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OW often should I ride my horse?” “How hard should I ride my horse?” “How long should I ride my horse?”

I am consistently asked questions like these about training schedules, and it is always difficult to answer them when the horse and rider have not been evaluated. But there are some general guidelines I like to give.

A training program should have a plan. What are your goals? Are you headed out on the trail for summer riding, planning for a weekend of riding or preparing for a show? Your schedule needs to take into consideration your plans for that year, your horse's fitness level and your availability to ride (how often you can ride each week). Once those questions are answered, you can begin to form a plan.

Consider the training schedule for one of our performance horses, let's say Roxy. Each workout consists of cycles: a warm-up period, stressing (working) muscles, rest/recovery and a cooling-down phase. These are components of each workout routine. If I'm planning a long routine, the stress and rest periods will repeat multiple times.

For example, I would warm up with a walk and jog and by doing some bending exercises and moving Roxy's hips. Next, I would lope some circles, working on steering and speed control – the first stress cycle of the routine. Then we would stand and walk to cool out. Next, I might work on her spins – the second stress cycle – followed by cooling down.

Roxy is in shape, and I use her in competition as well as in my demonstrations. She needs multiple stress cycles in her workout routines. The routine for a young or out-of-shape horse will often have only one stress cycle.

The concept of cycles applies not only to individual workouts, but also to overall training plans over weeks and months. For example, in a weekly plan, Monday will be an easier day than Tuesday and Wednesday. Thursday may be the peak of the week, and Friday will be easier, similar to Monday or

# Plan the Work, Work the Plan

By Stacy Westfall

Tuesday. The weekend can be used as recovery time, as time needs to be allowed for the body to rest and rebuild.

On an even bigger scale, looking at a month or several months, the training should have cycles in which Week 1 is easier than weeks 2, 3 and 4, but then Week 5 might head back down the scale.

You might be asking, “How does this apply to me?” Well, let me ask you a question: Has your training flat-lined? Is your routine the same every day? Consistency is good, but we need to remember to challenge our horses both physically and mentally.

My husband, Jesse, often says that horses are like kids – if you don't keep them busy, they will keep you busy. Sometimes when they keep you busy, it will be doing things like bucking or generally giving you a hard time.

A horse that is ridden several times a week, with a routine that never changes, will often become more difficult because he has reached a level of fitness and is not being challenged either physically or mentally.

Having a plan, and planning with cycles in mind, will assure that you have an aim each time you work your horse. So even if you only ride three times a week, you should use a training cycle. ■

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*Training schedules  
can keep you and  
your horse on track.*



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