

The New Year is the perfect time to get you and your horse into great shape, and repair those winter paddocks. Stephanie Bateman finds out how...

Winter recovery

◉ PADDOCK TLC



Potholes, poached ground, and sparse grazing are issues we commonly face at this time of year – so what's the best way to manage and repair damaged pasture?

From muddy hell to **FIELD OF DREAMS**

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON ISSUES?

Poaching, waterlogging due to poor aeration, and frost lift (root damage) are the most common problems.

When turning horses out on wet ground, they often leave hoof holes and skid marks behind which damages grass, and because winter grass has a slow recovery rate and active growth is minimal, these problems hang around all winter. Grass also has a much lower nutrient value in winter.

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CAN THESE ISSUES BE MANAGED?

If you have free-draining paddocks, sensible management of the land, such as staying off paddocks completely during wet periods, minimising stocking levels, and keeping off overgrazed paddocks, can make things manageable.

However, if you are on heavy land that poaches easily, you are better to keep off it totally, if possible. Consider restricted use of the paddocks, particularly during wet periods, by keeping horses in at night or during the

day. Sectioning off badly poached areas and gateways with electric fencing can also help.

Before winter arrives, ensure that the drainage is as good as it can be. If there are drains, but still very wet areas, dig down to see if the drains are damaged.

In the summer, consider getting in a contractor to 'mole drain' (make a tunnel in the soil to re-route water into ditches alongside the field). Allowing paddocks to grow good dense sward prior to use, and not over-stocking, will also help.

PADDOCK REPAIR

When bringing back poached and bald paddocks, it is possible to over-seed paddocks in the spring when the soil has warmed up. Special grass seed mixtures are available for horse and pony paddocks that supply the correct mix for their specific needs.

Where paddocks need renovating rather than completely reseeding, a specialist contractor can be called in with a tool called a slot seeder that removes a ribbon of turf, and then drills fresh grass seed into the old sward.

Alternatively, you can over-seed the existing paddock yourself. The paddock is firstly chain-harrowed to prepare the soil, break up any thatch, and aerate the ground, then grass seed is placed on top and the paddock is chain-harrowed again to mix the grass seed in with the soil. Finally, the paddock is rolled twice to help the roots get as good a purchase as possible. Grazing should be avoided until the grass is established, and then initially only graze lightly.

Fertilisers applied in March/April time supply key elements required for quality grass growth, including phosphorus, potassium, sulphur and magnesium, and can give your paddocks a much-needed boost.

Always check the acidity (pH) of the soil first... it should be pH6.5 – anything less and the soil will be too acid, in which case adding lime will help. Avoid high nitrogen fertilisers that produce lots of lush grass, especially for owners of horses prone to laminitis. ◉

Source: Duncan Findlay, Agresource

◉ EQUINE FITNESS

Now is the time to start thinking about bringing your horse back into work after his winter break, to get him ready for the competition season. A fit horse will not only perform better, but will be less likely to suffer from injury as well

FIT TO COMPETE

A 12-week fitness programme will give you time to get your horse fit enough to compete, so start with your first competition and work back from there.

FITNESS PROGRAMME

Weeks one and two: Always start with at least two weeks of road walking. Roadwork helps to harden the muscles and strengthen the tendons. If you aren't able to ride on the road, a horse walker or a sturdy surface such as stony tracks will suffice. When riding in walk, make sure the horse is working into a contact. Start with 20 minutes to half-an-hour, building up to one-and-a-half to two hours by the end of the second week.

Week 3: Next, introduce slow trotting for two minutes at a time and gradually build it up.

Week 4: If possible, introduce gentle inclines, which you can walk and trot up.

Week 5: Introduce schooling work, including circles and shapes and short bursts of canter.

Week 6: Build up the canter work, with longer canters in the school and out hacking.

Week 7: Add interval training of two seven-minute trots, with a three-minute walk in between. On canter days, every third and fourth day, do two three-minute canters with a three-minute walk in-between. The canter should be quick enough to get the heartbeat up, but not flat out. They should be partially recovered in walk before setting off again.

