

A Gallop Does Him Good!

Whatever your sport, your horse can benefit physically and mentally from regular galloping.

By Jo-Ann Wilson with Sandra Cooke
Photos by Jim Leiby

If you ride dressage horses or show hunters, chances are you think of galloping as something the “other riders”—eventers and foxhunters, for instance—need to do. Take another look! In the 20 years of my Sportsmassage™ practice, I’ve found that for horses who do most of their work in a ring, carefully managed galloping outside the ring can be a valuable part of their program. And when I am treating a horse with Sportsmassage—which uses exercise after massage as part of the therapy—to relieve muscle tightness, galloping can be more effective in some cases than cantering for completing the treatment.

My work is all about restoring the



freedom of movement and mechanical efficiency of a moving body. I think of motion as a wave. If you watch a slow-motion video of a horse moving at liberty, you'll see exactly what I mean. The starting point for motion in a horse is in his hind end, and the motion's wave travels all the way through his body and up to his poll. For the wave to flow smoothly, all the muscles involved need to contract and release with perfect timing, synchronized like a finely calibrated machine. The better the muscles' synchronization, the better the body's reflexes, balance and endurance. But a tight muscle anywhere along that path interrupts the flow of the wave and also requires other muscles to compensate.



This is the area of the hindquarters where sports massage therapist Jo-Ann Wilson sometimes finds severely tight and hardened muscle tissue that sports massage alone doesn't relieve. This severely tight area loosens with massage and galloping as part of the treatment.



Carefully managed galloping outside the ring can help loosen extremely tight muscles by stretching and lengthening them to their maximum. This makes the muscles more pliable, helping to restore the horse's range of motion. Here dressage trainer Tosha Zubrisky is galloping Raia, a 13-year-old Dutch Warmblood mare who is working at Second and Third Levels. Raia has not done a lot of galloping, so Tosha has taken a feel of her mouth to ensure control.

Muscle Tightness: Causes and Solutions

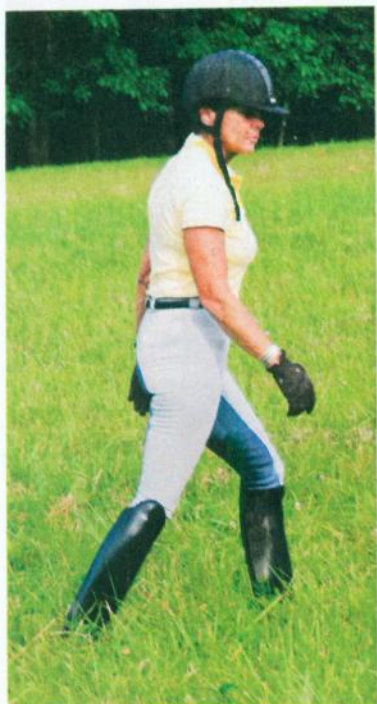
Tight muscles in horses result from the strain and exertion of exercise, which sometimes causes the thousands of individual fibers that comprise a muscle to lie closer together than they do when the muscle is in a normal, nontight condition. The closeness of the fibers limits the pliability of the muscle and its range of contraction and release, which also inhibits the muscle's range of motion. Most tight muscles feel firmer than the surrounding tissue, but they have some pliability, some "give" to my hand when I palpate them. I've found that effective therapy for these muscles is simple compression, which spreads the fibers. Ultrasound studies have shown that this technique separates the muscle fibers, restoring the normal spaces between them. This makes the muscle more pliable and allows a greater blood supply to support the tissue, thereby restoring the range of motion. As part of the therapy, I usually tell clients to canter their horses in long, connected frames immediately after massages, because the canter is a

good exercise for lengthening all the major muscle groups.

