

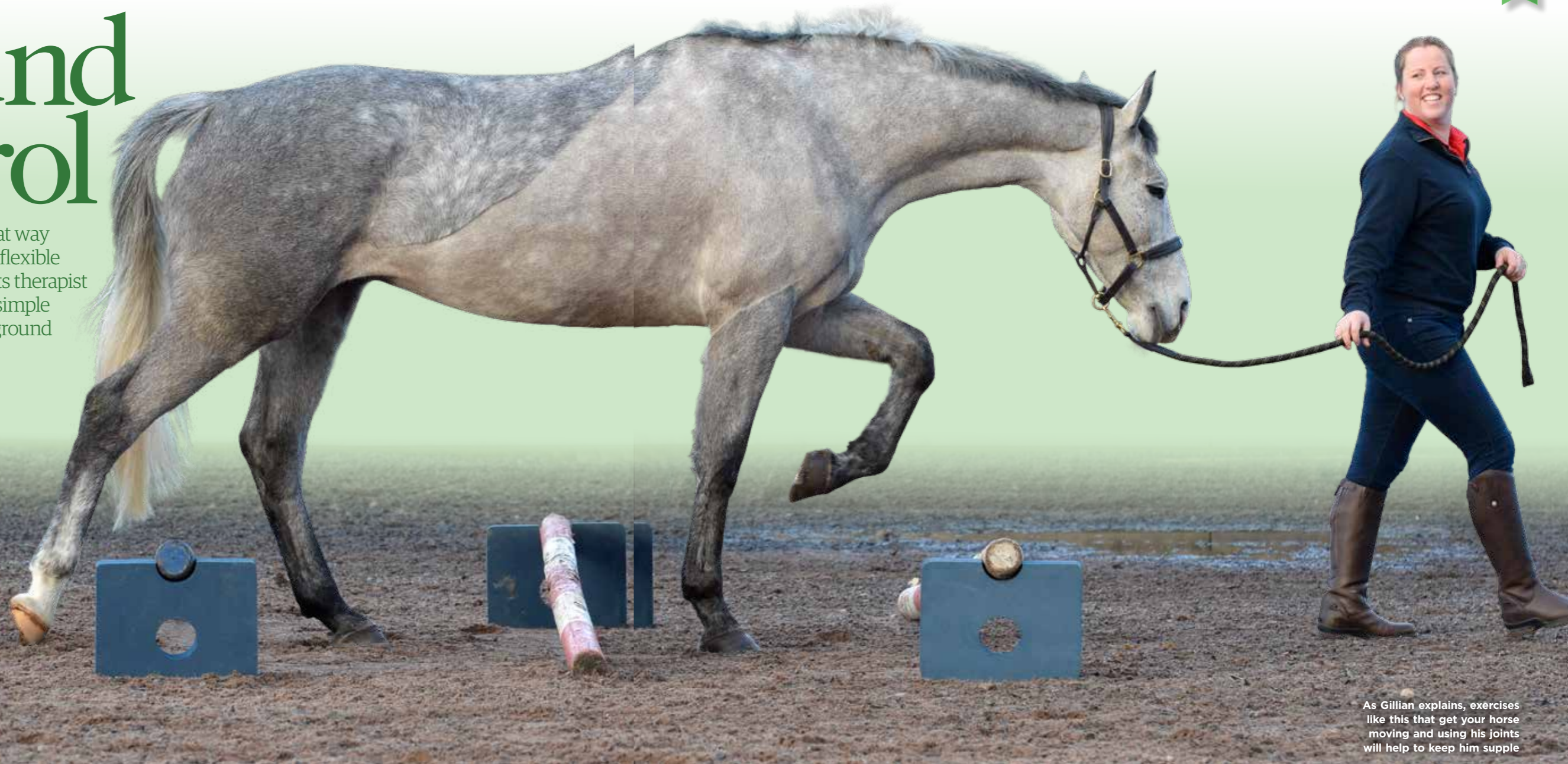
# Ground control

In-hand exercises can be a great way to keep your horse supple and flexible over winter. Here, equine sports therapist **Gillian Higgins** shares three simple routines you can do from the ground

## MEET THE EXPERT



**GILLIAN HIGGINS** is an equine sports and remedial therapist, BHS Senior Coach, biomechanist, anatomist and anatomical artist. Her business, Horses Inside Out, offers courses on understanding equine anatomy and biomechanics. Visit [www.horsesinsideout.com](http://www.horsesinsideout.com)



As Gillian explains, exercises like this that get your horse moving and using his joints will help to keep him supple

**I**T CAN BE TOUGH trying to keep your horse's fitness on track at this time of year. A lack of daylight hours means time in the saddle can be limited and wet weather may mean restricted or no turnout time. Combine these two issues and your horse's suppleness, muscle strength and core may become weaker. However, there are things you can do to help your horse stay fit and well. Here I've put together three routines that you can do with your horse to ensure he remains supple, strong and, above all, happy. All of the exercises are ones I enjoy doing with my own horses, and they're easy to incorporate into your daily routine - so there's no excuse not to give them a try!

## ROUTINE 1: Get his joints moving

This first routine is a great pre-riding warm-up, or useful if you're unable to ride. If you're planning on riding you can do these exercises tacked up. I'd suggest your horse wears an exercise rug or lightweight rug if it's particularly chilly. The aim is to get him moving, especially his joints. Begin by walking two circuits of your arena with your horse in-hand.

