

## EDUCATION UPDATE

### Think 'paid dues' to assess your equine

By Bruce Weary DC

The mere challenge of riding a horse 25, 50, 75 or 100 miles in a day is often what attracts many riders to our sport.

Far and away, most horses reach the finish line in good shape, with very few instances of injury or metabolic crises. However, the physical demands from this level of activity can overwhelm a horse, if he is ridden beyond his level of fitness and capability, or if he simply isn't having a good day and exercise becomes a stressor.

Fortunately, the horse will communicate to us the many signs that he is tiring and possibly becoming at risk of exhaustion or other metabolic trouble, if we know what to look for. There are a couple of popular mnemonics that can help prompt us to notice how our horse seems to be functioning:

-- ADR simply means "Ain't Doin' Right," and refers to an overall impression of a horse that appears tired, lackluster, and not reflecting the signs of health and well-being.

-- EDPP is a little more specific, and is an abbreviation for "Eating, Drinking, Pooping, and Peeing," which draws our attention to whether these four primary bodily functions seem to be occurring to degrees that can help assure us the horse is metabolically sound.

These simple observations are usually made when the horse is at rest, either in a vet check or back at the trailer after a ride, possibly because abnormalities are easier to notice when the horse is idle, and without all the distractions of moving along the trail in competition.

But some horses can get in trouble out on the trail, where it can be more difficult to discern early on that a horse may be having difficulty, especially if our own "race brain" has taken over. Many of us have experienced the regret of ignoring possible signs of trouble in our horse, only to have them worsen later on and possibly require veterinary treatment.

#### **The most important checklist**

**The purpose of this article is to expand the list of "hints" a horse can give us that he may not be doing well, and that we should slow down and possibly seek veterinary attention.**

**1. Pooping. I list this one first because the horse can live or die depending on whether he has proper gut motility. The intestinal tract keeps food moving along, and is responsible for the exchange of fluids, energy, electrolytes and nutrients that not only make exercise possible but keep the horse alive.**

**Notice how often your horse is defecating on the trail, the volume and consistency—is it solid or runny? If mucous is visible, dehydration is indicated. Does he strain unusually hard to defecate? Make note of anything other than what is normal for your horse.**

**It's been said: "No hoof, no horse." It may be more true to say, "No guts, no horse."**

**2. Appetite. It may be true that a horse is largely running on what he ate two days prior to the ride, but he still needs gut fill in order to fuel himself during the ride and to keep his intestinal tract rolling along. Pay attention to your horse's interest in eating both at the vet checks and out on the trail.**

**If he seems disinterested in food at a time when he should be hungry, keep an eye on him, check his gut sounds, and consider having a vet take a look-see. On the trail, if he's straining to grab a bit of grass, let him eat for five to 10 minutes. It will be a good investment of time to keep him doing well, and could make a big difference in the ride for both of you.**

**3. Impulsion. As a horse begins to tire, his impulsion may decrease. As fatigue sets in, there may be less spring in his step, or he may have to be increasingly prompted to move forward. Sometimes this can mean the horse has hit a low point from which he will recover and pick up again later, but if there appears to be a downward spiral in the horse's interest in getting down the trail, slow up and give him a chance to recover.**

If a horse refuses to do anything but walk, or simply stops and won't move forward, it's time to get help. If he becomes increasingly stumbly, he may be fatiguing—another indication to slow down, let him recover, and possibly avoid an orthopedic injury.

**4. Drinking.** The need for proper hydration for all horses is difficult to overstate. Water is necessary to keep all bodily functions going. The nervous system, cooling, gut motility and heart rate, to name a few, all rely heavily on proper hydration.

It takes time to learn a horse's drinking habits, and, if need be, to teach him new ones. Many of us have worried over a horse that won't take his first drink for 20 or 30 miles, and heaven is defined as a horse that will drink from any tank, pond or puddle that he comes upon.

