

# MAINTAINING SOUNDNESS IN OUR HORSES

*A horse that feels well also performs much better, so we all benefit by making a united effort to improve our horses' chances of staying sound for as long as possible. It is a real art and quite difficult to maintain, throughout the years of training, all the promise and potential the young horse has in the beginning of his career, while at the same time ensuring that his education doesn't cost him the quality or purity of his gaits, his presence or his lust for life, or cause too much wear and tear on his muscles and joints.*

*So what is it that makes things go wrong? The problem could be the fit of the saddle, the shoeing, the training, something in the horse's environment or a variety of other things. I will talk a little about some of these problems in this article, but each of them deserves a much more in-depth analysis and will be covered in more detail in subsequent articles.*

This article is intended as my contribution to a discussion about soundness. What I have written is based on my own experience gained from many years working with horses, training and teaching. My hope is that this will inspire you to continue the discussion in the forum, and share your opinions and thoughts based on your own personal experiences.

When we talk about soundness, we consider hoof trimming and shoeing, growth and feeding, the stable environment and everything else that affects the horse. My intent is for this article to be the first in a series covering some subjects other than training technique and philosophy. There are many important topics, and I invite those of you who work with horses on a regular basis to write in to us with your suggestions for subjects you would like to discuss, ideas you may have or articles you would like to share.

There is no question that soundness is an important subject. If we want to succeed in improving our horses' long-term soundness, we must join forces, and share our knowledge, which we can do quite easily on this website by taking advantage of the ability to compile information on the internet.

It is very difficult to talk or write about soundness without appearing negative. I don't mean to be negative, but we have to agree that this subject needs to be given a higher priority. Riding is a sport that's growing all over the world, and a lot of time and money are spent on it, yet so many of us who work with horses professionally are not taking the initiative to improve our skills and knowledge in this area. It is our responsibility to do so.

It is to everyone's advantage for the horses to last as long as possible and for them to live a good life. We don't want to spend a lot of time and money on the sport and later realize that it was all wasted due to a soundness problem that could have been avoided if we had had the knowledge. The horses do so much for us. We owe them our best possible efforts. A healthy, sound horse can give us his best performance, and I can only believe that we all gain by helping each other to improve long-term soundness.

There are way too many horses that, at an early age, already have to visit the veterinarian much too often. Just as it is important to treat a horse well, it is as important to find out why the horse went lame or overexerted himself. Sometimes there is something we can change to avoid the need for the vet to come back again right away. As I mentioned earlier, it could be the saddle, or the training or something in the environment. It's not always so easy to figure out the cause, but we need to try harder than we do today.

Too many horses end their days as trail horses or have to be put down as a result of various injuries. We see beautiful and positive young horses with a joy for life and clean gaits, only to see the same horse again at a mere five or six years of age filled with tension, the beautiful gaits gone. I am sure that most of you know what I mean and agree with me. And there is no question that most of this damage is caused by us.

Once we can admit this, it becomes completely clear that we are responsible to do something about it. ***It is a real art and quite difficult to maintain, throughout the years of training, all the promise and potential the young horse has in the beginning of his career, while at the same time ensuring that his education doesn't cost him the quality or purity of his gaits, his presence or his lust for life, or cause too much wear and tear on his muscles and joints.***

### WHAT GOES WRONG?

Here are a few examples of the most common problems. Each of these will be covered more in depth in subsequent articles.

#### ***Is the young horse started under saddle too soon?***

There is a great benefit to handling and working with young horses from the ground at an early age. To have developed good communication between horse and rider before the horse is ridden gives an invaluable advantage—not least when thinking of safety. But the young horse should not be started under saddle until he is at least three years old. His skeleton is not ready to carry a rider until then. And if the horse is tall and perhaps also big it is best to wait until he is four. Nor are the horses mentally mature enough for this kind of demand until they are three or four years.

