

Winter Warm-Ups - Beyond the 20m Circle



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WHY WINTER WARM-UPS MATTER...

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During Winter, warming up becomes more than just a routine part of riding it becomes a vital part of protecting your horse's long-term soundness.

Cold temperatures reduce tissue elasticity, meaning muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints are naturally stiffer at the start of work. This is particularly important in the distal limbs, where there is less muscle mass to generate heat and circulation. Without adequate time and movement to increase blood flow, these structures are placed under greater strain once work becomes more demanding.

Many riders default to riding repeated 20m circles during warm-up. While circles have their place, too much repetitive work on the same line, especially early in a session, can increase uneven loading and boredom - both mentally and physically.

A good winter warm up should:

- Gradually increase circulation
- Encourage joint mobility and muscle elasticity
- Activate postural and stabilising muscles
- Prepare the horse both physically and mentally for work.

Variety, patience and purposeful movement are key.

PRINCIPLES OF AN EFFECTIVE WARM-UP

PERFORM



Before diving into specific exercises, it is important to understand the principles behind a good winter warm-up.

These guidelines apply to all horses, whether they are hacking, competing or those prone to stiffness.

Allow more time than you think you need

- Plan for at least 10-15 minutes of walk
- Older horses or those with previous injuries may need longer
- Rushing the warm-up increased injury risk later in the session

Prioritise movement over outline

Early in the session, the goal is movement not shape.

- Allow the neck to lengthen
- Avoid holding the horse in a fixed frame
- Encourage swing through the back

Think variety, not intensity

- Change the rein often
- Use different lines and shapes
- Mix straight lines with gentle curves

PRINCIPLES OF AN EFFECTIVE WARM-UP

PERFORM



Start large and gradual

Tight turns and small circles place greater stress on joints and ligaments.

- Begin with large figures
- Gradually reduce the size of circles only once looseness is felt
- Avoid drilling movements early in the ride

Use transitions to activate, not rush

Transitions are excellent for warming up when used thoughtfully;

- Focus on calm, balanced transitions
- Prioritise straightness
- Avoid abrupt or sharp aids

Listen to what the horse is telling you

Every horse warms up differently.

Signs your horse may need more time:

- Shortened stride
- Resistance or tension
- Unevenness or stiffness on one rein

Adjust the warm-up to the horse you are riding that day, not the plan you have in mind.



SHALLOW LOOPS ALONG THE LONG SIDE IN WALK OR TROT

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Ride along the long side of the arena, gently looping off the track by a few metres before returning to the rail. Keep the loops shallow rather than tight and focus on smooth, flowing lines.

Why it helps:

Encourages gentle flexion, even loading of limbs, and helps prevent stiffness without overloading joints.



WIDE SERPENTINES

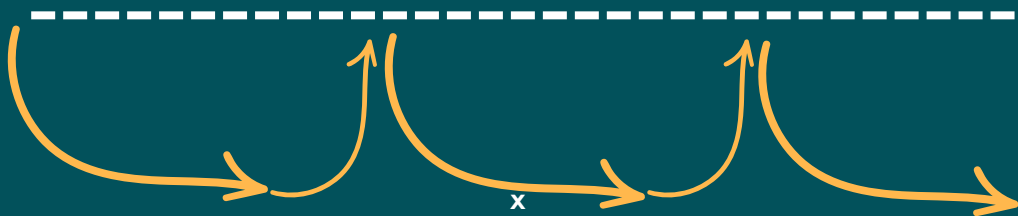
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~Ride a 3-4 loop serpentine using large curves.

Allow the horse to softly change bend through the body without holding the inside rein. Maintaining a relaxed, forward rhythm.

Why it helps:

Improves joint mobility and suppleness while keeping the horse mentally relaxed and engaged.



SPIRAL IN, LEG YIELD OUT

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Start on a large circle (20-25m). Gradually spiral in by bringing the circle slightly smaller, then gently leg yield back out to the original size.

