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Gymnastic exercises are great ways to strengthen and condition your jumper's entire body, thus reducing his risk of injury and extending his career for as long as possible.

FIT AND FUN FOR LIFE

How a legendary grand prix rider extends her jumpers' careers without dampening their enthusiasm for the sport.

By Margie Engle
Photos by Amy K. Dragoo

My number-one priority is always the horse. I'm constantly seeking new ways to extend my mounts' careers without making them mentally or physically sour. I avoid overdrilling them not just to prevent unnecessary stress on their legs but also because I want them to look forward to their work with the freshest, happiest attitudes possible. I accompany my husband, Steve Engle, DVM, to veterinary conferences to keep up to date on the latest science and strategies for strengthening and conditioning horses while also reducing their risk of injury as much as possible. I also pay attention to methods that trainers use in other disciplines. Here are some of the most important lessons I've learned:

1. Minimize the pounding. Over time, concussion may lead to injuries in horses' feet, joints, tendons and ligaments. The bigger the jumps, the greater the concussion. So small jumps are best for schooling sessions.

2. Avoid excessive repetition. Just as repetitive motions can cause tendonitis in humans, they can lead to muscle fatigue in horses, which, in turn, causes physical structures to break down. This can be challenging in sports like jumping, where a certain amount of practice is necessary for both horses and riders to develop and refine their skills. If you don't practice *at all*, you and your horse may not have the required strength and timing to perform to the best of your abilities without risking injuries. So it's a fine line. Some practice is a must, but change things up *before* your horse gets sore or bored.

3. Target the entire body. Focusing too much on one body part eventually leads to compensation. For example, if you constantly ask your horse to land on one particular lead, his muscles on one side of his body may fatigue. To compensate, he'll try to shift the load over to the other side of his body. This is how many lamenesses develop. The stronger your horse's entire body is, the less risk he'll have of getting injured. So choose exercises that work both sides of his body equally and also strengthen his stomach, back, neck, etc.

4. Use interval training and cross-training. Event riders are especially good at interval training. They know how to bring their horses' heart rates up, maintain the intensity for several moments, then ease off to bring the rates back down again. Gradually increasing the number of these interval "sets" improves overall strength and fitness.

I also incorporate the gallop into my jumpers' routine programs not just to improve their adjustability and get them comfortable at the gait but also to expand their lungs.

Dressage is excellent cross-training and a great way to improve rideability and responsiveness. All horses should be taught basic dressage. If you are able to progress to a more advanced level, the gradual incorporation of collection into your jumper's routine will strengthen different muscles from the ones he is accustomed to using. When Olympic dressage rider Lisa Wilcox rides my horses, it's like sending them to the gym: She makes them use their hind ends in brief repetitive sets, asking them to do the equine equivalent of human squats.

5. Work on different surfaces. Riding your horse on a variety of terrain—sand ring, grass ring, trails, hills and even firm surfaces—strengthens different structures in his body and gets him comfortable performing on diverse types of footing. It's great for his mental health, too.

6. Repeat exercises in both directions whenever possible. Horses' brains don't work exactly like ours do. When you

perform an exercise and then approach it from the reverse direction, for them it's like seeing it for the first time. You'll always get the most out of a lesson if you can do it both ways.

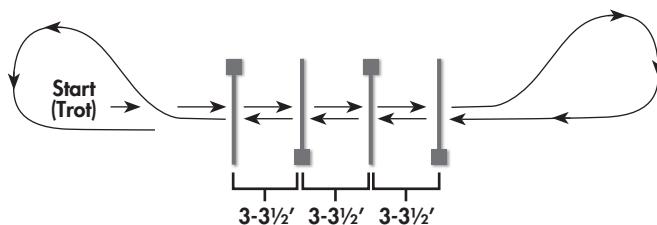
I design my schooling sessions with all of these principles in mind. Below are three of the exercises I use to keep my horses' programs fresh and effective.

