Are you and your horse ready to work together?

10 factors to reflect on

FEIF - International Federation of Icelandic Horse Associations

Regard for the nature of the horse

Meeting horse welfare needs such as foraging, freedom (free exercise) and equine company (social contact with other horses) should always be the top priority. These needs are the base of good horse management, and are important factors to keep our horses healthy. Understanding how horses learn is another crucial part of ethical training and handling.

? **Are my horse's needs fulfilled?**

The horse's physical condition

Before starting any training, the horse should be free from injury or illness. Injury, illness and excess body weight put additional strain on the body and can negatively affect the horse's well-being during work. Adjusting the training to suit the horse's current physical condition might involve shorter sessions or incorporating more groundwork instead of riding.

? **How can I adapt the training to my horse's current condition?**

The horse's mental condition

A horse that is relaxed, in an appropriate arousal state for learning, confident, and free from environmental stress can easier learn new things and perform. Consider the horse's mindset both before and during training and its general wellbeing in daily life, as both shape learning, trust, and long-term development. You should always avoid excessing the timeframe of how long the horse can concentrate.

? **How is my horse's mental condition?**

Anatomy

Training should build balance, suppleness, and power in a way that avoids injury. To achieve this, it is essential to consider the horse's anatomy — how joints, muscles, connective tissue, and frame develop and function together. Respecting the body's structure ensures training reveals the horse's potential while safeguarding long-term health.

? **How well is my horse's body adapted to training?**

Training physiology

Training is about progressive adaptation. Horses develop fitness, strength, and speed in different ways depending on age, condition, and training history. The key is to balance workload and recovery, ensuring variation in exercise type, intensity, and volume so the horse can adapt gradually, and build lasting capacity to progress and perform while staying sound.

? **How can I plan my training to fit my horse's physical condition?**

The horse's posture

The horse's posture reflects how the body and mind work together in training. Correct posture allows balance, suppleness, and efficient movement, while poor posture creates strain and risk of injury. Whether ridden or not, training should encourage a relaxed but strong frame that supports both performance and long-term wellbeing.

? **Can my horse carry itself in balance for the duration of the task?**

The person's influence

Everything the rider does affects the horse. To avoid discomfort for the horse the training should aim at the horse responding to as light aids as possible. The rider should reward at the correct moment (as soon as the horse responds as desired), avoid using conflicting and relentless signals. Each signal should only have one meaning to avoid confusion.

? **How do I use my signals? How is my timing?**

The person's physical condition

The rider's physical condition influences how easy or demanding they are to carry. Fitness, weight, and balance affect how the horse's body responds: elevated heart rate, faster breathing, and muscle fatigue are normal in training, but may become harmful if the overall load is too high or repeated too often. A balanced and symmetrical seat supports correct movement and reduces the risk of injury. Asymmetries in the rider force the horse to compensate, which may lead to strain or musculoskeletal issues over time.

? **How can I become an easy rider to carry?**

The person's mental condition

Mental and emotional condition shapes the connection with the horse. A calm, focused mindset supports clear communication and builds trust, while stress or frustration can cause stress and tension in the horse. Consistency, patience, and awareness help create a positive atmosphere where horse and rider progress together.

? **How is my mental condition when interacting with my horse?**

Equipement

All equipment should fit the horse and ensure it does not cause chafing, discomfort or pain. A properly fitted saddle distributes the rider's weight evenly across the back, but fit must be reassessed as the horse's condition changes with training. The saddle should also fit the rider, since poor fit affects the rider's seat and balance. Bridles, bits, and protective gear should also be adjusted correctly.

? **Is the equipement well fitted for my horse and myself?**

Conclusion

With the help of previous steps and reflections, the training can be adapted to the horse-and-human team. Assess your current situation and adjust the training level accordingly. Practical tools or guidance from professionals can help visualise strengths and gaps, making it clearer where to focus efforts. As a human, I am responsible for making sure that both my horse and myself are adequately prepared for the task at hand.

? **Are we ready to work together, or do I need to make adjustments?**

Want to learn more about fair horse training? Scan the QR code to discover the ISES foundational training principles. (Inform ISES about this?)

Photos: Felicia Andreasson, Theresia Sandahl, Tilda Tyrbo