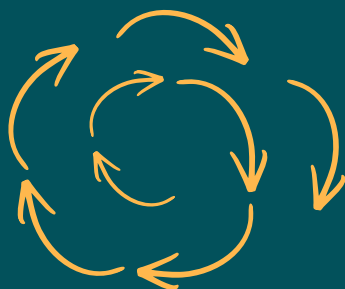
Keep the movement slow and controlled.

Why it helps:

Mobilises the shoulders and hips while improving circulation and coordination in the limbs.



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WALK TRANSITIONING WITHIN THE PACE

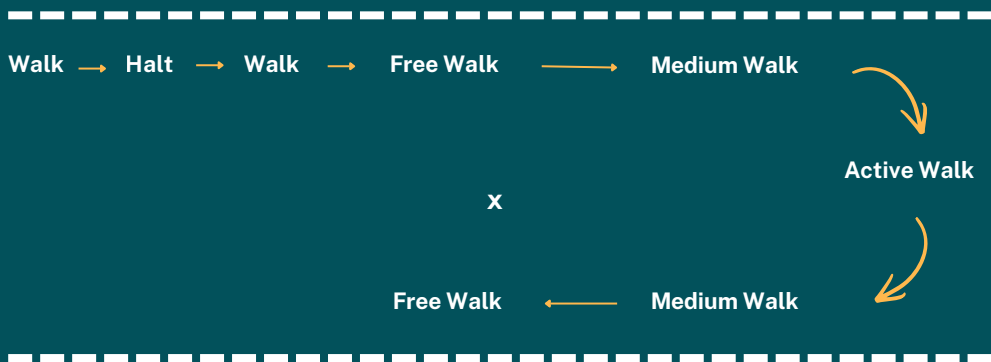
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Alternate between free walk, medium walk and a slightly more active walk.

Use your seat and leg rather than rein pressure, allowing the neck to remain long.

Why it helps:

Encourages blood flow, joint lubrication, and back movement without concussion.



WALK - HALT - WALK TRANSITIONS ON STRAIGHT LINES

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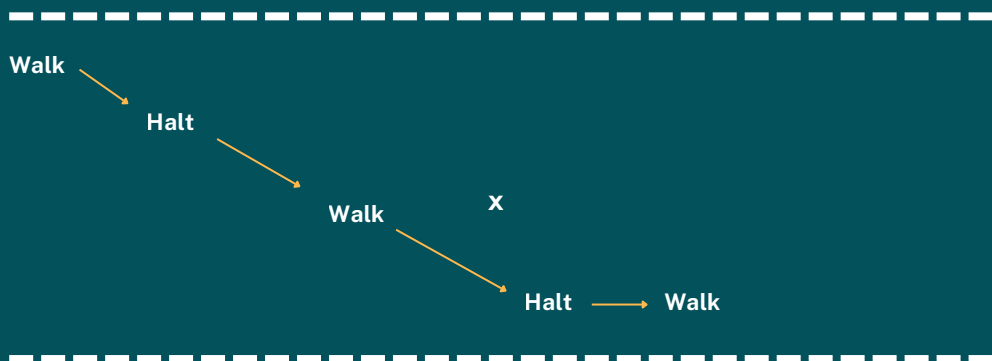
Ride down the long side or across a diagonal.

Ask for a calm halt, pause briefly, then walk forward again with purpose.

Aim for straightness and relaxation.

Why it helps:

Activates core and postural muscles while improving balance and joint stability.