Exercise 1: Football Grid

This exercise reminds me of the tires that football players run through to improve their agility and coordination. It strengthens a horse's topline, engages his hind end, increases the suspension in his gaits, teaches him to regulate his pace and gives him a better awareness of where his feet are. At the same time, it improves straightness as well as the rider's leg-to-hand connection with the horse.

To set up the grid, you can use any equipment that enables you to raise a cavalletti on just one side. I have boxes that I can roll over to create different heights (6 inches, 8 inches, 10 inches and 12 inches). Jump standards would work, too, if yours have holes that go as low as about 6 inches. Place three or four poles

Exercise 1: Football Grid



Setup: Place four poles 3 to 3½ feet apart with a single, adjustable cavalletti support on one end of each pole, arranged so the cavalletti are angled in an alternating fashion. Start with the poles flat on the ground or at their lowest setting.



About Margie Engle

Margie Engle has been one of the winningest jumper riders in the U.S. for more than three decades. As a child, she cleaned dog and cat kennels in exchange for riding lessons until she was deemed big enough to muck stalls and groom horses. She didn't own her own horse until her late 20s. In the meantime, she learned every aspect of horsemanship working her way to the top of the sport. To date, Margie has won more than 200 grands prix classes, more than 20 Nations Cups and a record 10 American Grandprix Association Rider of the Year titles. She competed in the 2000 Olympics, won team silver at the 1999 Pan American Games,

team gold and individual bronze at the 2003 Pan Am Games and team silver at the 2006 World Equestrian Games. In 2017, she and the Oldenburg stallion Royce anchored the winning team at the Nations Cup in British Columbia before topping the field in the \$130,000 ATCO Nations Finale Grand Prix. In 2018, they won the \$500,000 CSI5* at the Winter Equestrian Festival. Proving her ability to extend the longevity of her mounts, Margie had two 18-year-olds competing in FEI-level classes in 2018: Bockmanns Lazio, who had multiple top-10 placings, and Indigo, who placed third in the \$205,000 NetJets Grand Prix CSI4*. In 2021, she was elected for induction into the U.S. Show Jumping Hall of Fame. Margie and her husband, veterinarian Steve Engle, are based at Gladewinds Farm in Wellington, Florida.



EXERCISE 1: FOOTBALL GRID

I approach the poles in a collected trot. I normally begin this exercise at the sitting trot to have maximum control of the rhythm and pace, but I use a rising trot on Alter Ego, owned by Lea Allen, because he stays naturally animated in his hind end and is already familiar with the exercise.



This is a good example of how the poles help to improve the connection between your leg and hand. By using too much hand and not enough leg, I've made it difficult for Alter to lengthen his stride. As a result, he steps into the exercise a little shallowly. His front hoof has landed close to the first pole rather than where I'd like it to be: halfway between the first and second poles.



This time through the exercise we have the opposite problem: I've used too much leg and not enough hand (see the slight loop in my rein). As a result, Alter extends too much and tries to jump the cavalletti.



Finally, we get the connection just right! He's stepping almost perfectly between the poles, flexing his hocks and knees exceptionally well and stretching his head and neck forward and down, making good use of his back and topline muscles. I can really feel the animation and suspension in his steps here.



When Alter feels ready, we rotate the cavalletti to the next height (8 inches), and when that goes well, we move them up to 10 inches. You can tell by the nice curve in his topline that he's engaging his neck, back and hindquarter muscles to raise his legs higher over the poles, creating a more suspended gait.



Finally, we rotate the cavalletti to their highest height (12 inches). Note how much he's flexing his joints and using his topline. This is a great low-impact way to strengthen his muscles.

TIP

Place a ground rail on each side of every jump. This will help your horse's depth perception and prevent him from going past the distances.

about 3 to 3½ feet apart—up to 4 feet apart for bigger horses—with a block or standard next to each pole.

