Topline Building Exercises

By the HYGAIN Sponsored Rider Team

How to get your horse that perfect topline is what we are all after! The topline of the horse includes the withers, back loin and croup. Strength of topline and loin muscles also influences soundness and athletic ability. Quality Nutrition and correct exercise are key components when developing your horse's topline, this article features various exercises brought to you by our Sponsored Riders.

The horse’s topline explained

A good understanding of the horse's anatomy is essential, says veterinarian Dr. Nikita Osborne. A horse has an amazing ability to generate power, a great way of summarizing how this works is by the “Bow-string theory”. The bow is the rigid bones of the spine and the String are the more elastic epaxial, hypaxial, abdominal muscle groups. When this system is working unimpeded contraction of the ventral (abdominal and hind end muscles) creates energy which “cocks” the bow (spine) allowing this power to then be released forwards. Any problems in this mechanism will make the horse move less efficient and negatively affects movement.

Prerequisites to develop a healthy topline

Developing a horse’s topline entails more than just correct exercises to help build muscle, it is a fine balance of quality nutrition, regular dental check-ups and checking the mental and physical state of the horse. Para-Dressage rider Victoria Davies adds “like people, horses get sore and stressed for whatever the reason; it is important to learn to read the signs of your horse and work out ways to encourage suppleness and happiness”.

- **Stress:** If your horse is stressed, he will tighten not only in the back but everywhere and become inelastic. This goes for you as the rider also! Victoria Davies continues if you are tense in your body and your breathing is shallow you are stopping the horse from becoming supple.

- **Pain:** Kristy Jarvis from Dynamik Stallions points out that it is very important to be able to assess and be aware of any problems and sources of pain both skeletal and muscular. If your horse has any source of pain (e.g. an ill-fitting saddle) you will find it difficult to develop an even healthy topline on your horse. Seek the assistance of a veterinarian or Equine body worker.

- **Hoof:** Well balanced and regularly trimmed or shod hooves are essential for the horse to be able to move correctly and to hold a correct posture. Kristy Jarvis continues, hooves that are not well balanced can lead to tension in the muscles and pressure on the joints and tendons which will also in turn affect how the topline develops.

Exercises

“When training your horse, you must focus on the way the horse’s body moves in its entirety.” Kristy Jarvis explains that too many riders become focused on moving the horse’s neck or hindquarters instead of thinking about how the whole horse’s body is flowing. She emphasises that it is impossible
to create a good topline without the energy being able to flow through the entire horse’s body from its poll, through the neck, the withers, through the swinging back muscles, along the loin, croup and down the hamstrings to drive the horse’s hindquarters. Below are a range of different exercises to assist in the development of a healthy topline.

**The warm-up**

“Make sure you start in gear one!”

Kristy Jarvis explains many riders immediately start trotting the horse around full throttle, this is not good for the horse’s mind to achieve relaxation and also not beneficial to the muscles and joints. Eventer Debbie Kopp adds that during her warm up and cool down she likes to encourage the horse to stretch down through the head and neck on a long rein. This helps to stretch and improve suppleness in the topline, encouraging your horse to engage his back more actively during training. It increases the topline muscle mass and gives your horse a more rounded appearance.

**Stretching**

- **20m circle:** Vanessa Veart-Smith from New Zealand explains that horses which are very tight through their muscles will struggle to work through correctly from behind, hence stretching exercises are essential for the building of topline. Vanessa recommends to ride a 20m circle and really open your inside rein letting your outside rein go which helps stretch the outside side of your horse’s body. You should be able to see a noticeable difference after this where your horse’s gait is much more relaxed and he is much more over his back, engaged and through.

- **Long and low rest walk breaks:** Sets and repetitions aren’t just for human athletes, they are the most efficient way to build muscle in any animal. Equine veterinarian Dr Jenny Watts emphasises to keep the hard load bearing exercises short and to allow recovery of those muscles with walk breaks in between. Allow the horses head to lower (as low as they want) and keep the walk active - continue for a few minutes until preparing for the next exercise.

- **Carrot Stretches and Massages:** Dr. Nikita Osborne recommends a daily routine of stretches (neck round to side, between legs, front legs out and hind legs stretched forward), a good rub down and giving massages (curry combs work great) to the large muscle groups in the back.

**Lunging**

Correctly lunging a horse for a short session, 15-30 minutes each day for a few weeks will help the horse to gain some strength and topline before the rider starts training the horse, explains Jenny Gehrke dressage coach and rider from QLD. Letting the horses stretch down whilst lunging, leads to a
'working over the back' action that is fantastic for topline development. Nicole Tassone from Raising the Standards says: "You can visibly see the topline muscles contracting and stretching as the horse moves!" Working the horse’s topline before adding the weight of the rider will make the work easier for the horse.

Nicole adds that her 16m round yard has been purposefully set on a slope. The natural incline/decline the horse works through when in this space causes an organic ‘push’ through the topline muscles. She suggests that this affect can be replicated by lunging your horse on a slope with a lunge rope.

**Pole/Cavaletti Work**

Nicole Tassone found that trot poles are an excellent inclusion to your muscular rehabilitation regime, as it promotes a general ‘lifting’ and strengthening of supportive muscles. Vanessa Veart-Smith adds that pole work requires the horse to be moving forward and carrying their own body, plus it really helps to get them listening and thinking.

