

# Warm-Up Strategies

By Anne Cizadlo

Despite all the hours of practice, all the lessons, and all of the mental preparation that you have gone through before coming to the horse show, you can *still* not perform to your capacity if you don't have a good warm-up before your test. The warm-up strategy is a very important piece of the performance and often goes overlooked! Planning your warm-up should be something that you spend as much or more time preparing than the actual test.

In dressage, the horse is asked to perform a series of movements which match his level of training. The movements in the test are often only performed once, or once in each direction. This means that the horse had better get it right on the first try, since you don't get a repeat!

So what do you need to do in the warm-up? First and foremost, your warm-up should be the time that you use to get your horse's muscles loose and elastic. This includes stretching the topline muscles down and stretching the lateral muscles side to side. If it is cold, your horse may just need to trot around some to get the blood flowing to the muscles. If it is hot, then perhaps a lot of walking and stretching will achieve the same effect without wearing the horse down.

The second aspect of warming up is making sure that your horse is mentally prepared for the test. Usually, this boils down to whether or not your horse is focused on the rider or distracted by his surroundings. No matter how physically warmed up the horse is, if he is not mentally attentive to your cues, the test will not be smooth.

If you have a young or easily distracted horse, perhaps a short time on the lunge line will get the kinks out and allow him to look around at the surroundings without having to worry about the rider for a bit.

To get your horse attentive to your aids, try to focus more on transitions and prompt responses to your aids rather than repetition. I often see riders in the warm ups repeating a movement over and over again. This is only going to make your horse dull and sour. If you want him to tune in to you, give him something more interesting to think about than the rest of the horses in the warm up ring! Quick transitions and changes of bend, and promptness to the aids will keep him on his toes so that he will hear you in the competition arena. Repetitions of a single movement will only fatigue his muscles and bore him into tuning you out.

Time can be your friend or your enemy. You will need to experiment with your horse to determine how much time you need to warm up. You want the horse to be peaking with his energy level and mental concentration while you are in the ring. If you warm up too long, your horse may lose desire and concentration. If you don't warm up long enough, you might still be dealing with tense muscles or a distracted horse that hasn't yet settled into the surroundings.

Try to experiment at home when you are practicing. Exactly



"Ike, the Super-Pony," owned by Sydney Williams of Marion, Iowa, looks ready to warm up for the show!

how much time do you need to get your horse's muscles ready to peak in the test? Then, once you are at the show, determine how much time you will need to add to that physical warm-up time to allow your horse to also be mentally ready for the test.

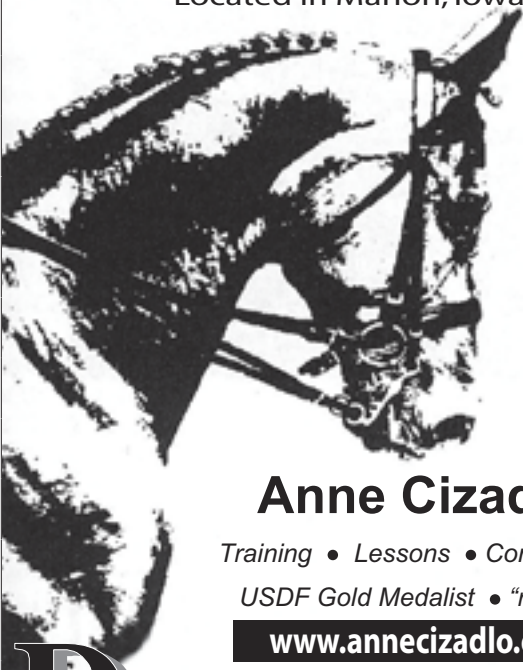
Another aspect of the warm up to keep in mind is that some horses need a moment before they go in to the ring to relax and take a breath. Others are better warming up and going directly from the warm-up into the competition arena without a break. Experiment and see what works best for your horse. Some horses do not pick up and start concentrating right away, so need to keep working, while others love mental relaxation right before they perform.

Start thinking now about how to warm up at your next competition and, if your horse doesn't peak in performance until the last end of the class, then you warmed up too little. If he peaks before you go in, then shorten the warm-up time. Constantly adjust

and make alterations to your warm-up until you find the best combination.

**Good luck!!**

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# Dressage