For the first few passes through the grid, set both ends of each pole on the ground so they're just normal trot poles. Approach them in an active, collected sitting trot. (Sitting trot is ideal because it provides the most control over your

horse's rhythm and impulsion and gives you the best feel of what he is doing underneath you. But rising trot is fine, too, if you're not comfortable sitting the trot yet.) Wrap your legs down around your horse's sides so you can feel his hind end and back working. Think of pushing his hind legs forward while creating more suspension in his steps, asking him to march up to the poles.

Trot straight through the center of the poles, then change direction, make a loop and ride back through them the other way. Change direction again, this time turning the opposite way after the poles (if you made the previous loop to the left, make this one to the right), so you end up riding a sort-of figure-eight pattern over them. Focus on riding a very accurate track: straight in the approach, over the poles and afterward, then making nice bending turns. Use the ends of the ring to maximize your straightness in each approach to the exercise.

If your horse is nervous or tries to rush through the poles, bring him down to the walk, remove a pole or two (from the beginning and/or end of the series so the remaining poles are still 3 to 3½ feet apart) and walk over the remaining poles very slowly and deliberately. This will teach him to step in between the poles. When he's doing that well, go back to trot and approach the poles in a very quiet, controlled manner. After several successful repetitions, add the other pole(s) back in.

Once he is comfortable with the ground poles, raise the alternating ends of each pole so that one end rests on the ground and the other end is raised by the block or standard, set at its lowest height. For example, raise the first pole on the right side, the second on the left, and so on. Approach the grid in the same way, in your sitting trot if possible. Stay connected with your legs and hands so your horse understands he's still supposed to step over the rails and not jump them.

Repeat this a few times in both directions, praising him each time he does it correctly and taking plenty of walk breaks. Then, if he seems really comfortable with the exercise, raise the pole ends to the next height. Don't go above 8 inches in your first session. If he has a good first experience and is feeling confident and coordinated, you can start your next session where you left off and gradually increase the height and/or add more poles, if you like. Also, if you feel secure in the saddle, try the exercise a few times without stirrups.

As your horse gets the hang of the exercise, you should feel his energy clearly flowing from your legs into a nice connection in your hands. Each time you go through the poles, try to find a happy balance between your legs and hands. If he slows down and drops behind your leg, ask yourself if you were using too much hand. If he gets flat and fast, ask yourself if you were using too much leg and too little hand. You never want to be rough with either your hands or legs, but instead want to maintain a light connection with both, allowing for and supporting a nice steady rhythm.

You will also feel more spring in his back as he lifts his legs over the poles. This is the elevation and suspension you want to feel—and it's just the impulsion and "spring-loading" we want for jumping. Once you have a nice connection over the poles, it's OK to do them at the rising trot. Be sure to continue asking for collection and suspension in each repetition of the exercise.

Remember not to overdrill. Once your horse seems to understand the exercise, repeat it just a few more times before going on to something else. Then incorporate it into your flatwork, doing some lengthening and shortening of the stride, lateral work, canter transitions, etc., elsewhere in the ring in between passes over the poles.

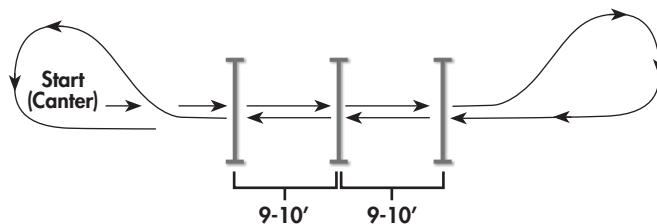
Exercise 2: Bounces

Like the last exercise, this one is great for improving straightness and rhythm while rocking your horse back onto his hind end and making him quicker with his front end. It helps to center his arc correctly over the tops of the fences. It also teaches him to learn from his own mistakes and back himself up from the jumps to avoid going "past the distance" or getting too close to the jump on takeoff. Meanwhile, you can focus on your own position and balance.

Only do this exercise with an experienced horse who is already familiar with bounce jumps.

