



MARK SAYS...

Ensuring our horses are suitably fit for the season is an important factor that contributes to our success on the field. Compared to other equestrian sports, in polo there is a high intensity of games throughout the season. We often ask our top ponies to "double chukka" more than once a week over a four-month period and, given the demands of our sport, this is a big ask. How we carry out the pre-season fitness can seriously influence how well the horses cope with this workload and in turn we can also help to avoid injuries.

Harry Meade is a top three-day-event rider; he is well known for his thorough and calculated approach to horse management and such methods have brought him plenty of success. Harry is seen by many as one of the best cross-country riders in the world and this element of his sport is where the horse and riders as athletes are really put under pressure. Here Harry has kindly taken some time to give an overview of how he prepares a horse for Badminton Horse Trials in May. Considering he has just completed a remarkable comeback from injury, flying up the leaderboard to finish third in last month's Badminton 4-star event, this is perhaps a good time to be hearing from such a hero in the eventing world. Badminton, like the Queen's Cup, comes early on in the season for the eventers and therefore this merely highlights the importance of the preparation.

The two sports are of course very different, but I hope Harry's account will be of interest to anyone involved in horse sport and, as with all these things, I am sure there are some lessons for polo to learn from it.

Getting an event horse fit for Badminton Horse Trials



Harry is one of Britain's leading event riders. He has been placed at the CCI**** Badminton Horse Trials nine times, finishing in 3rd place in 2014. Harry is the youngest rider to have ever received an Armada dish, awarded for five Badminton completions. Harry has been selected on to the Lottery-funded World Class Squad for the sixth consecutive year for 2014 and is currently a member of the GB Nations Cup team.

Top level event horses are a rare breed that need to be brave and athletic as well as supremely fit. It takes a long time to get a horse to this level – the youngest horses competing at Badminton Horse Trials are 10 year olds – so whilst it's vital that they are fit enough it's also crucial that their training programme is such that they are able to withstand the work in order to maximise the length of their four star careers, preferably into their late teens.

The course at Badminton is over four miles long, similar in distance to the Grand National, and although the average speed around

the course is slower than in racing, anyone in polo would understand that repetitive acceleration and deceleration is very energy-sapping, so the demands on fitness should not be underestimated. Top event horses' fitness is tested to the extreme; at this year's Badminton a large proportion of the field pulled up with tired horses.

My Badminton horses start walking towards the end of November and build up, with a few weeks of road-work and some light schooling, to starting their fast work at the beginning of January. This provides four months of proper fitness preparation before



the event in early May. The horse will do two days of fast work every week for four months and the dressage and jumping training will be fitted around it.

Fitness training is a balance between sufficiently stressing the heart and lungs whilst not overloading the forelegs. Speed and concussion is the biggest killer for tendons and ligaments so I do all of my fitness work up a gradient. Living in the Cotswolds, I'm lucky to have access to good hills with varying length and steepness on springy old turf, which is better than any artificial surface. In order for fitness to increase the horse needs to work anaerobically which is only achieved by the heart rate rising above 180 beats per minute during work. This is easily achievable up a hill, with very little concussion on the legs.

The main hill I use is only about two furlongs long. The horses start by going up twice during each session and this is gradually increased every fortnight as the horse becomes fitter: six weeks prior to

Badminton he will be going up six times. Crucially, the speed throughout the programme does not increase, but the work load is amplified through repetition. The walk down between each gallop allows the horse to partially recover, the principle behind interval training.

In the run up to Badminton, the horse will compete two or three times around a one day event, where the course is about half as long as Badminton itself. This will provide an important schooling ground to test horse and rider but in my opinion does not play a substantial part in fitness preparation. My horses would work far harder up the hills at home than around any one-day event. Riders who frequently run their horses fast around the one-day circuit are less likely to keep their horses sound in the long run. As a result most horses will have their final one-day run somewhere between three and five weeks prior to Badminton, and a month of holiday or very light work before building up in a similar way over the next

three months for Burghley Horse Trials or the respective championships (Olympics, Worlds or Europeans depending on the year).

It is interesting to have an understanding of other equestrian sports but there are obviously key differences between the requirements of an event horse and a polo pony. Endurance is tested more across country, while the polo pony must have explosive bursts of speed.

Perhaps an even more significant difference is the seasonal demands on the polo pony, who may be required to play fifteen hard chukkas over three months, often with international trips extending the season – a continuous demand as opposed to the four-star event horse who is trained specifically for one event and is let down mid-season before repeating the process.

Harry is always looking for new horses, owners and sponsors to join his team. For more information please visit www.harrymeade.com