#33 Overtraining Syndrome — When Hard Work Makes the Horse Slower

The Point Where More Work Produces a Worse Horse

Overtraining syndrome develops when the **total training stress across days and weeks exceeds the horse's capacity to recover** from it. It is not one hard session — it is a pattern. The horse that never fully recovers before the next hard session gradually accumulates a physiological debt, and eventually the body responds by **shutting systems down** to protect itself.

The warning signs are easy to miss because they look like the horse just needs more work: performance drops despite more effort, resting heart rate rises, the horse loses spark in training. The key diagnostic test: if **performance regresses despite increased training load**, it is overtraining until proven otherwise. **The treatment is weeks to months of rest — not more work.**

KEY POINTS

- Overtraining = cumulative stress exceeds recovery capacity — **not a single session**
- Performance regression + increased training load = overtraining red flag
- Other signs: elevated resting HR, dull/irritable temperament, recurring minor illness
- **Treatment is extended rest** (weeks to months) — no shortcut works
- Prevention through regular fitness testing is **far cheaper than the cure**

THE PARADOX THAT HIDES IT

Overtraining often produces **falling lactate values at high speed** — which looks like fitness improving. It is the opposite: the anaerobic system has suppressed itself to limit further damage. **Falling lactate in a tired horse is a danger sign, not a fitness sign.**

PREVENTION IS SIMPLE

Monitor resting HR daily. Test V200 every 2 weeks. Watch HRR after gallops. If two of these three markers deteriorate in the same week, **reduce training load immediately** before the hole gets deeper. Catch it early; recover in a week. Miss it; recover in two months.

STABLE QUESTION

"Is there a horse in your stable right now who has been working hard for 6+ weeks, seems to have 'gone off' their work, and hasn't responded to more training? How long since they had a genuine light week?"

TRAINER TAKEAWAY

The instinct when a horse underperforms is to add more work. Overtraining science says: **when a horse is underperforming despite hard training, the first move is always to reduce the load, not increase it.** Confirm the horse is recovering before building again.

CONNECTS TO →

Monday #27: Overtraining requires rest — but detraining warns you that rest carries its own cost. Balance the two. |
Wednesday #32: Tapering is controlled, intentional detraining — reducing volume while maintaining enough stimulus to prevent fitness loss.

#27 Detraining — Fitness Disappears Faster Than You Think

The Rapid Reversal of Fitness When Training Stops

Detraining is what happens when a horse stops training — and the speed at which fitness disappears is genuinely alarming. **Mitochondrial content can fall by 50% in one week of complete rest** after five weeks of hard training. VO_2max begins dropping measurably within two weeks of stopping exercise.

This has enormous practical implications. A horse with a short 5-week preparation who is injured loses much of their fitness base within two weeks of box rest. A horse with a long 12-week base holds fitness significantly longer — because **the deeper the fitness bank, the slower the withdrawal.**

KEY POINTS

- Mitochondrial content can drop by **50% within one week** of complete rest after hard training
- VO_2max begins measurably declining within **2 weeks** without training
- A long preparation base means **slower detraining** during forced rest or injury
- After detraining, returning to full fitness takes **longer than the original build**
- **Low-intensity maintenance work** during a break dramatically slows the loss

THE INJURY CALCULUS

A horse with a 12-week base who is injured and box-rested for 3 weeks loses less relative fitness than one with a 4-week base injured for the same period. **Preparation length is injury insurance.**

SLOWING THE LOSS

Even minimal activity during a recovery period slows detraining significantly. Walking on a horse walker for 30 minutes daily during a minor injury **maintains mitochondrial turnover** and cardiovascular stimulus. Complete box rest for minor issues accelerates fitness loss unnecessarily.

STABLE QUESTION

"When one of your horses gets a minor setback and needs two weeks of reduced work — do you have a light-maintenance plan ready, or does the horse go straight to complete rest while fitness silently drains away?"

TRAINER TAKEAWAY

Detraining is not a slow creep — it is fast. **Always keep some low-intensity activity going during any break,** even if it is just walking. And when planning a preparation, remember: a longer base is a **deeper fitness reserve that holds longer** when things inevitably go wrong.

CONNECTS TO →

Monday #33: Overtraining requires rest — but detraining warns you that rest carries its own cost. Balance the two by maintaining light activity, not complete shutdown. | **Wednesday #32:** Tapering is controlled, intentional detraining — reducing volume while maintaining enough stimulus to prevent fitness loss.