

PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

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The Tipping POINT

BY BARBRA SCHULTE

HAY OR CUBES? That is the Question.

BY RICHARD WINTERS

BECOME A GREAT HORSEMAN

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BY CRAIG CAMERON

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SEE PAGE 3 FOR DETAILS

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Horse Behavior - Training Issues vs. Physical Issues

By Jim Masterson

Each month PHD provides us with advice on a variety of different training challenges, from a variety of different trainers and perspectives. Looking through past copies you can get help with just about any training issue, as well as advice on many of the physical and medical issues that come up with horses.

What this column attempts to do is to bring performance and physical issues together. How do work and performance affect the horse's body, and how do physical issues affect work and performance?

When you take a look at training from this perspective, sooner or later the question comes up; How much do physical issues affect my horse's performance? And if you're curious enough to ask that one, then the next question might be: How can I tell whether a problem with my horse's behavior is a training issue or a physical issue?

The purpose of this article is first; to bring awareness to the fact that there is a physical component to training, and second; to look at some signs that your horse may be giving you that a physical issue might be involved in his behavior.

The most obvious sign that a physical issue might be involved is when it shows up as a lameness, but I'd say we're all in agreement that we'd like to find out what's going on with the horse's body before we have to call the vet. What are some signs that tension, restriction or pain might be involved in a training issue?

A problem in training, whether physical or mental, shows up in the horse's behavior. When we look at it in terms of the horse's behavior we can look for certain patterns that might be signs of physical discomfort or limitations to what we are asking of the horse. I'll list a few that in my experience have been precursors to more serious physical problems.

When an unwanted behavior shows up out of the blue. When the horse has been trained to do a particular maneuver or gait and has been doing it well for a period of time, and suddenly – or even gradually - has difficulty, refuses or is uncomfortable performing the movement. Physical discomfort from an over-strained muscle or other connective tissue may be showing itself in the horse's movement or behavior. This may especially be the case when the horse is being drilled or worked hard in a particular movement and repetitive motion is taking its toll on the muscles involved.

You can catch it even earlier if you notice a change in movement before it reaches the point where the horse is unable to do what is asked. When the muscles required for a certain movement start to strain then the horse will often try to shift the load to different parts of the body and different muscles. When first learning, finding the easiest way is natural for the horse to do, but the red flag comes up when the behavior shows up after the horse has been well-trained in the movement. If it's consistent the rider should take into account the possibility that it's something other than the horse waking up on the wrong side of the stall.

Which brings us to the next sign:



When learning a particular movement is consistently difficult for the horse. If a particular movement is consistently difficult for a horse to pick up you have to take into account that there may be a physical component involved. We all know that certain horses can be hard-headed, and certain breeds (and yes, spots. I know - I have one) might be more strong-willed than others. If, for example, the horse is having a hard time learning to stand, then it's not likely a physical issue. But if you're running into a block at the same point in training a horse in a certain movement over a longer-than-necessary period of time, then there is the possibility that something physical is preventing the horse from comfortably performing the movement.

Another sign is extreme laterality:

When it is consistently more difficult for the horse to perform a movement in one direction over the other. Like humans, most horses have a more predominant side and are naturally more comfortable in one direction over the other. Part of training is mentally and physically conditioning bilateral evenness into the horse. However, a consistent problem with a particular movement in one direction over the other could be a sign of a physical issue, especially considering that one-sidedness may include physically weaker muscles that may not have stood up as well to the level of work being delivered by the stronger side. Of course the directions we're talking about here are side-to-side, not up and down - that's the bucking motion the horse may uncharacteristically be resorting to when we're not listening to the other signs.

Examples of difficulties in movements that are applicable to all of the above might be as simple as a canter-lead, or as complex as a roll-back, turn on the haunches, or a half-pass. Good trainers should be even more aware of the possibility of a physical issue, as a good trainer can train a horse to cover up almost anything – up to the point of physical lameness. On top

of that it's important to respect the ability of the tough horse to cover up physical problem until irreversible damage is done.

You can catch a minor problem from becoming a major problem early by paying attention to changes in the horse's movement even before it shows up as obvious physical discomfort. Next month we'll talk about things you can do to lessen the possibility of physical issues – and lamenesses – from developing, and techniques you can use to release tension in key junctions of your horse's body that most affect, and are most affected by performance.

Jim Masterson, equine bodywork therapist for the 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014 USEF Endurance Teams and for thousands of equine athletes competing on the AA level and in FEI World Cup, Pan American and World Equestrian Games competitions, teaches a unique method of equine bodywork to horse owners and therapists in which the practitioner learns to read and use the responses of the horse to touch to release tension in key junctions of the body that most affect performance. This is an effective and rewarding method of bodywork that anyone can learn to use to improve performance, and open new levels of communication and trust with the horse. He is author of the book and DVD **Beyond Horse Massage**, the DVD **Equine Massage For Performance Horses** and the new DVD **Dressage Movements Revealed**. Go to www.mastersonmethod.com for more information.

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