

Winter Mini Lesson Footing



Winter Footing & Environmental Awareness

Lesson Overview

Winter dramatically changes the ground conditions horses work and walk on. Frozen soil, hidden ice, and thick mud all affect traction, balance, joint impact, and safety. Riders must learn to read footing, adjust their own balance, and plan safer paths for themselves and their horses.

This lesson teaches riders to identify winter footing hazards, understand how each affects a horse's body, and build the skills to adjust their riding and handling in response.

Frozen Ground

Frozen ground becomes extremely hard, reducing the natural shock absorption horses rely on.

This can cause:

- Increased strain on joints, tendons, and hooves
- Shorter, stiffer strides
- Changes in rhythm and balance
- Higher concussion risk, especially during faster work or tight turns

What Riders Should Do

- Slow the pace; avoid intense or high-impact work
- Choose safer paths when patches of frozen ground appear
- Maintain a centered, balanced seat
- Support with soft leg and rein aids (not restrictive)
- Keep warm-ups slow and allow longer time

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Teaching Points

- How to recognize frozen vs. safe footing
- How to adjust transitions and turns to reduce impact
- How to notice signs of discomfort (stiffness, shortened stride, reluctance to move forward)

Interactive Activities

1. Footing Walk-About

Walk with riders over frozen and non-frozen areas. Compare sound, feel, and firmness.

2. “Stomp or Jump Test”

Have riders jump from a mounting block onto soft vs. hard ground.

Ask: Which surface absorbs shock? Which feels jarring? How might that feel for a horse?

Key Takeaway:

Frozen ground isn't inherently unsafe, but it demands adjusted work, slower paces, and careful warm-ups to protect the horse's joints and tendons.

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Slippery Surfaces: Ice & Packed Snow

Why It's Risky

Slippery conditions make horses lose traction, especially during:

- Quick movements
- Tight turns
- Transitions
- Snow can pack into horse's hooves creating snow balls making it hard to walk.

Horses naturally shorten their steps to keep weight centered and balanced. Slipping increases the risk of tendon and ligament injuries and/or falls.

What Riders Should Do

- Avoid slick areas whenever possible
- Slow the pace drastically—control over speed
- Give the horse space to manage its own balance
- Consider dismounting if mounted and/or keep centered position
- Apply animal safe melting agent on the ice

Teaching Points

- How to visually recognize slick patches (barn thermometer?)
- How to plan a path before riding or leading
- Why small, careful steps matter
- How a rider's weight influences a slipping horse

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Interactive Activity “Winter Slip & Slide”

Participation is at its own risk and is not suitable for all participants. Use caution with this activity - putting people in a situation where they can slip and fall has a high risk of injury. Option to have your riders imagine or talk about their own experiences on something slippery.

Materials:

- Tarp or large trash bags
- Dish or castile soap + small amount of water
- Rope secured tightly across the aisle or between structural anchors (shoulder height or above such as cross ties connected together)
- Towel or non-slip surface to stand on and a way to clean the bottom of boots

How It Works:

- Students hold the rope for safety to prevent falls
- Stand on the slippery tarp
- Experiment with balance, weight shifts, and “tiny steps” while holding support
- Clean boots after to prevent accidental slips

Discussion:

- How does balance change?
- What happens when you lean? Pay with different body positions
- How do you keep a center of gravity
- How might your horse feel on a similar surface?
- Why should riders avoid big movements?

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Interactive Activity: Center of Gravity Shifts

Goal: Feel how small shifts of weight impact balance—just like when riding.

How:

- Stand with feet hip-width
- Lean forward/back/left/right
- Try lifting one arm at a time
- Notice how the weight shifts more to the foot on the same side

Teaching Points:

- Tiny shifts = big effect
- This mirrors how rider weight influences a horse
- Connect to slips: leaning can unbalance both horse and rider

Mud: Stickiness, Traction & Hoof Care

Why Mud Is Challenging

- Creates a slippery surface - increased tendon/ligament injury
- Creates suction: hooves sink - increased tendon/ligament injury
- Makes movement harder → horses tire faster
- Can pack into the frog, sulci, and sole
- Traps bacteria → increases risk of:
 - Scratches
 - Mud fever
 - Thrush

What Riders Should Do

- Slow pace; avoid fast/turn-heavy work
- Let horses take careful steps
- Offer breaks
- Always clean & dry hooves and lower legs
- Choose drier paths; avoid deep mud when leading

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Teaching Points

- How to read the depth and type of mud
- Why packed mud stresses ligaments
- How thrush grows in trapped moisture
- Why drying legs is essential

Interactive Activities

1. Horse Care Mud Management

- Tips and tricks for a long muddy winter coat
- Hoof care snow packing and thrush prevention and treatments
- Tips for drying skin & hoofs to reduce skin/fungal issues.

2. Property Walk & Footing Assessment

Walk the property and or arena and ask riders to:

- Identify frozen vs. soft ground
- Find icy patches
- Locate muddy areas
- Predict how each horse may handle it
- Create a “safe path plan”

Teaching Questions

- Where would you lead a horse? Where can you ride?
- How to lead safely in slippery conditions.
- Which areas will be dangerous tomorrow if it rains? freezes? thaws?

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Water



Water becomes a real problem when the temperature in drops below 32 degrees on a farm. Let's think about all the way in which we have to prepare for below freezing temperatures.

- Frozen hoses
 - Prevention
 - Thawing
- Water spigots and hydrants
 - water expansion and damage
 - Frost free hydrants - drain and syphon effect
- Frozen Water Buckets
- Frozen Troughs
- Excess water - dumping buckets, troughs, and bathing in areas where dangerous ice form in lower temperatures
- Horse's preferred drinking temperature is around 50–70°F. Horses are less likely to drink very cold water (near freezing) or very hot water, which can reduce intake and risk dehydration.

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Topic Ideas



More ideas for quick winter add on topics based on your program's policy and the horse's needs.

- Blanketing
 - Sizing and fit
 - Weights
 - Strap variations and safety
 - Drying/cleaning/repairing
 - Folding and hanging
- Winter Coats, Piloerection & Clipping
- Weather related turnout
- Drying wet winter coats
- Proper Winter Riding Attire
- How eating forage and fermentation helps warm the horse