

#28 Diminishing Returns — The Fitter the Horse, the Harder to Improve

Why Elite Horses Need More Precision, Not Just More Work

There is an uncomfortable truth about training: **the fitter a horse becomes, the harder it is to make them any fitter.** An unfit horse improves rapidly with modest work — almost anything new produces adaptation. A highly conditioned horse at the peak of a preparation requires a precisely calibrated session to nudge performance upward by even a fraction.

This is the law of diminishing returns, and it has direct practical implications. Trainers who manage young, unfit horses well often struggle with elite horses — because the playbook changes completely. **Simply doing more does not work.** Doing more on an already-fit horse is how you overtrain. The answer is **smarter, more precisely designed sessions** that apply the right stimulus to a system running close to its ceiling.

KEY POINTS

- Early in a preparation: almost any work produces improvement — the horse is far below potential
- At peak fitness: the margin for improvement is small and requires **precision**
- **'Doing more'** at the peak of fitness yields diminishing returns and risks overtraining
- Precision = correct zone, correct intensity, correct recovery, correct session type for this horse this week
- Experienced elite trainers often **train less volume with more precision**

THE BEGINNER VS ELITE GAP

A horse starting from 20% fitness can reach 60% fitness with basic consistent work. Getting from 85% to 90% may require **more planning, more precision, and more data** than the entire previous journey. The last 10% of performance is the hardest 10% to find.

THE ANSWER IS DATA

When diminishing returns set in, guesswork becomes expensive. **Regular testing** — V200, HRR, resting HR patterns — tells you whether the last block actually moved the needle. Without data at this level, you are managing a high-performance system with a blunt instrument.

STABLE QUESTION

"Your best horse at the peak of their preparation — are you managing them with precision data and deliberate session design, or with the same routine that worked when they were young and unfit?"

TRAINER TAKEAWAY

Diminishing returns is not a problem to solve — it is a reality to manage. Accept that the fitter the horse, the more precise the training must be. **Stop measuring success by hours worked. Start measuring it by the fitness markers that tell you whether the work actually moved the needle.**

CONNECTS TO →

Monday #33: Overtraining risk increases as a horse approaches peak fitness. | **Friday #38:** Conditioning test integration is the data system that makes precision training possible.

#38 Conditioning Test Integration — Stop Guessing, Start Measuring

Regular Testing Turns Training Into Science

Everything covered in this four-week curriculum comes down to one practical question: **How do you know if your training is actually working?** The answer is regular physiological testing — standardised checks that tell you whether the adaptations you intended are actually happening in this horse's body, in this preparation, right now.

Without testing, every training decision is educated guesswork. The horse that seems fitter may just be handling the familiar track better. The horse that seems flat may be detrained, overtrained, or simply undertested. **Regular testing replaces 'I think' with 'I know.'** Modern wearable devices make non-invasive daily monitoring practical for every stable, not just elite programmes.

KEY POINTS

- **Without testing, training prescription is guesswork** — regardless of experience
- Test V200 every 10–14 days — your most reliable non-invasive aerobic fitness marker
- Track resting HR daily — 30 seconds, free, tells you more than most other signals
- Record HRR after gallops — the trend over weeks is your cardiovascular fitness curve
- Testing also detects overtraining and illness **earlier than visual observation alone**

THE MINIMUM TESTING KIT

You do not need a laboratory. A **heart rate monitor on every gallop** gives you V200, HRR, HR zones, and internal load data. Combined with a daily resting HR log, this is enough to manage training scientifically for every horse in the stable. **The technology costs less than one vet visit.**

WHAT TO DO WITH THE DATA

Record it, graph it, and act on it. V200 rising: keep the programme. V200 flat for 3 weeks: change the stimulus. Resting HR elevated two mornings in a row: reduce load that day. **Data only has value if it changes decisions.** Testing without action is just record-keeping.

STABLE QUESTION

"If you had to prove to an owner that the last 8 weeks of training actually improved their horse — what data could you show them? If the answer is 'not much', that is where to start."

TRAINER TAKEAWAY

This four-week curriculum has given you the science. Conditioning test integration is the bridge from knowing the science to **applying it to your horses, your stable, your programme.** Measure resting HR. Track V200. Record HRR. When your data tells a story that matches what you see on the track — you are no longer guessing. You are coaching.

CONNECTS TO →

Week 1: Energy systems — ATP, aerobic, anaerobic, MLSS, VO₂max, trainability. | **Week 2:** Training science — supercompensation, rest, four variables, paradox, capacity-before-power, periodisation. | **Week 3:** Heart rate — resting HR, HRR, V200, internal load, zones, drift. | **Week 4:** Overtraining, detraining, tapering, cycles, diminishing returns, testing. These 24 concepts are the foundation of every evidence-based preparation.