And at this age they should only be ridden for short periods and not every day. Horses grow in spurts which means that there are periods of time when many changes are taking place in their bodies, and many horses are not finished growing until they are six or sometimes seven years old. During those growth periods, it is safest to reduce the demands on them dramatically. My practical experience has taught me that it is often during these periods that we cause damage, and this damage often affects the horse for the rest of his life. So listen to the signals carefully, especially with a young horse. If he looks like he is growing, or doesn't feel like he does normally, it is a good idea to give him a month off.

***Longeing the young horse when starting him under saddle...***

Only a few riders know how to keep a young horse balanced on the longe line. We often see riders longeing young horses by letting them run around full speed ahead—in hopes of making them so tired they won't throw the rider off when he tries to get in the saddle. This kind of longeing is extremely stressful to tendons and joints and should not take place. Also, instead of using a longeing cavesson, the longe line is attached to the bit, which in the case of a young horse is not a good idea since the young horse has not yet learned how to respond correctly to a bit in his mouth. (See the chapter in Section 6 (Training Techniques) called Longeing.)

***Do we, as riders, have an insufficient understanding of the basics?***

If we can ride the young horse in balance, with harmony, and in a correct tempo we can prevent many injuries. By helping the horses to understand the language we have in common and by teaching them their ABC's, we can avoid a lot of tension, and work on developing communication, understanding and trust instead.

***Is the horse mentally and physically ready to meet the demands being made on him?***

We often hurry ahead in the wrong way. It doesn't take longer to educate a horse the correct way. A whole book could be written about this, but there is not room for that right here. However, I do want to mention a few things. The horse must be able to keep up both physically and mentally. There must be continuity in the work that makes sense to the horse. The horse must receive a solid and correct basic education; he must learn his ABC's. When we demand something of the horse, we must first ask ourselves if he is ready and able to meet our demands. Is he receptive to learning? Is he strong and supple enough? Does he understand the aids for the movement we are planning to ask for, and is he strong enough to carry himself well enough to perform it?

***Does the saddle fit?***

Today we are well aware of how important it is for the saddle to fit the horse well. But to find the right saddle in the correct size is not always easy. I often see horses that, when finally ridden in a saddle that truly fits, start to work so well it is almost unbelievable. It is very important to be

aware of how your horse reacts to his saddle. The expression “only he who wears the shoe knows where it pinches” truly applies here. Saddles that don’t fit correctly can lead to damaged joints and tendons. I am no expert on saddle fitting and am not going to go into the subject in depth, so I hope that those of you with more knowledge on this subject will contribute to this discussion.

### ***Is the foot trimmed or shod correctly?***

Once again, this is not my area of expertise, but I can mention a few important points. The horse’s hoof is like the foundation of a house – if it is out of square and unbalanced, the house will be too. The shoe should be shaped to fit the hoof instead of shaping the hoof to match the shoe - an important factor with regards to soundness. There is no question that incorrect trimming or bad shoeing is the cause of many lamenesses. But the farrier is not always to blame. Most farriers want to do everything they can to do a good job. The blame can more often be placed on insufficient education, or bad communication or cooperation between trainer and farrier. In addition, farriers often have to work in an area that is too small and badly lit. Good working conditions always inspire much better work. As trainers and owners, we can help by developing better cooperation between trainers, veterinarians and farriers, combining our knowledge and experience to give the horses the best chance for long-term soundness while at the same time achieving better results for all of us.

### ***Is the footing good enough?***

In order to be able to ask the horses to work in a steady tempo, in self-carriage and under the aids, and furthermore to perform various movements, good footing is essential. We would never dream of asking athletes or ballet dancers to perform on a poor surface or on one that could lead to injuries.

