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Volume 7 Issue 5

Spotlight on the Equine Touch

Don't Bury An Injury (*It may come back to haunt you*)

By Jock Ruddock

A couple of years ago I was driving through Oregon when I got a call from a farrier in Texas. He was working on a horse that was in acute pain in the hind quarters and wanted some advice. I asked him to palpate the horse at specific points and the result was that the horse fell down, exhibiting acute sciatica.

I continued to ask him various questions regarding the horse so that he could perhaps make some recommendations to the owner who turned out to be a 6'2" tall cowboy weighing about 230lbs. The subject, a Quarter Horse, was 15 hands, no more than 26 months old, and had been 'broken in' and ridden for the past four months. When I suggested that the horse have rest, the owner's answer was simply, "Don't worry, I'll ride the pain out of the sucker!"

Horrified? So you should be, but is there any difference between that redneck cowboy and the so called 'educated' horse trainers and owners who put the horse continually through repetitive ground or mounted exercises when the horse is in pain, or not sound enough to participate in, or perform, these tasks?

On several occasions I have observed enthusiasm overpowering consideration, caring, and common sense - in the horse owner's blind desire to climb one step higher up the ladder to achieve another level of 'horsemanship'. We are intelligent people and all of us are hopefully in the equine world because we genuinely love the horse. However, when we lose sight of this and start to love the training, system or sport more than the horse, we must step back and take a good long hard look at our priorities.

Instinctual compensation - Where pain goes

The horse is a prey animal. We hear that at virtually every class, seminar and show that we lovers of horses and natural horsemanship attend. The horse is in fact the ultimate prey animal that has evolved and survived over millions of years. One of the reasons for this is his inbred ability to compensate for injury better than any other prey animal on this earth. He is genetically well aware at his very basic level that if he exhibits a weakness or shows that he is lame, infirm or unsound, then he is going to end up as dinner for the predator, or in the modern world, be otherwise disposed of.

Knowing this, the horse automatically contrives to hide and ultimately to live with the pain of injury, showing, to the best of his ability, to the predators (us) that he is sound. However in doing this it ultimately contributes to a chain reaction of compensation with each task that we ask of him, which in turn gives birth to a **'criminal and victim, mafia style'** injury network that grapevines its way throughout the entire animal - making itself felt not only at a physical level but at an emotional and behavioral one also.

To illustrate this, let us take a simple scenario: An enthusiastic horse owner, an enthusiastic horse trainer, and a horse. The horse is hauled to the training clinic; while in the trailer he pulls back and causes a compromise in his atlas and some muscle spasm in the neck. When the horse is unloaded, no one really notices, no one palpates the horse to check it out, and so the horse is taken immediately to join in the clinic.

The program for that day may involve tasking the horse to move sideways. To do this task comfortably the horse must access the full range of atlas movement, but due to the injury he can't. He resists, and the owner meets that resistance with more pressure to overcome; in many cases the instructor will come in to help and also increase the pressure in order to effect his purpose. In time, the owner and trainer 'metamorphosis' is complete, as they change from leaders to dictators subjecting the horse to their will, until eventually he overcomes the pain block - buries it, allows the fear factor to subjugate the pain spiral, and does that which is being demanded of him.

Did they work the pain out of that sucker? No, the horse just buried it deeply inside the tissue and wrapped its equine fear armour around it, making it just another thorn to live with.

The satisfied owner then hauls the horse home. The next day, still enthused by what she has discovered, she wants to hone her newfound skill, so she practices and practices, repeating over and over again the exercise until the injury and the pain is buried so deep in the horse that it has become a living part of it. Unfortunately what also has happened is that the horse has compensated for the pain and imbalance in

the atlas by creating an equal and opposite imbalance or 'victim' in the lower back and sacrum area.

At the clinic the next day, the horse performs the sideways exercises perfectly, the pain nicely tucked away, but today's lesson involves making the horse walk backwards. Now the sacrum 'victim' becomes a criminal as it is forced to do what it naturally cannot - and it in turn becomes a criminal, creating a new compensation victim. So the mafia syndrome is introduced to the horse. With each task demanded, the compensation factor creates a new criminal from the victim of the old, randomly layering injury upon injury.

Injury prevention and detection

In Scotland Yard's Metropolitan Police instruction manual, the first sentence goes something like this: *'The main purpose of police is the prevention of crime, not the detection and punishment of offenders.'* The main purpose of the Equine Touch is the prevention of injury and the preservation of the well being of the horse. We cannot prevent crime in society if we do not know how to recognize society's vulnerability. Likewise in the horse, if we do not learn to recognize his weaknesses, there is no point in trying to build up his strengths. The success we strive for will only elude us, and then one day, when least expected, the buried injuries come back to haunt us.

So what do we do about it? How do we help prevent over-training from burying injuries deep inside? The answer is simple: learn to observe not only movement but emotional behavior reactions - to everything you ask of the horse.

Palpate and observe

Learn to palpate the horse in a sequence that will supply you with feedback as to the pain spiral and injury location. This can be done quite easily by using your thumb and fingers and applying a pressure of about 5lbs on the atlas, running down the muscles of the neck, along the withers, and then along the para-spinal muscles running parallel with the spine all the way to the tail.

Note any points that have a reflex action, dips in the back, hunching of the croup, or moving away from you. Then return to these spots and apply slightly more pressure. If the horse dips or reacts at first but not when repeated, this is often the sign of natural reflex. However if you continue the pressure and the horse now starts to move away from you, the eyes open wide, ears come back, the head comes around to glare at you, and sometimes the horse will even drop, this is pain! This is evidence of injury and, however enthusiastic *you* feel, must be taken into consideration if you are thinking of working the animal that day.

Maintain and prevent with bodywork

Regular maintenance with bodywork disciplines such as the Equine Touch or massage can very often help with these problems, but more important can often prevent them happening. The horse whose muscles are relaxed and whose body is regularly balanced has a greatly reduced chance of injury, and in many cases where injury does occur, bodywork appears to speed up the horse's own natural healing ability in addressing the problem.

All horses at some time will suffer from some injury or another - that is inevitable. However it is a mandatory obligation for all of us who love the horse to do our very best to learn and understand the process of equine injury - to prevent ourselves and our unbridled enthusiasm and inexperience from being the cause of them. 🙏🙏

About the author:

Jock Ruddock, who pioneered The Equine Touch, and his veterinarian wife, Ivana Ruddock, have turned the Equine Touch into a discipline that is now recognized and applauded by all who see or use it, including veterinarians throughout Europe. The Equine Touch, a rebalancing, retraining, and some would say healing modality for the horse, is a non-diagnostic, non-invasive, energy and connective soft-tissue discipline which works at a complete holistic level; that is, it addresses the equine as a whole. For more information, visit www.theequinetouch.com.