

No time to ride? You're not alone. AQHA Professional Horseman Michael Hunsinger says positive, focused riding sessions can help riders even when time is short.



A man wearing a black cowboy hat, a bright blue long-sleeved button-down shirt, blue jeans, and a large gold belt buckle stands in a dirt arena. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background consists of a metal fence and a line of bare trees under a clear blue sky. A large, dark blue, stylized letter 'O' is positioned on the left side of the image, partially overlapping the title text.

Minutes ^{to} Success

When saddle time is short, don't skip the barn. Instead, use these three tips to create a positive, quick work session.

**Article and photos by
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COMMITMENTS TO WORK, FAMILY AND FRIENDS TAKE AWAY valuable saddle time. How can a rider make the most of a quick trip to the barn?

AQHA Professional Horseman Michael Hunsinger of San Antonio has the answers.

Michael works with a variety of clients, from Level 1 youth riders learning on their first horse to seasoned amateurs looking to top the nation. Regardless of the rider's ability, he says time in the saddle is always beneficial, even if only for a few minutes.

"Time in the saddle will better you as a rider," he says. "Even after just a few days off of riding, people come back slightly uncomfortable in their seat. Any time in the saddle benefits you as a rider, any time."

The trainer has experience training western pleasure futurity horses then cut his chops working with all-around horses for AQHA Professional Horseman Brad Jewett. Now Michael applies those lessons to his own clients.

A quick, positive ride goes a long way toward improving a horse and rider team.

"In my opinion, if you're limited on the time you have to ride, make it positive. Don't try to teach your horse something new in a short amount of time," Michael adds. "Do what you can to keep your horse in shape and make it a willing, positive experience."

1. Maintain Shape

OFTEN, RIDERS FOCUS ON WHAT THEY GET OUT OF THE RIDE, and they forget that any workout only helps improve or maintain the horse's endurance. Even short rides help keep a horse in shape.

Michael's lessons normally begin with a thorough warm-up that conditions the horse and softens it for the lesson. However, a limited ride time can mean that the warm-up is the day's only focus.

"It's OK if all I accomplish is my warm-up, because I'm maintaining the horse. I'm not gaining or losing ground," he says. "The goal is to have a horse that is truly connected to us."

To achieve that connection, Michael does trot work, suppling the horse, which requires it to be soft and responsive. The goal is to shape the horse through the rider's feet cues, gaining a lifted belly and soft, even stride from the horse in response.

"We do a working, engaged trot that keeps the horse stepping forward, and this helps keep the horse in good shape. Within the warm-up, we do stops, back-ups, turns and anything that checks the responsiveness of the horse," he explains.

Fifteen or 20 minutes of trot work provides the horse an aerobic workout, Michael says. The added benefits are working on the horse's supple and soft response to cues.

"Focus on making sure the horse is soft. Push the body parts around and get the horse connected to your trot rhythm," Michael says. "This keeps the horse honest and in tune to you."

2. Improve Horsemanship

GOOD HORSEMANSHIP COMES FROM A RIDER'S BALANCE, ABILITY to control her body, and the feel she develops from time in the saddle. Working each day to improve horsemanship doesn't

require an hour-long lesson, simply a few focused minutes.

Even if there are just 10 minutes to focus on horsemanship, Michael says, there is ample time for improvement. He uses no-stirrup work to challenge both English and western performance riders.

"Body control and body work are so important to a rider in the all-around," he explains. "Pick a part of the body to focus on – lower body, core, upper body – and set a goal to improve your position. I tell riders to say their goal out loud. Say, 'I will keep my heels down' before you ride off and during your circle or arena lap. It is a way to remind yourself of the goal while you ride."

With dropped stirrups, Michael says, riders can work on balance, leg control and strength, and also work on their core strength. Another tip Michael applies to riders looking for leg control is to have them stand at the trot.

"To lengthen a rider's leg, drop that heel and find balance, I have them stand and get their weight in the balls of their feet. This helps find balance using the stirrup," he says. "Maintain the proper horsemanship position with shoulders back and square, chin up, heels down and legs in position. A lap or two around the arena is all you need to work on this position."

When riders struggle with dropping a shoulder, Michael has them swap rein hands. While the rider might be uncomfortable, the result is re-alignment of the shoulders.

"I ride with my left hand, and sometimes push my left shoulder forward. That drops my right shoulder out of alignment," Michael says. "Even for a few minutes, swap your hands to bring the shoulder back. You will feel how to square yourself up the next time you're uneven."



Even a few laps around the arena without stirrups, as Rela Ratner shows here, can improve a rider's leg and core strength.



If the weather is nasty outside, barn aisles usually have enough room to practice showmanship.

3. Get Specific

WITH A HORSE SHOW LOOMING THE FOLLOWING WEEKEND, Michael says that his clients can attempt to cram too many event requirements in to one riding session – extremely detrimental when ride time is short.

“A lot of people’s expectations from a ride depend on what is coming next,” Michael says. “People put pressure on themselves knowing a horse show is approaching, and they put pressure on every ride on the horse. You don’t have to work on everything (you need to show), but you can work on one thing.”

To practice trail, Michael sets up a long line of poles, connected end to end, to create a never-ending serpentine. Riders can practice going over poles and work on controlling the horse’s footfall with this exercise.

“This is another example of the trot work I do to help find footfall and build consistent rhythm. A short attainable goal is to create cadence over logs,” Michael says. “The rider directs the horse over the logs in a tight serpentine that extends from end to end.”

If ride time is short, Michael doesn’t suggest practicing a maneuver that requires patience, like the box or back through. Instead, practice something that is attainable and offers a clear result, like cadenced, clean trot-overs.

“Don’t cut corners on one maneuver because you’re trying

to work on all the maneuvers you’ll need to accomplish the event at the horse show,” he says. “And don’t cancel a lesson because you may run late or not have a full hour to ride. Any time you have to work on your horse is good time.”

This winter, when the weather turned cold, Michael continued to give lessons. The barn aisle is enough space to work on showmanship basics.

“Use the alley and work on cross-overs, quarters and setting up. You can back up, and get the horse to lead off quicker,” he says. “We don’t practice for an hour. Just 10 minutes can improve the skills needed for a class.”

No matter if it is the weather wrecking your riding time or simply a day without enough time in it, find a way to interact with your horse at the barn. A positive workout creates a partnership between you and your horse, all the while building on the basics of horsemanship.

“Remember, instead of coming out and limiting yourself with a time frame to teach a horse something, find the positive,” Michael says. “When you push too hard too fast, the experience is negative for you and the horse. Keep the horse fit, keep yourself in good riding position and make it a positive ride.” 🐾

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