



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**  
 Dr Victoria Hamilton is one of Australia's top dressage riders and coaches. She has trained and competed throughout Australia and overseas. She has won numerous State and National Championships, two Australian World Challenge Finals (with Ardito in 1998 and Asaachen in 2000), two Australian Dressage Leaderboard Titles (with Asaachen in 1998 and Kaduso in 2002) and was the runner-up in the World Final of the PSI/FEI World Dressage Challenge in Germany in 2001. In 2006 she founded WADYRA (WA Dressage Young Riders Association) where is currently the chief coach.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF WARMING UP

By Dr Victoria Hamilton



**Maddy Georgiades & Double Oh Seven**  
 Maddy is competing at elementary and medium which can be quite tricky with horses that are still relatively new to the flying changes. Fortunately this is not the case with Mocha as he is very confident and clear with the aids. Maddy is now able to concentrate on the quality of the paces and the development of collection. Mocha is very talented at transferring weight on to his hind quarters and now Maddy needs to fine tune her aids so she can control the degree of sitting whilst preserving the stride length.  
 PHOTO BY ERIC LLOYD PHOTOGRAPHY.

I write this article just before warming up the WADYRA riders at a dressage training day at the State Equestrian Centre.

WADYRA is the WA Dressage Young Riders Association which I began with a fantastic group of young dressage riders' parents 10 years ago. Prior to that I had been the State Young Rider Dressage coach and really enjoyed helping these riders to develop their talent. When the EFA(WA), now known as the EWA decided not to have a dedicated State YR coach I decided to begin WADYRA for young riders from all disciplines interested in improving their dressage.

At each rally we have lessons and test riding. With the test riding we often focus on a different part of the competition procedure or the analysis and feedback given. There are always top level judges to judge the tests but sometimes the riders also have to mark their own tests from a video taken when they ride and then compare this to the judge's marks and comments. Other times they will go through the test and video either with myself or the judge. Sometimes they mark a test sheet before they go in filling in the highest mark they think they could feasibly gain and then compare this to what they actually receive. All these techniques help develop an in-depth understanding of what is required and what is currently achievable. This results in happier outcomes and more self-confidence in training and competing.

Today's exercise is to learn more about the warm-up and how this affects the entire ride, be-it a training session or a competition. Last rally we had a discussion on warm-ups which is the basis of this article and then today we are putting it all into practise. The riders have each designed their own warm-up which includes a final individual session with me just before they go into the ring.

## General Warm-ups for Horses of all Disciplines

Warm-ups are important from a mental and physical point of view to prepare the horse and rider for their work session. This article is primarily considering the warm-up for the horse but the same degree of attention should be spent on designing some loosening up exercises and stretches

specific for the rider.

Although many factors affect the length of the warm-up and the exercises used some components will always remain the same. Riders need to have a plan but also know their horse sufficiently and have the ability to be flexible and alter their plan if necessary.

Preparing a horse to be ridden doesn't just involve grooming and tacking up. This is the ideal time to give your horse a quick massage, particularly if you noticed any tight muscle areas or if your horse has required ongoing work in these areas. Carrot stretches are also fantastic and although best performed once warmed up, I find most people forget them then and they can really benefit some horses if done pre-ride. As the horse is performing the stretch himself it is unlikely that he will cause himself damage by stretching too far. It is not necessary to massage the entire horse, nor necessary to do all possible carrot stretches as this would take forever! Just work out which works best for your horse at this point in time in his training and be aware that this is most likely to alter as he progresses through the grades. A horse just commencing his work under saddle has a totally different pattern of

muscle work than one beginning canter pirouette work. Sure, the more advanced horse is still using the same muscles as the younger horse but they are well conditioned by that point in its career and tend not to tire and show the effects of new work as much as the muscles being developed as he begins to collect more and sits and carries behind.

Ideally horses should be walked on a long rein for at least 10 minutes, especially if the horse has come directly from a stable or small yard. This allows the joint fluid to start to move over the entire area of the joint surfaces. Riders can use this time to think about their position and perhaps do some quiet stretches themselves. They can think about their breathing and mentally prepare themselves for the work ahead.

Occasionally it is not possible to walk like this as the horse may be too fresh from lack of work or due to environmental influences so common sense must be used here. An alternative is to walk the horse in-hand. This is also sensible for horses started on the lunge if they are unlikely to walk around quietly at the start.

