

# *The Training of the Arabian Racehorse* - Anthony Mountney

## **First Preparation**

The biggest part of any preparation doesn't cost anything - patience! It's good to have a preparation time in mind and work backwards from the first anticipated race start. Be patient and don't rush things. Let the horse tell you how it's handling the training - how it's eating, its condition, recovery and overall look of wellbeing. When an Arabian for racing comes to us and it's had no real work (such as just broken in or sitting in a paddock) initial prep will be all about muscle conditioning, bone conditioning and aerobic conditioning. This prep may last for 10 to 12 weeks and a lot of the hard work is done in this time, mentally and physically.



We start by introducing the horse into a routine of daily work, consisting in the morning of 1500m trot and 1500m of canter ridden out. The afternoon consisting of either a swim or 15-20 minute walk. In the first month they are ridden out in groups of two and three to educate them and encourage competitiveness with the horses beside them, starting to simulate positions they may be in during a race as part of the mental education.

Every second afternoon they are walked through the gates (starting barriers). This is very important, not something to be left to the last minute. It is best to start when they are not over fit and get them very confident with the gates. Walk them in without a rider first, give them time and let them stand in them, then walk them out, moving on to adding a rider. Then walk out, trot out and canter out, going forward with it as the horse becomes more confident. Remember, a race can be won or lost at the gates!

If the programs going well in weeks 4 to 8 the ridden work can step up to 2000m trot and 2000-2500m canter and continue the swim or walk in the afternoon. The only alteration is in weeks 6, 7, 8. Once a week substitute a slow day with a pace work day twice a week -say Tuesday and Saturday. On these days warm up 1400m trot then canter off with cantering from the 1000m mark, at a 800m mark pace work at 18 seconds per 200m. This is where rides are very important for timing. Finish off with 800m of work at 18 seconds per 200m or 72 seconds for 800m and try and work in pairs for competition.

## **Weeks 8-12**

Slow work days remain mostly the same in this month. If you have access to hills, trails or the beach mix the work up with that but don't over work the horse. I always like my horses to be on the fresh side, Arabians like there work a little mixed to keep their mind interested and fresh. By this time you should have a good understanding of your horse and can change things to suit your individual requirements.

Weeks 8-10 increase pace work tempo to 16-17 seconds per 200m and keep that work to 800m. Weeks 10-12 back off the slow work days, keeping your horses well and happy. These last two weeks we can let them finish their work off. Kick off at the 800m mark at 16 seconds per 200m, slowly improving the tempo from the 400m mark, let them gallop say 13.5 seconds per 200m but don't let them off the bit (remember we have to teach them their best work should be the last 200m).



These sectional times are a guide only, good riders

can tell you where they are at and how they feel, that is always the best guide of all. Now some may have a spell at this stage, some may thrive and have another 2-4 weeks. I feel it is always best to spell a horse when it's going well and sound rather than to push too far and have to spell because the horse becomes sour or tired, but again, only you can judge that.

Just a note, you can go right through a first prep and race but it takes a very good horse to cope with all that mentally and physically and you have to be very much aware of how this individual is coping with it all.

If your race horse has gone out for a spell with no problems then a spell of only 4-6 weeks is all that is needed. Some residual fitness will still be there when returning to work.

Our spelling time has passed and it's time for training to recommence. A couple of things I like to do straight away is a stomach drench worming as it is very thorough and also do a blood test which enables me to see if the horse is lacking in any area of its nutritional needs and it gives me a good guide as what we can train on with.

If everything goes to plan (and with horses it sometimes doesn't), they should settle back into work for 2 weeks before starting pace work then  $\frac{3}{4}$  pace work. Monitor their attitude, eating habits and so on.



As training intensifies, working over 1200m at  $\frac{3}{4}$  pace, become a little more aware of how all parts of the training is going. Things like: trot ups in the afternoon particularly after a fast work day to make sure that we don't have any sore spots and that the horse is sound in its action. I really look at the hamstring, girth and rib muscles, back and upper hind quarter muscles, all joints are checked and flexion tests are done also any detection of heat. We pay a lot of attention to these muscle groups. Just remember your horse is an athlete and should be treated as one!

