

WISE UP WARM UP

By Kenda Lenseigne

"This horse is too fresh", he hissed as he threw the reins at me and stomped off in a spittle-flecked rage. I had no idea I had just cost him the win. I was merely a kid straight from the 4-H show ring working my first real job in the million dollar cutting pen and had not yet learned the science of proper warm up and wear down of a horse athlete. Up until that point, a warm up meant trotting around while chatting with friends and waiting to hear my name called. My reality check came on hour 5 of loping an own daughter of Doc O Lena at the world show, that the days of pony-play were over and it was time to get serious if I wanted to survive in this game.

Warm up / Wear Down

Just like with human athletes, preparing for the game starts with a warm up, though in the equestrian world, we also must add the additional step of the Wear Down. The warm up is for the body, lengthening and loosening muscles, opening airways and preparing a horse for battle. The wear down is for the mind; bringing an otherwise fresh minded horse down to cool focus and developing a connection of horse and rider to hold steady when the adrenaline and pressure of competition escalates. Like their riders, our horses feel the mental side of this sport, and if their mind is not focused going into the arena, there may be greater chances of an all system failure (insert sound of warning alarm followed by the bomb dropping). Have you ever heard yourself say, as your horse is wound tight, "he never does this at home, or in practice... only when we are at the shoot". This is because senses are heightened by pressure, adrenaline and the excitement of competition, making a longer wear down time even more important.

I like to start with series of leg and neck stretches from the ground, similar to what you yourself might do, getting ready for a workout. This slowly wakes up the muscles and loosens up areas that might be sore and tight. It's important to remember this step especially when at a major event where the horses are standing in stalls for several days in a row. Relating it to humans, think of how stiff you feel after traveling all day, or sitting at a desk. Now imagine being asked to sprint a half mile right out of your seat. This can be dangerous - or comical at the very least.



From there I mount up. At a halt followed by a walk, I ask my horse to bend and flex his neck while giving to the bridle on both sides and quietly work off of my legs in his barrel and hips, flexing all quarters of the horse until he is limber on both the right and left side.

Next I ask for a jog and build up to a long trot. Long trotting helps lengthen and stretch the muscles while warming them up slowly; it also starts to elevate the heart rate and begins to open airways to the lungs. Think of how beneficial it is for us to walk with longer, relaxed strides. We can almost feel the rust being knocked off as it slowly stretches out our muscles. Because humans only have two legitimate gaits (walk and run, with speed variations within each), an extended walk is most relatable to a horse's long trot.

Lastly, I ask for a lope, always being conscious of the correct lead and soft hands on the reins. To ensure that my horse is listening to me, I ride a series of quiet starts, stops and figure 8's to warm up his direction changes. It's important not to jam the horse into these technical moves as it can be counter productive and worry the horse if its not done properly. This last step is where you will continue to elevate the heart rate and reach the peak of your warm up. Always remember that it's important to ride both directions while warming up to keep both sides of the horse balanced.

The warm up wear down process is different for every horse depending on age, soundness, athleticism, overall conditioning, breed, temperament, and their ability to handle pressure. As horsemen and women, we know our own horses best and will have to be acutely aware of what our own horse needs and adjust accordingly based on those requirements. Read your horse's body language to know if they need more or less, and remember to warm them up before every stage. One warm up in the morning of the shoot is not enough and can lead to serious injury later in the day.



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An advertisement for the Kenda Lenseigne Signature Line. The background is a rustic wooden wall. On the right, a cowboy (Kenda Lenseigne) is mounted on a grey horse, wearing a cowboy hat and western attire, holding a revolver. In the foreground, a black leather holster and a revolver are displayed. The text 'BUILDING CHAMPIONS WITH RECORD BREAKING DESIGNS' is on the left, and 'BLANCHI COWBOY' is in a logo on the right. The name 'KENDA LENSEIGNE' and his title 'World and National Champion Cowboy Mounted Shooter' are also present. At the bottom right, there is a website link: 'To view the complete Kenda Lenseigne Signature Line, visit www.safariland.com/kendalenseigne'.