**STEP 1** This backing up exercise is great for developing the muscles that support back posture and help your horse carry your weight when you're riding. It also mobilises the back and sacroiliac area, encouraging your horse to bring his hindlegs underneath him, as well as improving his posture.

**How to do it:** From halt, apply gentle pressure on the reins (make sure you have an even contact on both reins), or leadrope to ask your horse to step back, taking long, even steps with his head and neck lowered. Ask for 10 steps backwards before walking him forwards again. Repeat this two or three times.



**STEP 2** This exercise works your horse on a small circle and helps improve suppleness. **How to do it:** Stand facing your horse at his girth area. Ask your horse to walk a small circle around you as you gently bend his head to the inside to encourage him to step across under his body with his inside hindleg. A common mistake is to allow your horse to pivot on the spot. To help avoid this focus on your horse's front legs, and keep him walking forwards on a small circle. You need to stand still and let your horse walk around you. Repeat this three or four times in both directions.





**STEP 3** Walking over poles will get your horse really using his joints. It will also improve his balance, muscle tone, his hoof/brain co-ordination and develop his core and abdominal strength.

**How to do it:** Place five poles one of your short walk strides apart. If you can walk over it comfortably your horse should be able to do it too. Walk over the poles with your horse

several times from both directions, making sure you allow him freedom in his head and neck. Once your horse is happy with this you can raise alternate ends of each pole.

**STEP 4** Walking your horse over an obstacle will engage his core and lift and mobilise his back muscles. There's no momentum or spring in walk, so your horse has to flex and lift his joints to get over the obstacle.

**How to do it:** If you have jumps set out in your arena you can walk your horse over them. He should be able to walk over anything up to his knee or hock height. The key to getting this exercise right is not to rush your horse. It takes time for him to lift each leg up and over. Keep your reins loose, allowing him to use his head and neck. This is hard work so don't over do it. If he goes over the jump nicely off each rein twice that's enough.



Ask your horse to step over a fence that's knee height or below in walk

## ROUTINE 2: Keep him supple

This routine is great for all horses, but if yours is on no turnout at the moment, or restricted turnout time, I'd recommend the following exercises to help him stay supple. You can run through this routine in his stable, and make it part of his daily grooming session.

**STEP 1** This exercise will help your horse to round his back and engage his core.

**How to do it:** This back lift is a good one to start with. Stand

behind or slightly to the side of your horse and place your hands approximately six inches apart on top of your horse's hindquarters. Using your fingertips, gently scratch either side of your horse's spine. As you stimulate this reflex point your horse should arch his back. You may need to vary the pressure depending on how sensitive your horse is. Remember safety first, if your horse is particularly sensitive, and may kick out it's best not to do this exercise.



**STEP 2** The abdominal lift again uses reflex points to encourage your horse to lift his back, stimulating the abdominal muscles to strengthen his core. The aim is for your horse to lower his head, bring his chest up and pull his tummy in.  
**How to do it:** Place the flat of your hand between your horse's front legs and run your hand back

to the middle of his tummy (see above). If he's happy with this movement, run your hand back against the hair until your hand's between his front legs again. You should see him lifting his tummy and see his back moving upwards. You can try changing your movement to a scratch with your fingertips, or you can use a rubber curry comb.



Gently push and release over your horse's last rib

**STEP 3** Rib mobilisation is a great movement to help keep your horse's back and abdominal muscles supple.

**How to do it:** For your horse to feel the full effect you need to locate his last rib. To find it, run your hand up his flank and across towards

his belly until you can feel his last rib. Gently push and release over this area 10 times. It should feel quite springy. Repeat on the other side, again for 10 times.



Scratching either side of your horse's spine will encourage him to arch his back



**STEP 4** A tail stretch can be done when you finish riding, as well as at the end of this short routine. It will help your horse to stretch the muscles in his neck, back and hindquarters.  
**How to do it:** Gently take hold of your horse's tail and gradually lean backwards, taking your weight on his tail. Hold for 30 seconds before releasing. Again, if he's sensitive and might kick, don't do it.

## ROUTINE 3: Give him a stretch

There are numerous carrot stretches you can do, but the two I'm suggesting will work your horse's core and improve the suppleness of his neck and back. To do both of these stretches you'll need a few carrots - the reward is that he gets to eat them at the end. It can help if you do these stretches in his stable so your horse has to reach for the carrot rather than being free to move about.



**STEP 1** This carrot stretch between the front legs is the equine equivalent of a human sit-up. It's great for better back flexibility and core stability.  
**How to do it:** I suggest using two carrots. Use the first carrot to encourage your horse to lower his head to about fetlock height. Hold the second carrot

between your horse's front legs and move it backwards to create the stretch. To stop your horse snatching at the carrot, and to keep the stretch smooth, keep the carrot touching your horse's chin. Hold the stretch for five to 10 seconds before allowing your horse to take a nibble of carrot.



**STEP 2** This final stretch promotes suppleness of your horse's back and base of his neck.  
**How to do it:** This is best done up against a stable wall, so your horse reaches round to the side for the carrot rather than moving backwards. To help create a good stretch it can

be helpful to stand with your back against your horse roughly in his girth area and move the carrot down to your knee, encouraging your horse to stretch round to the side. Repeat this two to three times on each side holding the stretch for five to 10 seconds.

### Want to learn more?

If you're keen to do more in-hand exercises with your horse take a look at Gillian's book *Pilates and Stretching for Horses* and her DVD, *Pilates for Horses*. Order them at [www.horsesinsideout.com](http://www.horsesinsideout.com)