Sometimes, however, I've needed to change the protocol. I've worked on both show hunters and dressage horses whose gluteal (buttock) and hamstring muscles were so tight that, although I could loosen the surrounding tissue with massage, there was an unyielding area as hard as concrete that I couldn't loosen with my hands. There were performance problems associated with this unusually hard muscle tissue. One show hunter's trainer had asked me to work on his horse because he was striding short behind. That was affecting him up front, so he wasn't moving well. A dressage horse in whose hindquarters I noticed this extreme tightness was not coming through from behind as he had been. I had little doubt that both issues were a result of the unyielding tissue I was feeling.

I knew that cantering after the massage wouldn't solve the problem because some of the horses with the extreme tightness were already cantering in a long frame as part of their regular program. I've never found this kind of hard muscle tissue when

Warm Up to Gallop



Before galloping in an unfamiliar location, Tosha surveys it on foot to check for holes, ruts or depressions.



Beginning with a "marching" walk, Tosha encourages Raia to take a long rein. Although Tosha's stirrups are still long by hunter/jumper standards, she has shortened them substantially from her regular dressage length in anticipation of galloping. When she feels Raia is moving freely at the walk, she'll ...

working on racehorses or event horses ... who both routinely *gallop* as part of their sports. I suggested that the owners of the horses with extreme tightness gallop their horses after I'd worked on them to soften as much of the surrounding tissue as I could. I believed the galloping might soften the hard muscle tissue as I was unable to do with my hand, because the gallop would stretch the muscle to its maximum, mechanically separating the muscle fibers.

When I asked the owners or trainers to try this, the first reaction was usually surprise—"Gallop?"—because they didn't normally gallop their horses. But they were willing to try it. After each horse galloped, I worked on the problem muscle areas the next day. I found the unyielding tissue had softened, and I was able to further spread the fibers with compressions. Once the extreme tightness was relieved, both horses regained their former quality of movement and were freer in their backs and hindquarters. I suggested that galloping as a regular part of the horses' training routines could help prevent the problem from recurring.

Galloping Is Different

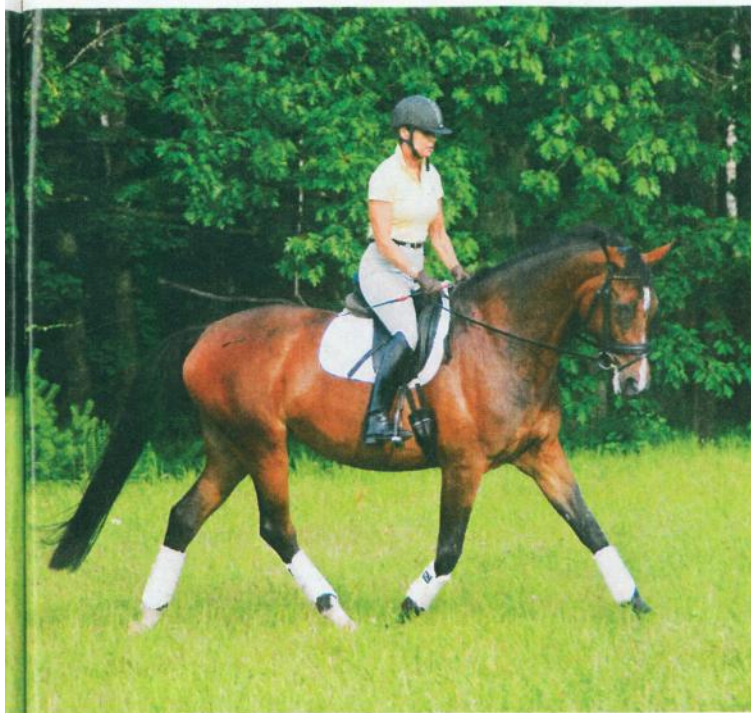
"You do feel an amazing, different kind of power in the gallop than you do in collected work," says Sara Chatfield, a dressage trainer who divides her year between Lincolnville, Maine, and Wellington, Florida. "You can feel your horse stretching and folding under you, reaching all the way out and then all the way back under. They really do use their muscles in a different way."