Set up three small crossrails 9 to 10 feet apart. Alternatively, you can make each jump a single rail, raised at one end and resting on the ground on the other end as you did in Exercise 1. If you and your horse are more experienced, make the jumps small verticals, no higher than 2½ feet. If he has a naturally bigger stride, increase the distances between the jumps to as much

Exercise 2: Double Bounce



Setup: Build three verticals with ground rails on both sides of each, 9 to 10 feet apart from one another.



EXERCISE 2: DOUBLE BOUNCES—The first time we go through the exercise, we remove the rail from the third vertical, leaving its two ground rails side by side in place. We approach this single bounce in a collected but animated canter. As Alter locks his focus on the first fence, I wait for him to ...



... jump up to me. I stay quiet in the saddle, keeping my eyes up and my hands softly following his mouth, letting him figure out the exercise.



In this moment, Alter is setting himself up for the next jump: His front feet have already touched down and pushed off again while his hind legs are just about to land from the first jump. By engaging his hindquarters, he compresses his body into this tight round shape.



As he jumps the second vertical confidently, already focusing on the next ground poles, I stay out of his way, letting the jumps do the work instead of my hands.



Now we build the third vertical. I approach the grid in the same canter and stay quiet as he bounces through the exercise. He's starting to engage his hind end to land and push off immediately. You can tell by his expression that he's paying attention. The curve in his neck and back and the muscle ripples along his belly show that this exercise is "gymnasticizing" his entire body.



Now we make the grid more visually interesting by raising a cup on one side of each vertical (two holes higher than the lower side), so the jumps are angled in an alternating fashion similar to the football-grid exercise. I canter Alter to it in the same way and then leave him alone to do his job.

as 11 feet. Place a ground rail on each side of every jump. This will help your horse's depth perception and prevent him from going past the distances.

Approach the bounces in a collected canter, being sure that your horse is in front of your leg. In this exercise, it's better to be a little tight to the jumps than too forward. When you arrive at the first jump, leave him alone to focus on his job. The more you can stay out of his way, the better. Hold your two-point position throughout the exercise, allowing him to jump up and close your hip angle over each obstacle.

If he gets quick over the bounces, think of being almost a little behind the motion with your body, using your weight—not your hands—to gently slow him down.

Jump the bounces in both directions. When that's going well, you can gradually add another jump or two.



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Daydream

I discovered the benefits of the football-grid exercise (Exercise 1) with Daydream, a horse I started riding as a 5-year-old. In a way, he and I grew up together: I won my first grand prix and my first big American Grandprix Association grand prix on him. He was a huge, gangly horse who was light on his feet but moved like a daisy-cutter hunter—low to the ground with very little knee action. He needed to learn to be quicker with his legs

Daydream and Margie
Engle jump a 7½-foot
puissance wall at an
indoor competition.

over very square oxers, so I consulted long-time trainer and horse dealer Vince Dugan. Vince was one of many generous professionals who offered me advice and horses to ride early in my career, when I was on a tight budget and starved for knowledge. He suggested I try this exercise to teach Daydream to think more about where his legs were and snap his front end up more quickly on takeoff. It worked! We went on to win countless grands prix and several puissance classes together, clearing walls taller than 7 feet! I continued to compete Daydream until he was nearly 20 and then watched him enjoy another decade of happy retirement.

If you have a young horse and want to trot instead of canter into the exercise, put a placement pole 7 to 8 feet from the first jump to help him arrive at a comfortable takeoff spot. Then set a second placement pole 9 to 10 feet after the last jump. With this setup, jump through the exercise in only one direction so the trot pole is at the beginning, not the end.

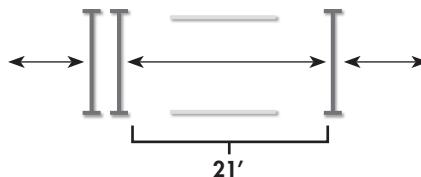
Exercise 3: In-and-Out

This final exercise will continue to emphasize straightness while helping you focus even more on body control and reminding your horse to collect and rock back onto his hindquarters on takeoff.