After walking the horse should be trotted or cantered on long straight lines

and big circles to warm-up the muscles, tendons and ligaments. As the horse exercises, its heart and respiratory rates increase. When the horse is at rest more of the horse's blood is supplying the internal organs and the digestive

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**Abbey Robson and Narcoola Park Deva**  
Abbey has been working on flying changes at home but is only competing at novice and elementary at the moment. In the warm-up it is important that counter canter is included to reduce the chance of Deva anticipating a flying change. Here Abbey is concentrating on developing and maintaining an uphill balance in the canter.



system but when exercising more is supplied to the muscles. It takes time for this shift to happen but is extremely important as then more oxygen is available to the muscles. In addition the horse’s body temperature rises which is necessary for the muscles to work at their most efficient and also for the tendons and ligaments to be more pliable. These are the reasons a warm-up is so incredibly important for your horse’s long term well-being.

The frame used to ride the horse in for this part of the warm-up should be long (but not too long) and slightly round. During this time the rider should be checking if the horse is regular in all paces and feeling for any stiffness that may be apparent. Then a decision has to be made as to whether that is normal for the horse or unusual. Does the next stage of the workout need to be changed to deal with this? After 5-10 minutes the frame can gradually be brought more towards the outline required for the work or competition through the use of different school figures and transitions within and between paces. As the warm-up progresses, the horse’s longitudinal and lateral suppleness improves to the point that they are ready to begin schooling dressage, begin pole work or jumping or whatever the rider has in mind.

Regardless of discipline an important part of each daily session should be to check that the horse is taking responsibility for maintaining each pace. Too many riders are forever nagging their horses to keep walking, or to keep trotting or cantering. If a horse is not going forward it is very difficult to do much else with it so in my opinion this is very important. Also check the stopping and slowing aids and the turning aids.

### Warming up for test riding

When warming up for a competition, environmental factors such as the weather, the surfaces and the show atmosphere must be considered as well as information about the horse. Experienced horses should take less time to settle than younger horses although this can depend on their temperament. The level of test that the horse will be performing will affect the length of time of the warm-up as well as the number of tests entered for the day or weekend and the time between them. Horse and rider fitness, including any previous injuries must also be considered.

Training days are a fantastic opportunity to experiment with different warm-up routines. Do you always find that your horse is better during the second test? Is this due to you riding better or perhaps that the horse has been working longer? Next time you could try warming up twice for your first test to see if that helps your horse or even just arriving on the grounds earlier so your horse has more time to look around.

Always think about the aims of the level at which you are competing as well as the specific goals of the individual test. When you ride you should be endeavouring to show the judge that you and your horse have a solid understanding of these goals and test movements. The purpose of each test

and level is found at the top of each of the test sheets. In addition to this there are judging directives for each movement of the test. Riders should take note of these as this will help them in their training and test riding.

Have confidence in yourself and your horse. The warm-up is not the place to school movements and neither is the competition arena. By the time you are competing you should easily be able to perform everything in the test. If not, either enter a lower grade or train more at home. It should not be necessary and in many cases can be detrimental to repeatedly ride certain movements in the warm-up. A cleverer option is to work on the preparation, the horse’s response to the rider’s aids and the quality of the paces. Canter pirouettes are a great example. More benefit can usually be achieved by practising bringing the horse to a pirouette type canter several times in the warm-up and perhaps only riding a couple rather than continually performing them. It is a similar situation with flying changes. If your horse is truly on the aids and performs a few lovely, straight and uphill changes there is no need to do line upon line of sequences.

Make sure you present to the gear checker on time and keep up to date with any scratchings before you. Know who is on one or two horses before you are due in so that you can time the final part of your warm-up perfectly.

Be ready to go around the outside of the arena as soon as the horse before you has finished its final halt so that you have as much time as possible to familiarise your horse with the arena and judges’ cars or boxes. Some horses are best walked around whilst others are better to trot or canter around the edge. Horses that back off need to be woken up whilst horses that are tense should be kept relaxed and supple. This is something that you need to work out over time and sometimes by trial and error.

After you have presented to the judge keep your horse focussed and listen out for the judge’s bell. From this time you should enter the arena within 45 seconds. When you halt and salute, look at the judge and smile. Be proud to be riding, enjoy yourself and allow your horse to enjoy himself. Aim to show people how the test should be ridden. If someone was watching you ride the test and didn’t know what the movements were, or where they started and finished, could they write the test down on paper just by watching you ride? If they could then you did a fantastic job of fulfilling all the requirements and should go home really happy. Above all – have fun! Remember why you took up riding in the first place – because you love horses and riding. Don’t ever let a dressage test come between you and your horse. You are in it together, not against each other.

### Ella Jones & Talga Park Blue Bird (above)

Every time Ella rides she practises her position and her balance on Dainty by fun exercises and games. She is also learning about the training scale and the importance of going forwards. Dainty is always relaxed and has a very good rhythm so Ella can concentrate on her flexion and developing a lovely, soft contact. Exercises such as spiralling in and out of a circle were included in her warm-up for these tests as well as some straight line work and halts. Young children, like young horses should not be expected to concentrate for too long so short, intensive sessions are best, interspersed with breaks where both can look around and take in the environment.

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