control, consider full feed pellets or alfalfa cubes. Properly prepared beet pulp or bran mashes also provide extra carbohydrates and fluids to the working fieldhunter, and a warm, moist bran mash is very comforting after a cold, hard hunt. Be sure he has had plenty of water before and after the hunt, as well as during when available. Do not offer your fieldhunter a full meal on the mornings before an A.M. meet. The effort required when hunting means that normal body functions will slow down in favor of supplying needed energy for hunting stress, and quantities of food in the gastrointestinal tract can result in impaction or gas colic. Feed him lightly, but be sure to bring a large hay bag for after the hunt and on the ride home. Just like you, he will be hungry from his workout. During warm days or hard hunts your fieldhunter will use up a lot of his mineral reserves through sweat and energy manufacture. An electrolyte supplement on the day of the hunt can be beneficial in helping him stockpile

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and replace these essential body chemicals. Electrolyte supplements may be added to eitherwater or feed, (follow manufacturer's suggestions) before and/or after hunt meets, to insure an adequate source of potassium and sodium during prolonged energy usage. This is especially important for large muscled horses, or any that have experienced "tying-up" syndrome in the past. If you put electrolytes in the horse's water, be sure that he also has a source of plain water to drink from as well. Consult your veterinarian for advice. Whatever supplements you choose, try your formula long enough to evaluate its effect before switching to a different program. If you do switch programs, do your switch gradually, whether supplemental or forage, for a horse's gastrointestinal system does not tolerate sudden change well. Always be sure that your horse has access to clean fresh open water (heat your tanks), free choice mineral and salt. Be certain to offer your hunter water both before and after the hunt, but do not allow him to drink overmuch if he is hot or sweaty when you return; and monitor his return to normal pulse, temperature, and respiration, before offering him all the water he wants. When he is not working, such as turn out time during the summer or any length of time off, reduce his feed accordingly.

Keeping your fieldhunter on a regular schedule of vaccinations is also very important, for as he is going to be constantly exposed to other hunters who may or may not be known to you. Do not share water buckets or hay bags unless you know the horse you are sharing with, and do not allow him to approach or be approached by a horse you don't know, to minimize both exposures and kicking matches.

Most fieldhunters will need to be clipped to insure proper cooling during hard work in the field. The long hair that is grown to protect the horse during the winter can be smothering for the hardworking fieldhunter. Clipping the hair allows him to cool off faster, sweat easier, and be kept clean from accumulations of sweat and matted hair. The ability to sweat AND COOL OFF effectively will add miles to his endurance. There are various clip patterns which should suit the level of hunting you are doing, and the stabling arrangements you provide for your horse. A full clip is most desirable for hard working hunters, but different patterns in the most important areas, such as the large blood vessels of the neck, belly and chest may better fit your situation. DO NOT clip his legs, for he needs extra protection on them in mud, snow, and heavy going. His first clip should coincide with the beginning growth of his winter coat and you should not reclip any later in the year than January 1, or you may interfere with the growth of his summer coat. Invest in a good blanket to replace the clipped hair when he is not working. You must groom the sweat and mud off his body and legs, or saddle sores and skin dermatitis will develop. He will also scratch and roll to rid himself of ungroomed sweat, and will eventually damage his blanket while doing so.

Shoeing the fieldhunter is a farrier's challenge. Shod or not, he must have proper foot care, including oiling of the hoof wall to prevent deterioration in the wet and hard conditions. If his feet need the protection of shoes, consider snow pads and borium or screw in studs for traction, as flat metal shoes are slippery on ice and subject to snowballing in snow.

Borium is not removable, studs can be removed after hunting, which is an attractive option especially for stabled field hunters, and have the added benefit of allowing you to choose different types (such as ice, mud, grass or road) for different kinds of footing. Borium on the other hand, can be helpful for horses who are in pastures most of the time. Being unshod in snow is often beneficial, since the horse goes more naturally, however, icy footing can be treacherous, and hidden rocks or ice shards can be bruising to an unprotected foot.