Set up a small vertical 21 to 22 feet from a small square oxer. Place ground rails on either side of both jumps. Add another pair of ground rails in the middle of the exercise, perpendicular to the jumps, to create a straight chute for your horse to canter through. Some horses spook at these poles when they first see them, so set them 10 to 11 feet apart initially.

Approach this in-and-out at a working canter, starting in the vertical-to-oxer direction. This should ride comfortably at this dis-

Exercise 3: In-and-Out



Setup: Place a vertical and square oxer 21 feet apart with ground rails on both sides of each jump. Add two perpendicular rails on the ground in between the jumps to help keep the horse straight (10 to 11 feet apart from one another initially).



We approach the in-and-out at a working canter in the vertical-to-oxer direction first. In the air over the vertical, I follow Alter's mouth with my hands while focusing my eyes on the oxer.



After we land from the vertical, I close my leg and continue to use a soft following hand to encourage him to keep cantering forward. I try to stay out of his way, allowing him to focus on the jumps, not on what I'm doing. As a result, he sets himself up to ...

... produce a nice round effort over the oxer. Next, we'll canter the oxer to the vertical.



The distance rides tighter this direction, but without any interference from me, Alter studies the problem and sets himself up properly to create an excellent jump out over the vertical, lifting his knees well and powering off his hind end.

tance, although you may need to add leg after the vertical to be sure the apex of your horse's next jumping effort is directly over the center of the oxer.

When your horse has jumped the in-and-out well in that direction, approach it from the other direction. The distance might feel a little tighter this way, so after you close your leg to help him across the oxer, stay quiet in the tack, allowing him to figure out the exercise. Let the jumps back him off. Help him more with your body control than with your hands—by opening your hip angle and sitting a little taller with your upper body.

Continue alternating directions through the exercise a few times to feel how differently you need to ride the vertical-to-oxer versus the oxer-to-vertical. Meanwhile, if your horse is having trouble staying straight, gradually roll the perpendicular ground rails closer together until they are about 8 or 9 feet apart. If he

has a major drifting problem, angle these rails into a mild "V" shape, bringing the ends of the poles slightly closer together (but no closer than 3 feet) in front of the takeoff of the second jump. At this point, only jump the in-and-out in this direction—or ask a ground person to reconfigure the "V" each time so that the narrower end is always pointing toward the second jump.

If you're a more advanced rider and this exercise is going well, practice it without stirrups and/or tie a knot in your reins and put your hands on your hips or out to the sides like airplane wings over the jumps. This will help you improve your independence from your hands and focus on your position and balance in the air.

Remember, your horse's welfare should always come first. Keep your schooling sessions fun and interesting without ever overdoing it—so you both can look forward to next time! 🐾

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DEWORMING TIME

Dose your horse right with these time-proven paste dewormer techniques

By Midge Leitch, VMD, DACVS, with Elizabeth Iliff Prax
Photos by Amy Katherine Dragoo



Deworming paste won't be effective if you can't get the full dose into your horse, so you need a strategy to make sure more ends up in your horse than on you or the stall floor.

Parasite control is a critical component of your horse's overall health-care plan. You probably have a system for what type of deworming products to give your horse and when, but it won't be effective if you can't get the correct dosage into him. With all but the most saintly of horses, administering paste dewormers without getting yourself and the stall splattered with paper-mâché-like goo takes a little strategizing.

In this article, I'll give a step-by-step plan for minimizing the mess and ensuring that your horse gets his full dose. Dr. Mary Griffin, DVM, a colleague in ambulatory practice with a specialty in ultrasonography in Chester County, Pennsylvania, is demonstrating.

How Much is Enough?