We use a lot of deep muscle massage therapy, equissage and acupuncture to keep our horses supple and free. We also consider the horses shins as shin soreness is brought about by speed. I have had horses that have come from endurance, commence racing and go shin sore. You may say that's not possible with all the hard work endurance horses do on hard ground for many miles, however shin soreness is mostly associated with speed. Endurance horses may average 22km per hour. The pressure on the front shins of a 400kg horse is ... The pressure for the same horse at 44km per hour is... Generally it is a speed related issue and a horse cannot gallop well when shin sore. When looking at the confirmation of an Arabian for racing, look for long forearms, short cannons and good round bone, not too fine. Fine-boned horses are usually highly susceptible to shin soreness.

We take blood every 2 to 3 weeks to look at white cell levels (white cell levels tell us whether we have an infection or virus in the body system), red cells are our hemoglobin and we look for a good range present. The blood test also notifies us of electrolyte levels, whether we need more or less and also consider potassium which is very important for muscle function. If a blood test seems daunting don't worry, a good vet can take and send it for results and then interpret these results back to you within a 24 hour period.

A point I haven't touched on is riders and horse partners during fast work. Riders first: those with good knowledge are hard to find but very important and as influential as the

trainer, strapper and horse itself. I like my gallop riders to be 55-65kgs. It's easier for a horse to flatten out and gallop with that weight than say 75-85 kgs. I know what weight I would prefer to carry in a gallop and we are talking a track gallop not a trot and canter!

Partners in gallops when our horses are learning. I like to use a thoroughbred ex-racehorse that is retired from racing as a partner. If they are tractable it gives our Arabians the best partner to learn off. The thoroughbred has been there and done it before so our Arabians can sit beside them in a gallop and follow the tempo of the gallop and learn. I know that it's not possible for everyone and it's not the be all and end all but it does make the job easier than trying to teach two Arabians together, particularly to pick up the attributes of  $\frac{3}{4}$  pace then hitting the line at a gallop. A good Arabian racehorse run 10 seconds slower than thoroughbreds over 1200m so don't expect your horses to be running the same time as a thoroughbred. A breakdown of a training track gallop as a guide with an Arabian is: You want to be improving sections without the horse being outside it's comfort zone 1200-1000m (16.5 s), 1000-800m (16.5 s), 800-600m (16 s), 600-400 (15 s), 400-200m (14.5 s), 200m-finish (13.5 s).

By race time they will need to be 75-80% fit so that there is room for improvement with racing and so you don't push too hard too early and have your horses prepared any earlier than required.

### **Feeding**

Feed good, high quality feed which is clean and dust free. There are so many feed products available on the market to confuse us but I'm old fashioned, high quality grain, chaff and liberal lucerne hay. I have my horses on an average of 12-14% protein diet which consists of oats, barley, corn, sunflowers, lupins and lucerne. In grain weight they would eat approx. 5 – 6 Kg a day plus lucerne chaff, the additives we use are electrolytes, vitamin E, selenium and additional potassium. There is no tried and true feeding program, the main thing is a diet that holds condition, good muscle development and health.

### **Race Day**

Race day should be an exciting and easy day, all the hard work should be done, with plenty of time to the start prior to the race (which is the required one hour), add some time so as not to rush. Remembering that you have to get your colours to the jockeys room, work out where everything is without the rushing. Having a thorough knowledge of all the rules of racing, be confident in saddling up on race day. *Having the jockeys gear on correctly is paramount as they are putting their lives in our hands!* Be aware of the breast plate length, weight bags, non-slip pads etc. All must fit correctly and tight before leaving the saddling area as we don't want to be correcting anything in the mounting yard. Sometimes a jockey will send out a girth that may be too big, jockeys carry different sized girths so don't be afraid to ask or ask for help from someone near-by, we are all there to help one another for a successful race day!

### **In conclusion**

Don't get too overwhelmed with the technical side of this article, the largest part of racing is the horse's natural born ability and from a training point of view, **patience, common-sense** and **horsemanship**. If you have your horse fit, healthy with no soreness and happy, your horse will be able to work and train to its best. Remember not to overwork or over stress as that is the quickest way to end your preparation for a race.

Right at the moment we are in a very exciting period for the Arabian Horse in Australia due to the hard work over many years by all those at NARA. Without their persistence we would not have the opportunity to show case our racing Arabians.