How to Condition You and Your Horse for the Major Howze

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Conditioning - I have heard a number of times that The Major Howze is an endurance race. It is not! The Major Howze is a relatively short platoon mobility test which culminates in a unit saber charge against stationary targets. It is scored on the time it takes the platoon as a unit to cover the course and the number of targets successfully engaged. The present distance of 7 miles is no where close to the minimum distance specified by the American Endurance Ride Conference for an endurance event, [limited distance rides are a minimum of 25 miles]. Moreover, the cavalry standard was for the cavalryman to be able to cover 25 miles in no more than four hours with full pack. So you can see that The Major Howze is not an endurance race nor is it close to the cavalry’s own mobility standard. But you have to start somewhere...

Major Howze Preparation Tips:

- **Condition** – Begin riding long, slow distances 6 weeks in advance and slowly add speed.
- **Ride** – Get out 3-4 hours per week: 1 hour twice during the week and 1-2 hours on weekends.
- **Monitor** – Learn how to check your horse’s pulse and respiration.
- **Track** – Keep a training log to monitor your progress.
- **Feed** – Make sure your horse has adequate nutrition and water.
- **Stretch** – Stretch yourself and your horse before and after riding.
- **Enjoy** – Follow these steps and you’ll be prepared to trot your horse over distance.

What The Major Howze does is provide a mobility test to the National Cavalry Competition. It is named for the night movement of the 11th Cavalry led by then Major Howze on 4-5 May 1916 during the Punitive Expedition. The crucial aspect for our mobility test is that Major Howze and his unit of 332 officers and men covered the last 20 miles to the objective area in 2 hours and 45 minutes, in
the dark, over a spur of the Sierra Madre Mountains, at the trot and then launched an immediate, surprise, dawn mounted pistol charge on the Rancho Ojos Azules. It is a fascinating story and an outstanding example of the mobility possessed by cavalry. I recommend you get a copy of Chasing Villa by Col Frank Tompkins and read up on it.

While some horses are better suited to covering distances than others, the thing to remember is that all horses possess a remarkable capacity for delivering oxygen to their muscles. A horse can expand his oxygen delivery system by some 700%. That is a phenomenal capability. Unless you are riding a Clydesdale and the weather is 95 degrees with 95% humidity, all of the horses that I have seen at the NCC, can be conditioned to be competitive and successful in The Major Howze.

It is easier to condition your horse for this than you imagine. I know, I know, where will I find the time? Three to four consistent hours a week is what it takes. That and a lot of LSD. Don’t go getting all happy on me, that translates to Long Slow Distance. Can you ride before you go to work? If your schedule is such that you arrive at work at 09:00 or later, perhaps you can ride in the morning. If not in the morning, do it in the evening. Your objective is an hour twice during the week and an hour to two on the weekend. The goal is to be able to trot your horse for upwards of an hour each time. If you have hills and can trot up and down them so much the better, but don’t start with the hills.

But do start with the hour, and always do an hour. In the beginning walk 30 to 45 minutes with 15 to 30 minutes of trotting. Start with a walking warm-up of 5 to 10 minutes then 5 minutes of trotting. Another 10 minutes of walking and then another 5 minutes of trotting. If your horse is really out of shape, walk 15 minutes, trot 3 and walk then walk 15; repeat for the hour. If you think he is not so badly out of shape, walk 10, trot 10, repeat for the hour but be sure to walk the last 10 minutes for the cool out. I will address monitoring later so you will know what to look for to prevent you from doing too much too soon. Some dos and don’ts:

- Again, don’t start with the hills,
- Do start with the flat.
- Go for five rides before you increase the amount of trotting.
• Never increase both speed and distance at the same time. By that I mean never trot longer, say 45 minutes (increasing distance) and at the same time make the horse trot faster.
• In general it will not be necessary for you to make the horse trot faster. He will normally do that on his own as he gets in better shape.

Let’s handle some common excuses:

• “My horse doesn’t like to trot”. That is probably because you have taught him to gallop everywhere. The trot is the horses’ most energy efficient gait. Make use of it. It is also the gait that improves the others. A horse with an efficient trot will have a, or can more easily be taught a, better walk and gallop.

• “I hate to trot, it’s so rough”. Tough, learn to like it. Take some riding lessons - always a good idea. The best riders in the world regularly have someone coach them, just like Tiger Woods has a golf coach.

• “My horse has short legs and a really rough trot.” Been there, done that. It may never become a daisy clipping trot but it will get better. It helps to stretch the front legs. More on this later.

So there you are, a couple of weeks or so into this and ole Dobbin is moving along pretty well. Time for some galloping...Not so fast Jones. We are not ready for interval training yet. Stick with the trotting. If you are getting bored and you will be, there are lots of things you can have him do as you are clipping along. Side pass at the trot from one side of the dirt road to the other, collect him up and let him out.

Here you are, a 5 weeks into this, you started with 15 minutes of trotting and now you are up to an hour of trotting. Some where along week three you introduced some hills into the equation and it is going well. You are more comfortable at the trot, and old Dobbin isn’t foaming like a can of shaving cream any more - that by the way should not have lasted past the fourth ride. If it is a persistent occurrence, check your feed, if you are giving a lot of grain try cutting back on it. If you are not graining and not feeding exclusively alfalfa, call your Vet.
So there you have it, after two and a half months you have a total of some 33 rides on your horse. His coat should be shiny, he should have good muscle definition and people should be admiring him; I do not mean the usual “pretty horse” stuff, I mean “Wow! What a good looking horse!” Words of caution, it does not take too terribly long to get a horse in good cardio shape, three to four months will do it. It takes twice as long to toughen the bones, tendons and ligaments. Don’t risk those legs! Don’t do a lot of work or gallop in deep sand, avoid trotting on asphalt and always cool ‘em out. If his legs start to stock up or he gets wind puffs, ice those legs and massage them! Back off, walk more and trot less.