Sara was already hacking her Grand Prix horse out on the trails as a break from ring work when I suggested that regular galloping would complement how I was treating muscle tightness in his hindquarters. "He was working so hard at the collection I wanted to do something different that was actually exercise," Sara says. Since incorporating regular galloping, she's seen a big change. "The cross-training makes him healthier and stronger. His wind is very good, and he has become stronger and more regular in piaffe and passage, more able and willing to 'sit.' His extended canter was always good, but I think it's gotten

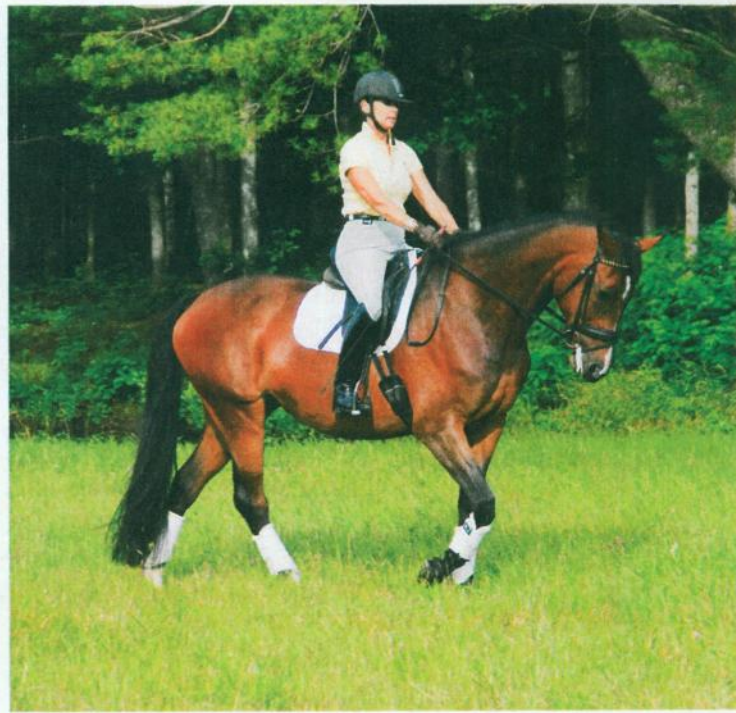
better since we started galloping."

What makes the gallop different from the canter? When a horse canters, his diagonal hind foot and forefoot (for example, left hind and right fore) strike the ground at the same time, producing a three-beat gait. The speed of the canter is moderate, usually between about 10 and 17 miles per hour. In the faster gallop (about 25 to 30 mph), the gait becomes four beats: The hind foot hits the ground just before the diagonal front foot as the horse compresses and extends his body. If you watch a video of a galloping horse, you can see that the stretch is extreme. This maximal stretch is the reason galloping helps the extremely tight, boardlike gluteal and hamstring muscles to release.

"Galloping horses out of the ring lets them use a length of stride, a part of themselves that they never get to use otherwise," says top hunter trainer and judge Tony Workman. Several of the hunters showing from Lynfield Farm, where Tony is based in Hillsboro, Virginia, have benefited from my recommendation to add regu-



... pick up the posting trot and encourage Raia to stretch out. They trot for about five minutes, then walk briskly for a minute or two, then trot on the other diagonal for another five minutes.



Returning to walk, Tosha shortens her reins in preparation for cantering and galloping.

lar gallops to their programs. "In the hunter ring, everything is on a 12-foot stride, day in and day out. We strive to start and finish a round with the same stride. Getting out of the ring environment is good for their heads, too." Tony has noticed the galloping is especially beneficial for warmbloods, who now populate the hunter and jumper ranks. "They have a lot more movement than Thoroughbreds, and we only ask for about a quarter of that movement when riding them in the ring." As someone with extensive background in working with Thoroughbreds earlier in his career, he found galloping his horses felt natural.

Tom Brennan, who rides for Lynfield, adds his perspective on what massage plus galloping has done for one of the best horses in their string. "Doing the gallop work to free up his hind end translates to power that is distributed all the way through his topline as he bascules over the jump. That is the part that has most impressed me: When his hind end is correct from the gallop sessions, his form becomes immaculate up front!"

