

EXCUSES AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF THE HORSE

Horses can't talk...or can they? We know for sure that they can't speak English, nor write e-mails. They don't speak a language that we humans can understand immediately, but it would be wrong to say that they don't give us a lot of signals. People who have worked with horses for many years understand many of these signals. And it is true in all circumstances that horses benefit when we listen to them, and that we are more successful when we pay attention to those signals. If a horse starts to feel sore somewhere, a rider who understands how to pick up on the horse's signals can often prevent a permanent injury from occurring.

A smart lady once told me that she had watched herds of horses of all ages her whole life. She had noticed that the older horses that no longer had very good appetites continued to act as if they were grazing. This was to avoid showing any possible predators that they were weak and therefore easy prey. Perhaps this is the reason why many horses, in spite of injuries or lameness, continue working the best they can. With this in mind, it is important that we become even better at picking up their signals.

It is important to know our horses so well that we can feel it when something is wrong:

- When riding, we should notice immediately when the horse does not work in his usual manner.
- We should be familiar with the normal behavior of the horses we work with when handling them in general.
- We should check the horses' legs daily so we can recognize any heat or swelling immediately.
- We should know the normal pulse, temperature and respiration for each horse. You can read more about how to measure these vital signs later in this chapter.
- It is a good idea to run a blood test once in a while. Keep the results in a binder so you can compare the results from one test to the next.

When a horse doesn't want to work in his normal manner, there is something wrong. Let's make a list of some of the good excuses the horse could have for being tense, resisting the aids, not wanting to go forward with the same energy as usual, or in general, just not feeling right.

Just as people do, horses have good days and bad days. It's not necessary to call the vet just because the horse does not work at his best for a few days. But, if he starts leaning against one rein, it could be a warning and we should investigate the situation more closely. The same is true if he has less energy than normal, becomes tense when asked to collect, or if his tempo feels irregular. In this situation you must use your common sense.

Some good excuses:

- The saddle doesn't fit properly.
- The girth is too tight, fits incorrectly, or the buckles are in the wrong place or causing girth sores.
- The leg wraps or boots are too tight or rubbing.
- The footing is too deep, too hard, or uneven.
- The horse has not been worked for some time; has been off his normal schedule.
- The horse has ulcers.
- The shoeing is incorrect; the angle is off or the shoes are too small.
- The horse is lame.
- The horse got cast and is sore.
- The horse has dental problems.
- The horse has a sore back.
- The horse has eaten something unsuitable.
- The horse has a virus.
- The horse was too cold before he started working.
- Something unusual or distracting is going on either in or outside the arena.
- The horse is working in the wrong frame or tempo, or there is something wrong elsewhere in the horse's training. This subject is too extensive to cover in depth here, but it is something to think about.

This list could be much more extensive, but it is already long enough to make us aware of just how important it is to listen to the horses. Those riders who pay attention and listen to the horses' signals will have a better chance to keep their horses sound over time, and as a result will enjoy much more success. Conversely, it could be quite expensive to ignore the horses' signals.

In the arena at Strömsholm (the school for Swedish trainers) there is a sign on the wall that reads, “Where violence begins, art ends.” This is so true, and we can add, “You can get far with force, but you will never make it all the way.”

CHECKLIST FOR EVALUATING A SICK HORSE

Before you call the vet, check the following:

Temperature: Normal temperature is 100° to 101°, rectally.

Pulse: Normally, 25 to 40 beats per minute. You can feel the pulse inside the jawbone. Feel around lightly with your fingers until you feel the pulse. You need a watch with a second hand. Count the beats for one minute. Wait 10 minutes after work to take the pulse.

Respiration: Normally, 8 to 16 breaths per minute at rest.

Gut sounds: Put your ear close to the flank and listen. On the *left* side there is normally a whole symphony of sounds. On the *right* side, a few sounds per minute.

Stool: When was the last bowel movement? Normal? Dry? Soft? Diarrhea?

Eating/Drinking: Is the horse eating and drinking normally?

Pinch test: Pinch some skin in the middle of the neck using your thumb and index finger. When you release the skin, it should flatten out in 1 to 2 seconds. If it takes longer this could be a sign of dehydration. Note! Old horses normally have “stiff” skin.

Gum color: Lift the upper lip and look at the gum above the teeth. Normal color is light pink. It can vary between very pale to a discolored blue, depending on the horse’s condition. Press on the gum with a finger for 5 to 10 seconds. When you remove your finger, the color should return in a few seconds.

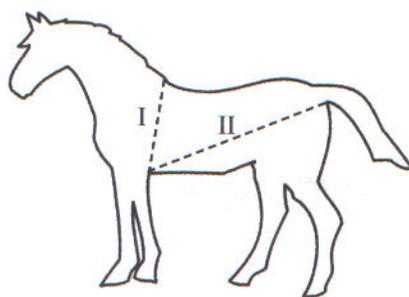
Other important information and observations:

- Is your horse calm? Is he restless, pawing, or getting up and down?
- Is he on medication? If so, what medications and doses? When were the medications started or discontinued?

- What is the name of his regular veterinarian? When did the vet see the horse last?

Learn to check these things before your horse is ill. It is a good idea to write down his normal statistics. Remember that normal statistics can vary depending on age, size, breed, condition, etc. The more information you can give your veterinarian when you call him, the better he will be able to decide what to do, how to treat the horse and how to advise you.

HOW TO ESTIMATE YOUR HORSE WEIGHT



$$\text{Weight (lbs)} = \text{Girth (inches)} \times \text{Length (inches)}$$