Different horses prefer different footings. But they would all agree that the footing must be consistent and level so they won’t have to worry about losing their balance. There should not be areas in the footing that are so deep that they sink. Many people try to make the footing really nice for the horse by putting down a thick layer of various materials, but this often results in footing that is too deep and heavy. This increases the danger for damage to tendons and joints. The footing should help the horse feel secure, and not be so loose or damp that he could slip. On the other hand, if the footing is too hard and/or dry it will inhibit suspension in the gaits and elasticity in the strides (limiting the overall quality of the gaits) and could also injure the skeleton and the joints.

There are many kinds of footings that work well, and many ways to combine them. The type of footing or combination of materials to use depends on several factors: Is the footing for an outdoor arena or for inside? Is it to be used for jumping, or dressage, a combination thereof, or for driving? It’s also important to make sure the base for the footing is level, and if the arena is

outdoors, it must provide sufficient drainage during wet weather.

***Is it the right horse for the discipline?***

When we get our first horse, we're not always clear about which discipline draws our interest. But perhaps one day we decide that it is dressage, or maybe jumping or eventing that really interests us. Having the right horse for the discipline we choose also has a lot to do with the horse's long-term soundness. If we ask a horse to work in a way that goes against his nature, or if he doesn't have the conformation or other necessary abilities that make it possible for him to do the work we ask, he will soon be overexerted and worn out. Also see the chapter in Section 4 (Setting Goals) called A Discussion About Goals.

***Is the horse working in the correct frame?***

Many of you will agree with me when I say that horses are often ridden in an unsuitable frame. But to describe which frame is correct is impossible, and to attempt to do so would also be totally wrong. The frame must depend on the horse. Age, level, and the purpose of the training at the moment are equally important, but always remember, ***the horse may not under any circumstances feel handicapped by the frame in which we ask him to work.*** He should never be *forced* to work in a certain frame, and he should never be stuck in the same frame all the time. We must vary the frame in which we work the horse. Also see the chapter in Section 1 (The Basics) called The Frame.

***Is the work varied?***

Monotonous, repetitive work is also something that causes a lot of wear and tear on the horses. We should not ride the same form of dressage every day or work the horse in the same frame for too long. Of course, it is also confusing and hard on the horse to jump around too often in one session. We need to find a balance.

Many riders get stuck working on a circle. They feel safer there and think they will lose what they call the horse's "carriage" if they leave the circle. But if there is something that really wears the horse down, it is to go round and round on a circle for a long time. Ride your horse on straight lines as much as possible.

There are many ways we can vary the work we do with our horses. For example, once in a while long rein or work over cavalettis. Alternate between collecting and suppling work. And it is almost always a good for both horse and rider to take the horse out for a trail ride. Swimming is also a very good method of training and strengthening the horse.

***Resistance that stems from pain is often confused with disobedience.***

If your horse feels different than normal one day, you'd better have all your antennas up. The

horse has only one way of telling us there is something wrong and that is to tense and resist the rider's aids. If we choose to ignore these signals we may end up with not only a horse that has lost all his confidence, but also with long-term damage. Also see the chapter in this section (Understanding the Horse) called Excuses as Seen Through the Eyes of the Horse.

***Do we balance the horses well enough?***

Horses are always in balance. After all we seldom see them fall. The big question is how do they stay balanced? It is up to the rider to help the horse find a way to balance himself so that negative tension is not necessary. When the horse is ridden in a frame that suits him, in the correct tempo and in harmony with the rider, it becomes possible for him to work without wearing out. Also see the chapter in Section 1 (The Basics) called Balance and Equilibrium.

***Are we not good enough to understand the signals the horse gives us when he is sore?***

If the horse suddenly resists one rein in a way that is not normal for him, we can be sure that he is sore somewhere in his body or maybe even lame. If the horse leans on both reins, or refuses to go forward in his usual manner, he might be sore in both front legs. If the horse resists half-halts it might be caused by pain in his hind legs or back. The list can get quite long, and that is ok if it means that we all get better at understanding the signals we get from our horses.