For Olympic eventer Nina Fout, galloping has potential benefits for any horse, not just those with troublesome muscle tightness. "A good horse, an all-around athlete you can enjoy doing almost anything with, should have the ability to perform all the gaits—and that includes the gallop. It really completes the physiological picture of the horse, improving his overall body condition; in turn, I think it helps improve his balance and his outlook on his job," she says. "Galloping requires a horse to use his muscles differently. It is definitely lengthening and strengthening, not shortening and tightening."

Dressage trainer Tosha Zubrisky, from Bald Mountain Farm in Camden, Maine, incorporates regular galloping in her horses' routines. She bases her program on techniques she learned while working for the late US eventing coach Jack Le Goff earlier in her career. "Jack wanted the horse to stretch for the bit over his back—not long and low so his nose was on the ground, but so he could be supple and use his body."

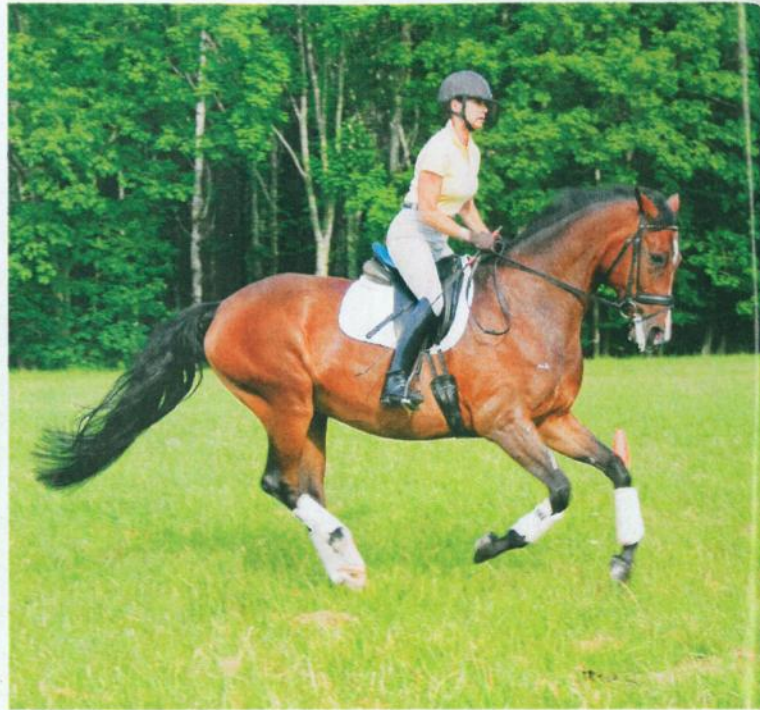
Galloping Safely—For You and Him

Where to gallop: "A sand strip, a grassy field or a trail in the forest," suggests Nina. She points out that in some rural areas, fences surrounding fields have a 20-foot setback from the road that can be suitable for galloping. At home in Maine, Sara gallops in a big open field. In Florida, she uses the perimeter of a nearby polo field. A location with a gentle uphill slope is ideal. Your horse can "work against the hill," in Nina's words, and get the benefits of galloping without excessive speed or pounding on his legs. Tosha likes to use a former private airstrip that has a gradual uphill slope. "It levels off at the top into a nice big field."

The common element in any galloping location is good footing. Check the area where you plan to gallop by walking it ahead of time. You're looking for footing that is a happy medium between hard and soft. Hard surfaces, which increase the pounding on hooves and joints, are unsuitable, and footing that is too soft and deep can cause soft-tissue injuries. "Con-



Tosha picks up the trot again, then asks for the canter—a three-beat gait whose speed is between 10 and 17 mph.



From the canter, Tosha increases to a hand gallop—a more forward, balanced three-beat canter—for about a minute.

sistency is key," says Nina. Look carefully for holes and ruts. "You also want to check for abrupt dips in the terrain, which could cause a misstep. If you know where those are, you can avoid them," says Tosha.

