

# Back-to-Work Program

with Elizabeth Gingras

BY JESSICA LEFROY



Liz Gingras of Edmonton, AB, stresses that safety is a prime factor when bringing horses back into work, even after a brief layoff, as they can be fractious. "The most important thing is to *always* wear a helmet when riding."

CEALY TETLEY PHOTO

“**T**here are many factors to take into consideration when you have a horse returning to work. If any extended period of rest was required due to health or soundness issues, it is imperative to move forward only at the discretion of your veterinarian and closely follow any rehab schedule. Even if your horse just did lighter work over the winter, it is important to set realistic expectations and return to work gradually.

I think it's important to have a few easy weeks under saddle for the horses to feel refreshed over the winter break, but my horses generally do not get complete time off. My older horses have a month where they are ridden every day, but not trained hard – just lots of walking and trotting. Two of my younger horses, who tend to put on weight and become unfit easily, stayed in full work. I find it's easier for them to keep a solid base fitness as opposed to letting them get out of shape and then having to work really hard to get them fit again.

The most important thing for any horse at any age who is returning to work is to walk a lot, as it's good for their mind and body. It doesn't put any wear-and-tear on their bodies and most horses love to walk either in-hand or under tack.

My plans when bringing a horse back to work are based around my show schedule and what each individual horse needs to be ready to show. Is the horse young or old? Arthritic? Naturally slim and fit? Do they put on weight easily? How hard did they work last year and how hard are they going to work this year? It's also important to consider what the horse is telling us: are they grumpy?

Safety is a big factor in protecting yourself and the horse from being too fresh when you put it back to regular work. When horses are really fresh they tend to react to noise, so I use earplugs or a bonnet that has sound-reduction ears on it, and I always try to pick a time when the arena is quiet. I have a horse that likes to buck when he's fresh

and I will use a martingale so that I have something to grab onto if he takes off.

Keeping the horse focused on a job will help prevent him looking for ways to be naughty. Ask for shoulder-fore, transitions, and incorporate poles and cavaletti to keep it interesting and also help with strengthening. When trying to get them fitter once you are a bit further along, work them until you would normally be finished, let them have a walk break to catch their breath, then do another 10-15 minutes of work.

It's really hard for an athlete to not get overly ambitious at the beginning of show season, including myself. Everyone is excited to get going, but it's really important to start off a bit easy and remember you both might be a bit rusty. I find most horses jump better and feel more confident when they start jumping a bigger division if they have jumped a few easier rounds first. I find that it's always better to move up off of success than moving down because things didn't go well. ”🐾

## WEEKLY SCHEDULE:

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
Day off. The horses get turned out and go for long walks.	Flatwork. I like to work on loosening their muscles and cardio fitness.	Flatwork. I focus on dressage, building muscles and rideability.	Gymnastics. I set up a grid or poles, focusing on shape, straightness and rideability.	A cross between dressage and gymnastics, depending on what the horse needs.	Course jumping day. During the winter the height can be small, but we will build a more substantial course when we are starting to gear up for competitions. This keeps my horses jumping fit, helps keep my eye working, and also gives me an idea of what I need to improve and what exercises I will work on the next week.	Fun cardio day. I'm very lucky that I have beautiful trails to ride on. I like to walk, trot, and canter a long time out on the trail. This helps improve the horse's cardio fitness and my horses love it.