***Not enough exercise?***

Our stress filled way of life and lack of spare time often make it difficult to give the horse enough exercise. But if we are to keep him sound, there is no question he must get the exercise he needs. A horse that gets plenty of exercise also develops a better immune system. The best thing for a horse's health is to spend as much time as possible outside and preferably in a pasture. Riding the horse twice a day or taking him out for a half an hour walk can also help meet his exercise requirements.

***Is his condition good enough for what we are asking him to do?***

To ask a horse to do work that he is not in good enough shape for—to make demands that exceed his condition—could, of course, also lead to excess wear and tear, not only on joints and muscles but also on heart and lungs. A horse that is in good condition tends to be healthier and stronger. You can track your horse's condition by taking his pulse right after a workout, and then again after he has had a few minutes rest. In general, the lower his pulse after a workout and the faster he returns to his normal pulse, the better his condition.

***If the muscles don't develop, the joints will be overloaded.***

A big part of the training is to develop the horse's muscles, and this is something that takes time (often up to several years before the horse is ready to handle difficult tasks). The muscles are developed by training in a systematic and varied manner, while slowly increasing the demands.

Remember that when you are training the horse, you are training a top athlete. This requires a lot of knowledge of physiology and training techniques. But if the horse is not trained in a way that allows his muscles to develop properly, odds are his joints will wear out.

***Does the rider restrict the horse too much in order to maintain control?***

A horse should be between the aids, but at the same time he should feel free inside this frame. He should never feel cornered or restricted when he is on the aids. Accomplishing this requires a thorough understanding of riding theory and how to apply it. See the chapter in Section 1 (The Basics) called On the Aids.

***Young horses are often ridden forward at too high a speed.***

Most horses are not ready to work in extended trot until they are about six years old. They don't have sufficient strength, self-carriage, balance or technique until they have a good basic education. I often work with students who want their young horses to work in what we normally call extended trot as soon as possible. This is because they want to show their horses in one of the young horse competitions, and if they are to have hopes for high scores, the horse must show that he can lengthen his strides like a more advanced horse is able to. In the old days we used to call this a "butcher trot" and not without reason. Let us hope that one day judges will become so good that they can judge the horses' gaits in a speed normal for the young horse.

However, we do normally ride the young horse at a slightly higher speed than a more experienced horse, (but as I said, not in extended trot). This is because the young horse is not ridden with the same degree of collection as a more advanced horse, and therefore more of his weight moves into the direction of travel. So in order to prevent the horse from falling on his forehand he should be ridden forward at a speed that matches the amount of weight moving forward.

***Are injuries discovered in time?***

Get in the habit of checking your horse each time you take him out of his stall. Look at his coat and general condition. Familiarize yourself with how his legs normally feel by running your hands down the cannons and pasterns to the hooves every day. If there is some swelling or heat that is not normal, you'll find it in time. Take his temperature regularly so you will know what his normal range is. For more suggestions, read the chapter in this section (Understanding the Horse) called Excuses as Seen Through the Eyes of the Horse.

***Do we call the vet in time?***

We don't like to think of our horses not feeling well. It costs money to call the vet, and it takes time. There may be disappointments. "What if the vet finds something that requires my horse to

rest for a while? What about the training and those competitions I've entered?" Shall we agree right now that it is stupid to think like this? If the horse isn't feeling well, of course we must do something as soon as possible to help him, even if it involves a visit with the vet.

***When inexperienced riders train young horses...***

The young horse has neither read books nor looked at videos on riding, so he needs all the help he can get to figure out how to learn to use his body when a rider gets on his back. A rider who is going to educate a young horse needs enough knowledge, feeling and understanding for this task so that he or she can really help the horse understand how to meet the demands that are being made on him. If the rider is unable to do this, the horse will be forced to guess and will often guess wrong. You can actually say that it is setting up a trap for the young horse when he doesn't get knowledgeable help from the start. If everyone could learn to ride the horse in balance and in harmony from the beginning, I am sure our horses' overall and long-term soundness would be vastly improved.