Work up to it gradually: When you're planning to gallop, use common sense and

think about safety first. Take your horse to the selected area and familiarize him with it at walk and trot on the first couple of visits. This is your chance to see whether anything in the environment frightens or excites him and also to gauge his current fitness. If he's breathing hard after a few

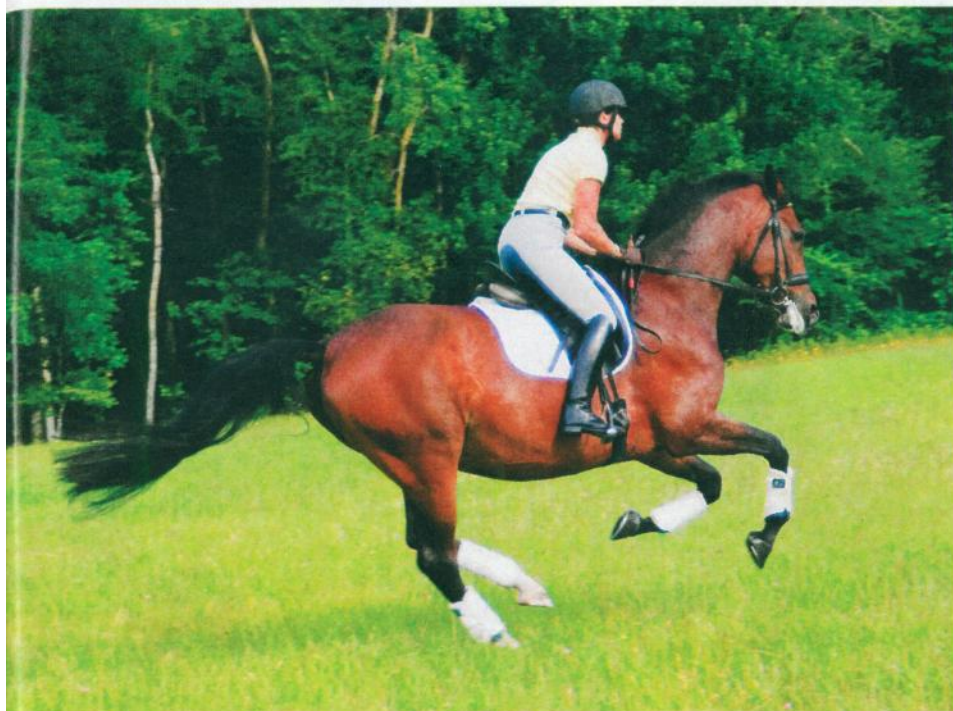
minutes of trotting, Tosha suggests continuing the trot work (on both diagonals, with walk breaks in between) until he's fitter. Move up to canter, and then progress to the gallop when his condition improves.

Warm up before galloping: "Help your horse avoid injury by loosening and warming up his body beforehand," says Tosha. She has a system for preparing to gallop. "I always walk first for at least 10 minutes, and that is a *marching* walk. If your horse knows how to go 'long and low,' this is a great time to stretch him by keeping a contact while you encourage him into a really forward walk. It improves his fitness and stretches and warms up his tendons, ligaments and muscles." If you are hacking your horse to the galloping area, you can probably do the walk section of the warm-up in the hack. "When I feel my horse is moving freely in the walk, I go into a trot where I once more encourage him to stretch out long and low. We trot about five minutes, then walk briskly for a minute or two, then trot on the other diagonal for another five minutes. After a minute or



Jo-Ann Wilson is a nationally certified and licensed massage therapist and a long-standing associate of the late Jack Meagher, founder of Sportsmassage™. She was sports therapist for the silver-medal Canadian eventing team at the 2010 World Equestrian Games, where she also presented the educational seminars "Sportsmassage for the World's Largest Athlete." Jo-Ann was the sports therapist for both horses and riders of the US eventing team that won

team bronze and individual gold at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. Her current practice serves horses of all levels and disciplines and her educational DVD, "A Course in Equine Sportsmassage," is available through HorseBooksEtc.com. Jo-Ann is the director of Wilson and Meagher Sportstherapy, a program that trains professional therapists in equine Sportsmassage and offers workshops for horse owners. For more information, go to www.sportsmassageinc.com.