**Monitoring** - Get yourself a $10 stethoscope. You need to know what your horse’s resting pulse and respiration are. You also must know when you are working your horse too hard, or not hard enough. The stethoscope will help with the pulse and your hand for the respiration.

To take your horse’s pulse, put the stethoscope on (the little plastic knobs with holes go in your ears) and tap firmly on the diaphragm to see if it is working...just kidding. Have your horse move his left hoof forward about 8 inches. This will allow you to place the diaphragm of the “scope” against his chest wall behind his elbow where you can best hear his heart. You should hear a lub-dub sound- that’s one beat, not two. If you don’t hear his heart, move the diaphragm around a bit and/or tip your head up and down. If this doesn’t work, ride or longe the horse to get his pulse up and it will be easier to hear. Once you have it, look at your watch and count the pulse for 15 seconds. Don’t count the 15 seconds. It is easy to do if you stare at the second hand on your watch. Rather, tap your foot in time with the pulse and only look at the watch every few seconds.

The resting pulse will probably be between 9 and 11 beats per 15 seconds. If it is much higher than that and it is a true resting pulse, call your Vet and have him check your horse. Check this for a few days, even several times a day to get a good feel for his resting pulse. Write this down in a log book. **Keep a log of your training and conditioning program.**

To check his respiration, hold his halter with the hand that has the watch on its wrist and place your other hand so that he is breathing on the back of that hand. Count the breathes for 15 seconds and again check it several times to get an average. It should be between 5 and 9 breathes per 15 seconds. Write this information in your log book.
Now that you have a base line, what do you do with this information? Well as you exercise your horse, especially the first three weeks on the flat, stop for a few moments after you have been trotting for 10 or 15 minutes, pull out your scope and take his pulse. If you are over 30 beats per 15 seconds back off and walk. Do this again after another 20 minutes or so. The idea is to initially keep him below 30 beats per 15 seconds or no more than 140 beats per minute. Once you have finished give him 5 minutes to recover after you dismount, less if you walked in for the last 5 or 10 minutes of your ride and check his pulse. You want to ensure he is down to at least 15 beats in 15 seconds within 30 minutes. That is at the extreme edge, he should be “down” long before 30 minutes. If he isn’t, call the Vet and walk him to encourage the cooling process. If it is a hot day you can wet him down. See below for guidance on this.

As far as respiration goes, inversion in an unconditioned horse is a sign that you have pressed too hard. Inversion is when ole Dobbin is breathing faster than his heart is beating. Not a good thing. Cool him off, if it is a warm day, with water on his neck and chest. Water on the inside of the hind legs is okay where you can see all the veins. Keep the water off his hindquarters and back; you don’t want to cramp those big muscles. And walk him. Just letting him stand will actually raise his temperature.

An extreme situation is synchronous diaphragmatic flutter or “thumps”. If your horse is thumping, his diaphragm is contracting in time with his pulse. He won’t be able to get his breath. His entire abdomen will be heaving. If this is happening, you have way over done it and get your Vet. This is a life threatening situation, I repeat, get your Vet. In the mean time, get him in the shade if it is hot, repeatedly put water on his neck and chest only, and try to walk him.

Once your partner is in shape or is on his way to getting into shape, this monitoring of his pulse and respiration will all become routine and will take you merely a few moments, less than a minute. You are trying to ensure he comes down, (pulse and respiration) shortly after you get in from your ride. The in-shape horse will have dropped in 5 to 7 minutes or less. You will soon become so practiced that you will be able to read your horse and know if he is down from the extension of his nostrils or whether you have to get the stethoscope and check him.
Feed - Horses do not need a lot of grain. Horses are designed to eat grass, they are a long grass prairie animal. You have to really work a horse before the calories you are taking out of him exceed the number of calories you can put in by feeding him hay. The cavalry fed grain because it was a compact food; you could carry the equivalent of a half a bale of hay in fifteen pounds of grain. If you want to put extra calories in your horse, make his coat shine and not make him hot - here is a trick. Go to a warehouse store like Costco and buy a five gallon jug of cooking oil, soybean oil, what ever they have. Start with a little on your horse’s hay and work up to a cup in the morning and a cup in the evening. It is more effective, safer and more cost efficient than grain. Use grain from time to time, and don’t be afraid to use it at an event, but hay is the best.

Stretching - Your horse will rapidly grow to love this. Lift each front leg in turn as if you were going to clean the hoof. Move the knee forward and gently stretch the hoof forward. Do not pull it hard, do it slow and easy. Keep a hand behind the knee and the other behind the fetlock. Stretch the leg forward and down, rotating the shoulder forward. Do this to both front legs, faithfully before and after you ride. His trot will get better as his shoulders loosen up and... Stretch the back legs while you are at it. Stretch them forward and back gently. Your horse will, unless he is a rank SOB, learn to really like this.

A note of caution if you have over ridden your horse, if he is hot and exhausted, don’t stretch the legs, this can lead them to cramp up and now you have another problem to deal with besides taking care of a horse who is really, really tired.

Finally, horses can cover amazing distances. They are more or less built for it. Some heavily muscled horses will never be as good at it as a lean animal will. But for what we are doing, all the horses I have seen compete at the NCC are capable of the condition necessary to trot 7 miles. But in the end if we are keeping alive the proud tradition of the cavalry, mobility is one of the aspects we need to preserve.