Working in slippery conditions means tired legs, so learn how to wrap him or in some way provide warmth and support for him after hunting. The use of leg protection in the form of boots or wraps during hunting is somewhat controversial, although some horses require extra leg support to remain sound. If the horse interferes while galloping, has an old injury or steps on himself, an assessment must be made as to whether the possibility of injury outweighs the risk of wetness, muddiness, rubbing and loss of protective boots. If protective boots are used, it is imperative that they are kept in good repair and are cleaned after every use. Dirty or torn boots can cause much more damage than they will ever prevent. Just as there are expected standards of attire there are also accepted forms of saddlery. These standards have attained acceptance based on need. Saddle pads should not extend past the saddle nor be squared, because they can be caught in brush or fencing. Originally, they were not encouraged at all, however, it has been proven that horses are much more comfortable over the long haul, and saddles last much longer with a clean white pad to collect the sweat, and cushion the saddle. The fact that we are often in snow, mud or water is the reason protective boots are not recommended for hunt horses, although many times the protection is worth the risk for certain horses, as long as the boots are properly cared for before and after riding, so they don't become gritty, or stiff, and cause sores. Leather tack of the wide flat variety is also proper for the exact same reason. (there is less to catch on brush or heavy going.) It is also much easier to clean and maintain, since it often returns from the hunt with sweat and mud dripping from it. Bits should be as severe as needed for control, and as gentle as you can get away with. Even the best rider is going to tug on his horse's mouth at some point during a hard, fast hunt. You can severely damage an overbitted horses mouth, and loose control with an underbitted one. Sometimes a less severe bit with a properly adjusted martingale will do the trick. Training aids and bandages are not encouraged in the hunt field, as these things can often become more trouble than help in situations that require maneuverability through adverse conditions. Many times, training aids that help in ring situations become painful inhibitors which punish for no reason, when used in the hunt field, even in the most forgiving hands. This is especially if the aid is connected to the mouth or head and restricts freedom of use of the head and neck for balance. By all means, if you can only control your horse with certain kinds of tack, use it, but try to think ahead as to what situations can happen that will render the extra tack a problem, and avoid them. These things are suggested for your protection as well as to provide the field with as much "camouflage" as possible. Whatever kind of tack you use on your horse, it must always be in good repair. Check the stitching regularly, and be sure it hasn't gotten cracked or loose. Tack should always be clean and properly dressed.

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(This also extends its life). Bits and pads or string girths should be clean if for no other reason than dirty bits, pads and girths cause sores, and clean ones reflect your care, and respect for the sport.

While horses play a very important part in the sport of Foxhunting, they are not always intelligent enough to keep themselves out of trouble. Some need stronger bits than when at home, others need to be at the back of the group or out to the side a short distance. A normally well behaved horse will sometimes have a lapse. Even quiet horses will shy or become agitated if some inconsiderate person gallops past them unnecessarily. Certainly do not be the inconsiderate one, galloping past. You make your horse work hard enough, cowboying him around and asking for energy expenditure that is not necessary is foolhardy, annoying, and will eventually take its toll on your horse. Many horses will act differently in uncomfortable footing, and some will become so tuned into hunting that they will react to the horn before the rider has a chance. At a jump panel, it is often difficult for your horse to wait his turn, but by walking him quietly, or taking a circle behind the group until your turn is next, you can help him keep his flight instincts under control. Do not jump fences unnecessarily. It is dangerous and wasteful of your horse. If a horse becomes loose in the field, **DO NOT CHASE HIM**. Horses are herd animals, they will usually return to the group. Often a loose horse will rejoin the field unless we are near the kennel, in which case he will probably try to go "home". Take the time to learn how to jump properly, and be a help instead of a hindrance to your fieldhunter. If your horse doesn't know how to jump, a few lessons with a professional will develop his level of confidence and understanding, as well as add information and practice to your riding. Along with jumping comes other responsibilities which require more concentration by you on your horse's condition and mental attitude. It is easy to teach your horse **NOT** to jump by getting in his way, hurting him, or presenting him to obstacles that frighten or over face him. Remember, you need not ever jump in our field if you don't wish to. Be patient as you progress, and do not ask your fieldhunter to jump unless you are comfortable with the conditions and the situation.

Trailering to and from the hunt is also a necessary evil for your fieldhunter. He must load quietly and positively in any kind of weather and in any kind of trailer. Trailer loading is training that must not be neglected, for you may also wish to share trailering with another member, and your horse must be courteous while in a host trailer. More important, however, if he is ever injured in the field or is left to companion another injured hunter, he must load when the emergency vehicle gets to him. **NEVER** trailer a saddled horse, as the saddle can become a death trap if it becomes caught in the trailer, and be sure that blankets and halters cannot become caught during traveling or unloading. Evaluate carefully the openness or closedness of your trailer and the drafts or stuffiness that outside conditions will create on your hunter as he travels, and adjust appropriately. If you have never bounced down a dirt road in an enclosed trailer without using your hands for balance or to brace yourself, try it sometime. The compassion with which you tow your horse trailer will multiply with each jolt. Protect his legs and head if your trailer is not overwide or tall, and

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**DO NOT** feed him on the way to the meet. Drive carefully, especially on turns, and do not accelerate until the trailer is straight behind your vehicle.

Upon returning to his stable after the hunt, before you turn him into his stall, paddock or pasture, check him all over once again. Enough time has now passed since the end of the hunt for miscellaneous bumps and scrapes to become apparent. Treat them right away, and he will be ready for next hunt. If he appears to be overly stiff, some aspirin or bute will probably put him right with one dose, and a warm bran mash will soothe him internally.

As soon as hunt season draws to a close, heavily hunted fieldhunters should have their shoes pulled and be turned out for a least thirty days. This allows them to rest, mentally and physically, and to put some weight back on bodies that have become almost too lean with fitness. Hunters that have been moderately to lightly hunted may not need this turnout, but need to be evaluated for continued use, especially if they are to be hunted again in the fall.

