Supporting Topline in Senior and Retired Horses – Beyond the Feed Bowl
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One question we're often asked at SPILLERS is how to maintain or build muscle in retired horses, seniors or those out of work. While of course their diet should provide sufficient protein, even a perfect diet won't build topline without some exercise.

Caring for a senior or retired horse often comes with lots of questions.

The SPILLERS Super Seniors' Club is a free community where owners share experiences and get expert guidance to help older horses stay comfortable, active and thriving.

We spoke to Equine Physiotherapist Francesca Page to find out what *you can do* to help your horse maintain muscle once their ridden days are over….

Winter is the hardest time for our golden oldies! Maintaining muscle tone and gentle mobilization is vital to ensure they stay fit and healthy! Alongside a balanced and good quality diet there are key areas you can target to help maintain topline in the older horse.

Winter care for senior horses
Cold weather management, stiffness and muscle loss are common topics inside the SPILLERS Super Seniors' Club, where owners support each other through the challenges of winter with older horses.

Warmth, we all know as we get older, arthritic joints do not take kindly to the cold. A heat pack applied over diagnosed arthritic joints for 10 minutes helps decrease the viscosity of the synovial fluid, improving lubrication and therefore function of the joint. Improved joint function means improved Range of Motion, therefore working that topline further. It is important to always work within your horses' capabilities and check with your practitioner or vet if you are unsure.

Gentle Mobilisation is a great way to help our older horses maintain muscle tone and suppleness; these exercises target the core and balance.

- Wither rocks, place a hand over the wither and gently rock the horse from one side to the other gently shifting their weight.
- Tail pulls, taking the tail and gently pulling in order to shift their weight to create a muscle contraction, therefore improving muscle strength.

It is vital that these mobilisations are performed when the horse is warmed up, always work within the horse's capabilities and aim for 2 reps of each with a hold time of 15-20 seconds.

In hand walks are a great easy tool especially in the cold weather when turnout may be limited. Utilizing different surfaces helps to use different muscle groups, gentle inclines targets the hind end muscle group the most, walking down hill engages the core and stabilizers in order for them to control their speed and balance.

In-hand exercise is a favourite tool for many senior owners.
In the SPILLERS Super Seniors' Club, members regularly share simple routines that fit around limited turnout, winter conditions and retirement life.

Baited Stretches are fantastic to maintain suppleness and Range of Motion (ROM). This simple set of stretches are nice and simple to perform helping to engage the core, stretching and elongating the muscles over the topline and improving flexibility in the neck.

- Nose to toes
- Nose to girth
- Nose to hip
- Nose to knees

It is vital that these stretches are performed when the horse is warmed up, always work within the horse's capabilities and aim for 2 reps of each stretch with a hold time of 15-20 seconds. I advise clients to use a likit instead of a treat to help encourage the horse to hold the stretch.

Pole work is a lovely exercise to help improve proprioception and increase ROM in horses that are capable. These simple sets of pole work can be done ridden or in hand and are designed to target lateral flexibility, increasing ROM and improving stride length.

- Labyrinth, a set of poles that can be used as a channel for straightness and lateral flexion, or to walk over the poles.
- Hogs Back poles used to weave in and out of in a serpentine targeting later flexion and stabilizers.
- Walk Poles In a linear fashion to help improve stride length and ROM.

Francesca is on the Register of Animal and Musculoskeletal Practitioners (RAMP) and the Institute of Registered Veterinary and Animal Physiotherapists (IRVAP) alongside holding a BSc degree and is an FEI Permitted Therapist. With nearly a decade of practical experience and complex rehabilitation cases under her care you can find out more about her services here: fpvetphysio.com

You can read more about feeding for topline in our blog, or for tailored advice speak to one of our friendly nutrition specialists via our Care-Line on 01908 226626 or fill in a nutritional enquiry form here.

Supporting topline is just one piece of the senior-horse puzzle.
If you'd value expert advice, shared experiences and a community that truly understands older horses, you're warmly invited to join the SPILLERS Super Seniors' Club — because senior horses hold a special place in our hearts.



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