Most riders use electrolytes, to some degree, to keep the thirst reflex functioning as well as keep the horse eating and able to continue working. If you're not comfortable with when and how much to safely electrolyte, ask an AERC vet or an experienced rider. They can give you tips on electrolyting that will help keep your horse drinking and wanting to keep moving on down the trail.

**5. Desire.** Sometimes a horse that clearly hasn't been ridden far enough to be truly fatigued may lose interest in moving down the trail. He may show no interest in tagging along with passing horses, and may need to be prompted frequently to stay in a trot. In the absence of any obvious metabolic distress (reasonable pulse rate, breathing, sweating, temperature to touch) he could be developing intestinal discomfort from some influence other than exercise, possibly indicating an oncoming colic.

AERC records indicate that it sometimes is the horse being ridden slowly and sensibly that can develop metabolic trouble, so the speedsters aren't the only ones who need to pay attention to how their horse is handling the demands of an endurance ride.

**6. Urination.** While a conditioned endurance horse will, among other things, develop the ability to retain his bodily fluids through more efficient sweating and heat tolerance, he will still need to urinate frequently enough to excrete the waste by-products of exercise.

Lack of adequate urinary frequency, poor volume, dark coloration, and straining to urinate are strong signs of dehydration, and definitely indications to slow down and start working on getting some water into the horse. Under these conditions, putting a trace of electrolytes on the horse's tongue to stimulate drinking may work, but avoid full doses of electrolytes until he drinks a sizable volume of water.

**7. Eyes.** Julie Suhr places much credibility in what the eye of the horse tells us. Does he have that "1,000-yard stare" borne of fatigue, or is he bright-eyed, interested in his surroundings, and looking for what's over the next hill? To loosely quote Julie, "The horse's eyes can tell you how he's feeling, if he has more to give, when he's done for the day, and what he thinks of you." Enough said.

**8. Sweating.** A working horse that is overheated and/or dehydrated and/or nearing exhaustion may stop sweating. This can be dangerous as his main cooling mechanism has been shut down, and his internal temperature may continue to climb, causing potential damage to internal organs and even death. This situation requires the horse to stop moving, be placed in shade if possible and cooled with whatever means are available. Such a horse usually benefits from veterinary attention.

These signs are all observable out on the trail, where we spend the most time with the horse on an endurance ride. The first letter of each of these indicators together spell: PAID DUES.

If your horse shows any one or more of these problems during a ride, best to at least slow down, and possibly seek veterinary attention. Tell passing riders your horse may be in trouble, and ask that they send help. Don't be shy about the welfare of your horse. He may have "paid his dues" for the day.

Listen to your horse and your own instincts. If your own "race brain" has taken over, shut it off and ask yourself, "What you would do if this were your best friend's horse?"

## **Investigating Girth Problems**

***When a horse objects to the saddling process, it's time to do some detective work to find the root of the problem and identify possible solutions.***

**by Matthew Mackay-Smith, DVM with Christine Barakat**

Put enough saddles on enough horses, and you're eventually going to run across one who strongly objects to the process of tacking up. Some of these "girthy" horses express their displeasure with pinned-back ears and pointed delivery of "the evil eye." Others bite, kick and even attempt to bolt in response to saddling and cinching.

This behavior might be pure mischievousness, but probably isn't. It's much more likely that the horse is giving you his honest reaction to an event he truly finds unpleasant. And punishment – a natural if unfortunate impulse – simply reinforces the notion that saddling is something to fear and fight. When addressed with a boot in the ribs or a slap on the muzzle, girthing only gets worse and can endanger you, your horse and anyone who's in the vicinity when you tack up.

Instead, you need to get to the root of the problem so that you can devise a solution. Often, this task is relatively easy: With a systematic investigation, you're likely to spot an acute injury along the girth line or an ill-fitting saddle. In other cases, you may not turn up any outward evidence of trauma, so you'll need to experiment with a variety of girths and girthing techniques, gauging your horse's reaction to each.

Finally, there are the most challenging cases, in which the cause of girthy behavior isn't a physical problem at all, but a reaction to saddling that has become an ingrained habit. With these horses, you may find that the answer is not simply a change of equipment, but rather an entirely new approach to tacking up, riding and even relating to your horse.