I Deworming medications are not effective when given in an inadequate dose, so always err on the side of giving more rather than less of the recommendation for your horse's weight. One easy way to estimate your horse's weight is with a weight tape, available through feed and tack stores. Also be aware that the average syringe contains enough medicine for a 1,200-pound horse, which is less than many of today's warmbloods weigh. So, if your horse is on the larger side, part of an additional syringe may be in order. Consult your veteri-



narian, who may suggest because deworming medications are very safe, even at higher-than-recommended doses, you should administer the dose for an additional 250 pounds (usually one mark on the syringe) more than you think your horse weighs.

When it comes to foals, smaller ponies or miniature horses, overdosing can become a problem, so you should always consult your vet before determining the appropriate dose, and be sure during the actual administering that an overdose does not occur.



2 It's also a good idea to have a little extra medication on hand, in case more ends up on the outsides of your horse's lips or on the ground than you expected. These drugs are not effective when given in small amounts over a period of time. The whole dose must be administered in one sitting. So if he doesn't swallow his full share within one day, wait a few days and start over with a new plan—and another full dose.

Say, "Ahhhh"

3 It's much easier for your horse to spit out the paste when he can combine it with a wad of food. So before administering the medication, check to be sure that he has no hay, grass or grain in his mouth. Holding the side of his halter with one hand, gently pull his lips back on the opposite side with a finger (being careful to keep it clear of his teeth) to check for food. Repeat on the other side of his mouth.

4 If you feel comfortable, encourage him to open his mouth by pressing a finger in the gap between his incisors and molar teeth, where the bit goes. On the opposite side and with your other hand, reach through the gap in the teeth to grasp his tongue. Gently pull it to the side and look into the mouth for food. Never apply excessive tension to the tongue, as it can result in permanent damage to the tongue's nerves. If your horse resents your pulling on his tongue, LET GO!

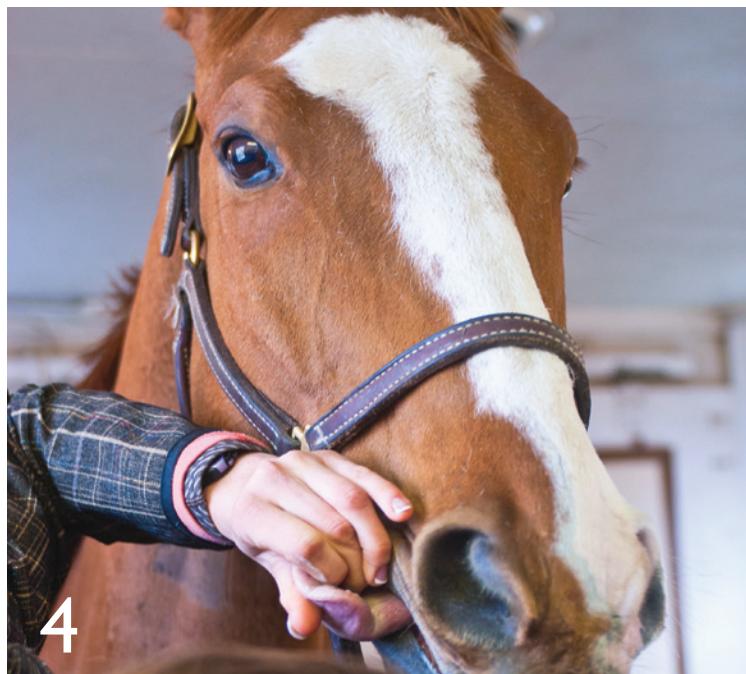
If you spot any, this manipulation probably will compel him to finish chewing and swallowing it—or spit it out—in the next moment or two. Make sure there's no food available for him to grab. If he

Mix It Up

If your horse is uncooperative about swallowing the paste from a syringe, try mixing it in a bucket with yogurt or applesauce and offer it to him when he's hungry and no other food is available in the stall. If he doesn't eat all of it immediately, mix something else tempting—an apple, carrot pieces, molasses or a little sweet feed—with the remaining portion. To be properly protected, he needs to clean most of the mixture up within a day. If he doesn't, wait a few days and then start over with a new full dose.

doesn't appear to be swallowing the food, carefully try to grasp the hay and remove it, steering clear of his teeth.