- **Trotting poles:** Showjumper Maddie Stephen describes one of her favourite exercises is to ride long and low over trotting poles, teaching your horse to put his head down low and then poke their nose out slightly. Maddie uses 5-6 poles set out at 5 foot lengths for a hack (pony 4 foot) and encourages the horse to trot over slowly so he really has to use himself over each pole. She points out to make sure that your long and low exercise is correct and confident first and then add the poles.

- **Lifting Poles:** Once you and your horse are comfortable trotting over poles on the ground you can change it up by lifting some of the poles, simply pop the alternate ends of the trotting poles up on a small block to start with. Eventer Kate Disley explains another variation is to raise all poles on both sides.

- **Shortening and Lengthening Strides:** Team Caddy from NZ regularly vary the stride length between poles by lengthening the distance, which encourages the horses to extend their stride and open their shoulder, whilst shortening the distance (and lifting poles) encourages the horses to collect their stride and really push from behind. Just a few minutes of this on each rein is more than enough to be effective without actually tiring them out.

- **Canter bounces:** Showjumpers Jaime and Travis Campbell recommend to mix up the training with canter bounces, setting up 3 to 9 small cavaletti at 3 meters apart. Keep the horse collected in a quiet canter and approach the small cavaletti keeping the horse soft and round through the exercise.

- **Circle Poles:** For horses that are weaker on one side and particularly struggle to soften to one rein, you can arrange your trot poles at a slight angle on the arc of a 20m circle. Maddie Stephen continues this exercise allows you to work one side at a time and stretch your
horse’s neck and back more thoroughly. Once your horse is comfortable working on the circle you can change the size of the circle by riding a smaller (poles closer together) or larger circle (poles are further apart).

**Hill Work**
Queensland Barrel Racer Jo Caldwell explains that riding in the hills is one of her favourite exercises as it serves more than one purpose, as well as building topline it also strengthens and builds the horses hindquarters, is good for their respiratory tract and helps horses to stay fresh and not become arena sour.

Vanessa Veart Smith also recommends to work your horse up hills once or twice a week adjusting the level of hill work to your horse’s fitness level. For more advanced horses and riders, you can also ask for lateral work during the hill work. Start by asking the horse to walk or trot up the hill with his head long and low to strengthen their backs and hindquarters and to work their whole bodies. Vanessa includes lateral exercises such as leg yield and half pass up hill (when and if able) to really engage the horse’s hindquarters and opening up the shoulder.

**Half-halts & Lateral Work**
- **Half-halts:** Dr. Jenny Watts recommends to integrate half-halts throughout your training session to balance and soften the horse and to encourage more load shifting to the hind end with a view towards self-carriage.
- **Lateral work:** Exercises such as leg yielding encourages the horses to “step under” with their hind legs and engage their topline muscles. Team Caddy particularly highlights riding the leg yield to enlarge your circle work. Ride your horse on a small circle and slowly leg yield out to a larger circle.

Victoria Davies explains one of her favourite lateral work exercise that really helps to loosen the horse’s back and free the shoulders. Ride on a 20m circle begin in rising trot, then sitting trot and ask for 5 steps of shoulder in keeping on the circle, then ask for counter flexion for 5 strides, then rise trot for half a circle and repeat.

**Water**
Water work is a low impact way of developing muscular strength whilst working against the forces of the water. Para-Dressage Rider Jo Jackson explains the support of the water provides an opportunity for horse’s muscles to develop and for the rider to feel the prominence of the movement. Using my normal aids I will ask for a working trot in knee deep water (sand base), because of the ‘drag’ effect of the water the horse will lift his belly using his small back muscles and you will feel the enhanced cadence of the movement.
Treadmill
Eventer Cassie Lowe explains that sometimes as riders we are a little backward, not using enough leg and way too much hand creating a very uncomfortable shape in the horse's neck and not allowing the horse to work correctly through from behind. The treadmill allows the horse to travel forward in self carriage without a human interfering, ideally used for about 20 minutes as a warm up a few times per week. Further, using a slight incline on the treadmill provides a good consistent workout that makes the horse stretch out and use his muscles, without the weight of the rider as recommended by Jo Caldwell.

Summary
“At the end of the day, developing your horse’s topline is all about the basics” says Kristy Jarvis. So the key to building a healthy topline is to have a horse that is healthy and sound in both body and mind, coupled with quality nutrition and correct exercise.

Contributors
Cassie Lowe – VIC Eventing
Debbie Kopp – QLD Eventing
Jaime and Travis Campbell – NZ Showjumping
Jo Jackson – NZ Para-Dressage
Jo Caldwell – NSW Barrel Racing
Jenny Gehrke – QLD Dressage
Dr Jenny Watts – NSW Dressage and Veterinarian
Kristy Jarvis – WA Dynamik Stallions German Riding Pony Stud
Kate Disley – NZ Eventing
Maddi Stephen – WA Showjumping
Makayla Saunders – QLD Barrel Racing
Nicole Tassone – VIC Raising the Standards
Dr Nikita Osborne – NZ Dressage and Veterinarian
Team Caddy – NZ Showing
Victoria Davies – NSW Para-Dressage
Vanessa Veart-Smith – NZ Showjumping and Dressage