Summer riding for the fieldhunter should be tailored as a prerequisite to the coming season, not as a second vocation. Heavily hunted fieldhunters should not be required to work as hard in the summer as they do in the winter. More moderately hunted fieldhunters can continue to work, with some consideration given to the coming season. Lightly hunted fieldhunters probably have a summer schedule, and can be used for both situations. If your hunter is turned out for some or all of the summer, or you plan on starting a new horse hunting, ask to help with the hound exercise schedule in August and early September. This an excellent way of bringing your horse to hunting conditions. You should also follow a conditioning schedule, to allow your fieldhunter to be ready for the coming season. (A sample schedule can be obtained from this same packet.)

Try and develop a "feel" for your fieldhunter, and his "way of going". Just like people, horses have bad days and good days. They get viruses and sore muscles, and become stressed when circumstances change in their routines. If your horse is acting differently, even subtly, than usual, chances are something is amiss. Try and determine whether or not your horse has a mental or physical problem, and if it is acute or simply an "off" day. If you suspect something is not right, do not subject him to the extra stress of a long, hard hunt. Have him checked by a veterinarian or observe him for a day or so. You can head off many problems by being cautious, and remembering that for all his size, the domestic equine has a fairly fragile ecosystem. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and can mean a long and fulfilled relationship with your best foxhunting companion.

## Suggestions for a Fieldhunter fitness schedule and maintenance\*

From Pasture

Week 1 Day 1 Walk 20 minutes, briskly as possible (increase in 5 minute increments/day)  
(flat terrain preferable)

Week 2 Day 2 Walk 45 minutes, briskly as possible (increase in 5 minute increments/day)  
(uneven terrain, with medium hills preferred)

\*\*If your horse has been trail ridden fairly regularly, you can start with week 3

Week 3 Day 1 Walk 20 minutes, trot 2, walk 2, trot 1, walk 10, trot 2, walk 20 (increase  
Trots 2 and 3 by 1 minute each.

Day 7 Rest (turn out in pasture if possible)

\*\*if your horse has been ridden fairly regularly (lessons or competitions) you can  
probably start with week 4

Week 4 Day 1 Repeat last day out

Day 2 Replace trot two with canter of 3 to 5 minutes over 3 days

Day 5 Flatwork or Dressage lesson

Day 6 Walk 20 minutes, trot 5, walk 10, gallop 2, trot 3, walk 10, canter 3, walk 20

Day 7 Rest (turn out in pasture if possible)

Week 5 Day 1 Repeat Day 1 from week 3, with all 4 minute trots

Day 2 Jump or Cross country school (or canter and trot uneven terrain)

Day 3 Repeat Day 2 from week 4

Day 4 Hack out quietly for 90 minutes

Day 5 Repeat Day 6 from week 4

Day 6 Repeat Day 2 from week 4 (or do combination of trail and jump obstacles)

Day 7 Rest (turn out in pasture if possible)

Week 6 Day 1 Repeat Day 1 from week 3, with all 5 minute trots

Day 2 Jumping or Cross country school

Day 3 Flatwork or Dressage lesson

Day 4 Hack out quietly for 90 minutes (varied terrain is good)

Day 5 Repeat Day 6 from week 4

Day 6 Rest or Hack 45 minutes, groom for hunting

Day 7 One hour flatwork or dressage lesson, followed by 20 minute hack

Week 7 First Day of Cubbing

Most of the days above can be shifted to accommodate schedules. However, hard work should be interspersed with less demanding work, in order to build the most fitness. Always be aware of the footing and ground surfaces you work on. Be sure your farrier is trimming and shoeing for the work involved. After cubbing begins, if your horse is hunting both days, you will probably need to ride only as a stretching hack to loosen muscles on the day after, and loosen and stretch work on the day before. (Each of these rides gives you an excellent opportunity to check soundness and attitude.) Always remember that you may return early to the trailers from ANY hunt (please inform the Fieldmaster and take a buddy). You may wish to have a lesson no more than once a week. A cub hunt can be counted on as three hours of work, whether or not the hunt lasts that long. Formal season hunts can be counted on as four hours+ of work, likewise. You must be aware of the horse's soundness and nutritional needs in work as demanding as the above. If in doubt, give him time off, and start over. Be mindful of his body changes, and feed to his need. Worm and vaccinate regularly. Consult your veterinarian with any question of leg or body soundness.

**\*Other Considerations:** If you plan on hunting during the winter months, please consider shoeing for the conditions, i.e., snow pads to help your horse maintain his balance in snow and borium on his shoes if he is pastured, or removable, adjust-to-the-conditions screw-in studs, for ice and snow. Also, consider clipping either partially or fully, to allow him to dry after a sweaty workout. This of course, means you will need to blanket him after working, to compensate for his lost warm coat.