When Tosha asks Raia to gallop, a four-beat gait at about 25 to 30 mph, she keeps the contact so she can shorten her reins quickly if needed. Her upper body is inclined forward and her seat is out of the saddle to allow Raia the freedom to stretch, lengthen and loosen tight muscles of her hindquarters.

two of walking, I shorten my reins and pick up the trot, then ask for a canter that I increase to a hand gallop for about a minute.

"The hand gallop is still three beats, a more forward, balanced canter," Tosha explains. "A gallop is a definite four beats and is really 'booking it' in terms of pace. Some riders may never get beyond a hand gallop, which is fine for the horse because he is still stretching more than he does in a regular canter. Whether to hand gallop or really gallop depends on the horse's level of fitness and the rider's ability and confidence.

"For a horse who is still developing fitness, 30 seconds of hand gallop might be enough the first few times. Then I walk for at least a minute before hand galloping on the other lead," Tosha says. If your horse isn't breathing hard after the second hand gallop, you can let him stretch out into a full gallop for your next set.

Stay in control: "Your horse needs to be listening to you during this routine. Even as you encourage him to stretch forward, keep your reins short enough that

you maintain a connection and can take back if you need to. Think of it as riding with a longer arm rather than with long reins," says Tosha. She uses her dressage saddle to gallop, shortening her stirrup leathers a couple of holes. "I lighten my seat, but I want to be secure if my horse makes a sudden move. I only rise into two-point when I know a horse well and feel confident about how he'll react." If you think your horse is feeling good and may be a handful, she suggests first schooling him in a ring to take the edge off.

Sara makes galloping an "incremental" process in which she periodically reminds her horse that she is still in charge. "After I warm him up, I ask for a canter, press my heels down, incline forward a little and come out of the saddle as I 'ooze' him up into a gallop. After a minute or so, I bring him back to canter, then let him gallop again," she says.

"No one needs to be afraid to try galloping, get into it and enjoy themselves," says Nina. "It takes most horses quite a bit of what I call fast or open canter to get com-

fortable in their stride and range of motion before moving up to a full gallop. As you warm up your horse, really encourage him to move forward into the working paces. Don't think about collection. Let him go with a relaxed neck so he can use his neck to balance himself. The more relaxed he is, the more he will stretch out his frame in the gallop, which is what you want—a nice, steady, balanced connection. If your horse is green, it sometimes works well to have another horse lead you. Let him get a head start, then gallop your horse to catch up. If your horse is nervous, he'll benefit from working in company. Most racehorses are taught to gallop with another horse beside them at the track."

For protective gear, all our experts recommend approved helmets for the rider. Gear for the horse depends on each individual. "If your horse is a good mover and doesn't strike himself, whatever you normally use when you hack or school is what he should wear when galloping," says Nina. Sara uses bell boots in front and galloping boots all around. "I'm not a big bandage person," says Tony. "We use just the regular polo wraps that we put on our horses' legs for daily work."

Finally, It's Fun

"My horses love to gallop," says Tosha. "I think it's wonderful for their minds and bodies. It gets them thinking *forward*, which is what we want, and for them it's like playing, out of the ring."

"It's good for their heads," says Tony.

"It's mentally refreshing, relaxing and uses different muscles—for me, too!" says Sara. "Whenever you do one discipline intensely, trying to be competitive and move your horse up through the levels, he needs to do something different once in a while. We both love it."

The bottom line: Varying your horse's work and adding the gallop to his program helps to synchronize his movement while maintaining loose and supple muscles. A muscle that is loose and free can strengthen. The looser your horse is, the better he will move and perform—and the longer he will last. 🐾