

STRETCH

for SUCCESS

Jessica Routier credits longevity and injury-free runs to her regular stretching routine.

Article and Photos by Kate Bradley Byars

JESSICA ROUTIER AND HER HARD-RUNNING PALOMINO PARTNER, Fiery Miss West who is best known as “Missy,” are a familiar face in the arena. They have a great story, a solid partnership, that fans know well. One thing they haven’t been through is an injury-ridden season. That isn’t pure luck. “Missy has never been hurt running,” Routier said. “I’d like to think stretching regularly is what helps us keep going. I started doing [these stretches] years ago with my rodeo horse that I ran until she was 20. Now, [that horse] is 25 and my daughter still runs her. I’d like to think that this helped increase her longevity and prevent injuries.”

Routier learned seven stretches—two for the hind legs and five for the front legs—at an Ed Wright clinic many years ago. It is something she does with her regularly-running horses to help keep them limber and loose, ready for any eventuality in the arena.

“His advice is to never stretch a horse cold,” she explained. “I can’t do it with all my horses, but the horses I am running [in rodeo] more often, I stretch them every day after I ride them. At the rodeos, I’ll warm them up first, then stretch. I’ll long trot a few more laps to loosen them up and then I’ll run them.”

Here, the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo qualifier, current Badlands Pro Rodeo Circuit leader (as of July 1) and winner of more than \$760,000 walks through the routine that keeps her running.

MEET THE EXPERT



Jessica Routier of Buffalo, South Dakota, and Fiery Miss West, owned by Gary Westergren of Lincoln, Nebraska, are a dynamic team in and out of the arena. The 9-year-old mare has carried Routier to the National Finals, several circuit finals, and every major rodeo on their way to earning \$650,000.



FRONT LEGS FIRST

1. Forward

Routier holds each stretch for 30 seconds each, long enough to limber muscles but not too long to annoy the horse or get in a bind underneath it.

"I pick one leg to start and go back and forth until I go through those," Routier said. "I start with the easiest one and never start without doing some warm-up riding first. I pull the leg forward until it is tight, but no further."

Used to the routine, Missy is comfortable with Routier moving her legs. However, a horse new to being stretched may need someone to hold it, or loop the lead loosely over a fence.



2. Forward and In

In the front forward and in stretch, Routier is close to Missy's chest, almost under her throatlatch. She keeps the leg about chest height, twisting the foreleg slightly in.

"I pull until it is tight. Every horse is different. As I stretch them, every day the horse can go further. Sometimes you'll feel the horse tense up at one point, and that is when I back off a little," she said. "For Missy, I pull her leg to about the center of her chest because that is her comfort spot. I'll push a teensy bit further. But I want her comfortable while stretching."

3. Forward and Out

"Stretching the legs every which direction that they may be stretched when running is the main idea," Routier said. "Once a horse gets used to it, I can see they like it or it relaxes them. They help you do it, too. It is stretching for anything that may occur during a run."

When she pulls the leg out, she does it slowly so the horse understands what is happening and doesn't jerk away.

STRETCH



4. Lower Leg Forward

Like a ballerina pointing her toe, Missy stretches her front leg forward while Routier holds her in place. She places her hands around the bulbs of Missy's feet to pull pressure and keep the foot in place.

5. Lower Leg Back

"She is mellow but you never know what can scare them. Never get in a spot where you can't get away, Routier said. "If a horse is respectful and will stay put, I will put the lead rope on the ground or just over the fence. I don't tie one in case it does try to get away. I always want it comfortable for them, especially when you start out. Being underneath the horse in this position, or any really, can get you in a potentially bad spot if one spooks."



HIND LEGS LOOSE

1. Stretch Forward

Stretching not only loosens up a horse, it also helps Routier check for any soundness issues.

"If you do it regularly, your horse should get to where they like it," she said. "If they are relaxed and cooperative, but one day if the horse resists, that is a pretty good indicator something may be wrong."



2. Reach Back

"Be careful not to ever put your hand directly under their foot. They are heavy and move fast, I keep my hands on the sides of their feet," Routier cautions. [BHN](#)

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