At this point, you should have a good idea of how your horse feels about having things put into his mouth. Most horses are fairly comfortable with the idea and, consequently, relatively easy to deworm. However, the occasional horse will take great exception to this process. Some hate it so much they're downright dangerous.



Life's too short to risk your life for this simple purpose. If your horse throws his head violently or refuses to stand quietly, consider mixing his dose with food instead (see "Mix It Up," page 12).

Down the Hatch

Where you inject the medication depends on your horse. Some swallow it wherever you squirt it. Some do better if you put it on their tongues; others do better if you squirt it back between the cheek and molars. A few are so adept, they spit it out regardless of where you put it. (For those types, consider mixing with food.)

It may take some experimentation to find out which place works best for your horse. In any case, when you put the syringe in his mouth, be careful not to poke the lips or bump his teeth or gums, which can make the experience less pleasant for him—and harder to tackle the next time.

5 Begin by holding his halter with one hand and sliding the tip of the syringe gently into the corner of his lips, between his molars and incisors. Inject the paste directly onto the tongue, squeezing a small amount out at a time (leaving the syringe in his mouth as you pause), allowing your horse to swallow

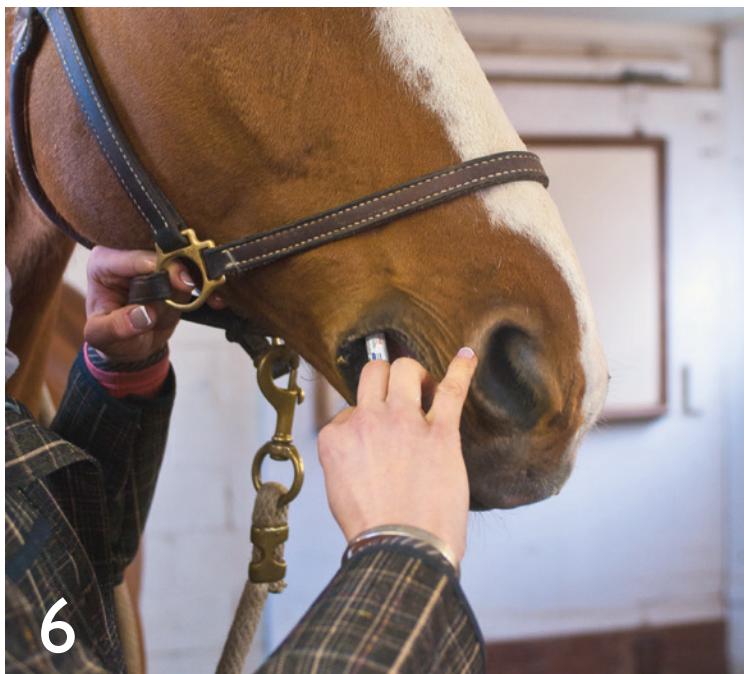


between—or ...

6 ... slide the syringe back between the molars and cheek and squirt it toward the back corner of his

mouth. Again squeeze out only a small amount at a time. If you use this method, be especially careful to avoid bumping the teeth, which can be very annoying to most horses. 🐾

*After completing her large-animal surgery residency and serving as a staff surgeon at the University of Pennsylvania's New Bolton Center in 1980, the late **Midge Leitch**, VMD, DACVS (Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Surgeons) opened a referral practice in which she developed a specialty in performance-limiting problems in racehorses and sporthorses. In the following decades, she traveled extensively with the US Equestrian Team, including trips to three Olympics and multiple World Championships. She returned to New Bolton Center in 2005 as a radiology clinician, assuming responsibility for equine diagnostic imaging, including digital radiography, MRI and CT. Dr. Leitch died in 2014.*



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