CHANGE THE REIN ACROSS THE SCHOOL

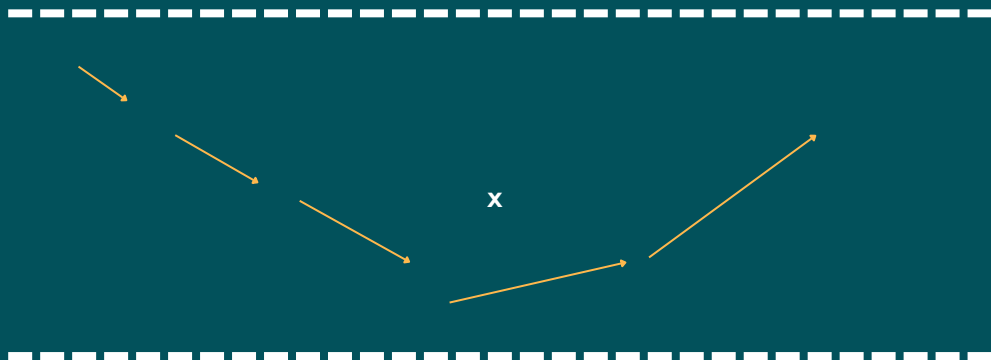
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Use diagonals, half-school loops or shallow changes of rein.

Keep the lines open and avoid sharp turns. Focusing on rhythm rather than precision.

Why it helps:

Promotes even muscle use on both sides of the body and avoids repetitive loading.





WALK POLES (FLAT OR RAISED)

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Set out 3-4 poles with generous spacing.

Walk over them on a loose, steady contact.

If appropriate, poles can be slightly raised to increase joint flexion.

Why it helps:

Improves proprioception, joint mobility and circulation to the distal limbs which is ideal for cold conditions.



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TROT - WALK - TROT TRANSITIONS

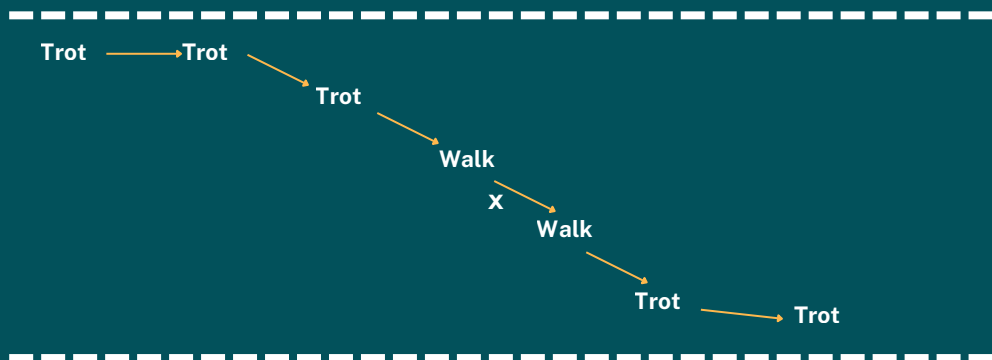
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Ride forward into rising trot, then return to walk for a few strides before trotting again.

use long lines or gentle curves rather than small circles.

Why it helps:

Encourages hind quarter engagement and muscle activation while allowing tissues to warm gradually.



LARGE FIGURE 8

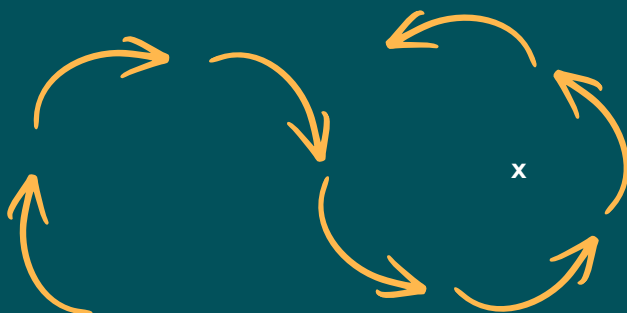
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Ride a figure eight using two large circles or ovals.

Focus on smooth, balanced changes of bend through the centre without rushing or tightening the turn.

Why it helps:

It improves coordination, balance and symmetry while avoiding excessive strain.





STRETCH BREAKS ON A LONG REIN

Periodically allow the reins to lengthen while maintaining rhythm and forward movement.

Encourage the horse to stretch the neck forward and down.

Why it helps:

Releases topline tension, supports healthy circulation and allows the back to swing freely.

Walk start to loosen allow stretch allow stretch start to gather

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Gentle Reminder for Riders

Not every exercise will suit every horse. In winter, listen to how your horse feels each day and adjust your warm-up accordingly.