

PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

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READING the *Signs*

BY RICHARD WINTERS

Horses Are HONEST

BY CRAIG CAMERON

PLEASE, Let's *STOP*

BY SANDY COLLIER

OVERLOOK FARM
ER Hot Chex

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AND MANY MORE!

SEE PAGE 3 FOR DETAILS

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The Whole Horse Approach

Looking at the Bigger Picture

By Jim Masterson

We've all heard the adage, "No feet, no horse." Not only from the point of view of the feet, but from the point of view of the equine body, this makes a lot of sense.

MOST OF THE TIME THE TOPIC OF "NO FEET, NO HORSE" IS LOOKED AT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF:

- 1.) Conformation of the feet and legs
- 2.) What the farrier is doing
- 3.) What the veterinarian will need to do

All of these perspectives are important, but their focus is only from the leg down. When we step back and look at the bigger picture we can see connections between issues with the feet, and other seemingly unrelated problems in the horse's movement, performance or behavior.

Pain creates tension in the horse's body that negatively affects movement and performance. Most of this tension and restriction is created by – or is secondary to – another primary issue or issues. Front foot and lower leg pain or discomfort are good examples of the primary issue.

Pain or discomfort can not only affect stride, foot-fall, or lameness in the short term, but in the long term can translate into restriction and loss of range of motion in other areas of the body.

In the example of feet, discomfort or soreness in the front foot and lower leg transmits into the body through the leg, shoulder and neck, and eventually shows up in the poll and atlas. Tension in the poll and atlas affects movement in other areas of the horse's body.

When tension accumulates in an area unilaterally – more on one side than the other – then performance issues will become even more noticeable. Soreness in a right front foot will create tension in the right poll and atlas. This shows up as bracing, pulling, or heaviness on the bit when the



horse is asked to turn or bend to the right.

Compensation for this right front foot or lower leg pain will also affect the diagonal behind. This can show up as difficulty in lead changes or in the canter lead to the right. Compensating with the hind diagonal will put extra load on that limb, causing excessive soreness in the muscles of that limb, which can lead eventually to hip or hock issues on that side.

Soreness, tension and restricted movement in the above areas will shift the workload to other parts of the body, resulting eventually in sore backs, withers and sacroiliac, as the horse continues to try to do what is being asked of it with the original sore front foot. This can all happen before any sign of lameness in the right front foot shows up.

Flipping the picture around, what's going in the horse's body can tell us what might be going on in the feet and legs. Tension in the body accumulates in patterns that can point to possible primary issues. By paying attention to what the horse's body is telling you often you can catch a primary issue - such as something in the foot, leg or joints - that may be addressed or treated before it becomes a veterinary issue.

A LIST OF PRIMARY ISSUES MIGHT INCLUDE THINGS SUCH AS:

- 1.) Feet and legs (joints, navicular, tendons, ligaments)
- 2.) Tack or saddle
- 3.) Dental issues
- 4.) Over-training or excessive repetitive movement in training.

OTHER ISSUES MIGHT INCLUDE CONGENITAL ISSUES THAT NEED TO BE MANAGED SUCH AS:

- 1.) uneven feet/legs
- 2.) poor conformation or conformation not suited to the horse's job
- 3.) natural asymmetry or one-sidedness in the horse.

It also pays to pay attention to what your horse is telling you through his behavior and performance. Consistent bending, bracing, or lead problems are often signs of discomfort or compensation for pain that can turn into veterinary issues. A good example is when the horse resists or consistently has trouble doing a movement more to one side than the other.

There is the possibility that a physical issue is involved. If it is interpreted as a behavioral or training issue and the horse is drilled in the movement, it can cause the underlying physical issue to worsen.

This can not only negatively affect other areas of the body, but can eventually lead to a lameness issue that requires veterinary treatment. This not only makes the ride miserable for you and the horse, but can cost you time, and money down the road.

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One difference between the horse and the human, is that the horse won't stop and ask for help when it gets sore, but will keep on going until it becomes lame. This might explain why we don't often hear the adage, "No feet, no human."

When dealing with any issue with your horse – behavioral or physical - it helps to look at the big picture, and explore all perspectives. It not only helps with the original issue but also goes a long way toward prevention of long term issues.

"No feet, no horse" is as much an adage about looking at the whole horse, as about looking at the feet.

Jim Masterson has been the equine bodywork therapist for the 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012 USEF Endurance Teams, and has worked on thousands of horses, including equine athletes competing in FEI World Cup, Pan American and World Equestrian Games competitions. He is the author of the book and DVD Beyond Horse Massage, and the DVDs Equine Massage For Performance Horses and Dressage Movements Revealed. Go to www.mastersonmethod.com for more information.