Week 8: Start introducing lungeing and jumping, and build up cardiovascular work, making sure they are stretching into the contact and building up their top line.

Week 9: Nearing the competition, include fast work but alter the minutes, so a four-minute and then a two-and-a-half-minute sprint to open up the lungs. By this point, your horse should be worked six days a week, with one-and-a-half hours hacking or at least 45 minutes solid work in the school.

Weeks 10 and 11: Introduce more jumping, including grid work and clinics, and then jumping and dressage shows. You can also go cross-country schooling. Make sure your horse is ridden on a variety of surfaces, including mud and grass, not just an arena surface. ◉

Source: Sam Champney-Warrener
BHSI and BE Accredited coach



TOP TIPS FOR GETTING BACK TO WORK

- Monitor your horse, checking weight, condition, recovery and leg condition.
- Feed chaff and nuts initially, with sugar beet if weight drops off, and plenty of hay. Gradually build up the feed as the horse requires it.



- Get the horse's back and teeth checked, as well as saddle-fitting, which should be checked throughout the season as the horse gets fit and changes shape.
- Check for saddle sores and girth rubs - surgical spirit will help toughen up skin.
- Always get rid of sweat and clean tack. Residual sweat can cause rubs.
- Tailor your programme depending on what you will do with your horse once he's fit (level of competition), his age, breeding and experience.





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RIDER FITNESS

Getting fit isn't just about looking after your health, it's also key to riding at your best. Being supple, flexible, and having a strong core will help you to balance better, be more independent in the saddle, and mean you're less likely to suffer an injury

CORE VALUES...

IMPORTANCE OF RIDER FITNESS

Riders expect their horses to be fit enough to carry them through a dressage test, over a set of show jumps or round a cross-country course, so it makes sense that riders should take as much care in their own fitness preparation.

It is essential that riders remain in balance with their horse. As they become tired physically, they lose the ability to hold themselves in the correct way.

During the cross-country phase of eventing, penalties or falls often occur in the last third of the track. This is when riders are becoming more mentally and physically fatigued, meaning reactions are slower, often resulting in mistakes. The fitter you are physically, the more likely you are to be successful.

FITNESS PLAN

Step 1: Try to cut out any junk food and start with cardio vascular exercises. This can be a quick run, row, or cycle – 20 minutes is plenty to begin with. The key is that you get your heart rate up.

20-40/3

MINUTES 3 X A WEEK

Gradually increase the intensity of your sessions, so you are working hard for between 20-40 minutes at least three times per week

Step 2: Gradually begin to increase the intensity of your sessions, so that you are working hard for between 20-40 minutes at least three times per week.

Step 3: In addition to the cardiovascular fitness work, add in core strengthening exercises. These could include sit-ups, balancing on your seat bones while holding your legs and shoulders off the floor and engaging your stomach muscles.

Planking is also beneficial, as long as you engage your core and don't dip your back. Working on a fitness ball will help your balance and strength, and improve coordination.

Source: Flora Harris, event rider who follows the Jon Pitts Human Performance initiative RideSmart

**TOP TIPS
BUILDING UP
YOUR FITNESS**

- Always check with your GP that you are OK to start fittening work.
- Begin slowly, and don't overdo it, especially when starting out.
- Small increases in intensity rather than huge jumps will help to prevent injury and also help you to sustain your fitness programme.
- Stretching before and after exercise will help keep your muscles long and elastic, and help prevent injury and soreness.



GETTING OFF THE SOFA

'Couch to 5K' is a running plan developed to help beginners get into running. The plan involves three runs per week, with a day of rest in-between, with a different schedule for each of the nine weeks.

Running regularly will improve the health of your heart and lungs, and also help you lose weight. It can also be a great stress reliever and has even been shown to combat depression.

CONTACT MORE INFO

Visit: www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/c25k/Pages/couch-to-5k.aspx