### ***HOW TIGHT IS TOO TIGHT?***

*A girth needs to be only tight enough to provide a secure platform for riding. Cranking a girth up an extra hole just because you have the muscle power is unnecessary and risks injuring a horse's pectoral muscles. Tightening a girth while in the saddle requires less effort and is even more likely to exceed reasonable pressure. And on some oddly shaped horses you can make a girth painfully tight and still not stabilize the saddle.*

To begin your investigation of girthing, you'll need to observe your horse carefully throughout the saddling process to pinpoint exactly when he begins to object. Tack up as you normally would, but be very watchful of his body language. Context is extremely important when trying to figure out the causes of girthing and will dictate how you go about resolving the problem. I have found that most girthy horses fit one of the following three descriptions.

### **1. Uptight During Tightening**

Scenario: The horse is fine until you begin to tighten the girth.

Potential remedies: different girth, change in girth-tightening technique; treatment of a physical problem.

A horse that stands willingly when the saddle is laid on his back but reacts negatively when you begin to tighten the girth is sensitive to pressure along his girth line. He may be naturally "ticklish" and simply find the pressure unpleasant, or he may experience some level of pain due to an old or new injury in the area that the girth touches.

Such horses often act up until the rider mounts, then miraculously settle down. This is attributable to the weight of the rider, which presses the saddle down and effectively loosens the girth. These horses typically have no objection to being ridden bareback or otherwise handled.

If your horse seems to have girth-pressure issues, thoroughly examine the affected area. With the horse untacked, use your fingers to explore his sides, "armpits" and the bottom of his girth line. Use a light touch first, then deeper probing pressure – be ready to evade bites or kicks if these are your horse's preferred ways of complaining. You're looking for a "hot spot" that, when poked, invariably causes him to react. If you find a spot that reliably induces a reaction, it's probably the site of an old or ongoing trauma.

Also note any areas that have a different texture – a soft bulge may be a hematoma from a recent kick or a ridge of scar tissue may signal an old girth-related injury. If you can't find physical clues to your horse's behavior, you may be dealing with a complex physiological problem that requires the attention of a veterinarian or specialist. Don't hesitate to call in a professional if you are stumped.

If you do locate a trouble spot and it appears to be associated with obvious injury, call your veterinarian for a more in-depth examination. If you find only a minor defect or no outward sign of trouble beyond sensitivity, experiment with various girths and tacking arrangements.

First, try a different girth. Wider girths distribute the pressure over a larger area, so consider four inches wide a minimum for a girthy horse, but try the widest you can find. "Balding" girths, named for their creator, have a distinct hourglass shape that keeps the girth clear of the sensitive area behind the elbows without sacrificing width. In some specialty tack stores you may find girths that have large leather "plates" six inches or more wide at the center for maximum pressure distribution. Consider different material, too. Many horses prefer cotton string girths because the strands move and adapt to the shape irregularities all horses have. Neoprene and synthetic girths or covers are likewise soft and flexible.

Also try various girthing techniques. If you typically use the first and third billet straps, try fastening to only the back two. If you've got a saddle with full double rigging, try one that has a centerfire rigging. A slight rearward adjustment might make all the difference by placing the girth over larger muscle masses. Tighten the girth very gradually, only one hole at a time. You may even pause between pulls, rub the horse on the neck and walk him forward a step or two to ward off tension that may contribute to girth problems.

When the girth is on, pull the horse's front legs all the way forward, first one, then the other. This accomplishes two things that will contribute to girth comfort. First of all it will smooth the skin under and in front of the girth, minimizing the risk of pinching. And second, it will stretch the pectoral muscles, releasing any tension that can lead to discomfort. Mount up and walk your horse a bit – perhaps even trot him briefly – before checking your girth tension; then tighten only if necessary. When you've stopped your serious work for the day and are cooling out, loosen the girth a bit as a courtesy to your horse.

Eventually, with these modifications in your equipment and approach, you'll find that a horse who is sensitive to girth pressure, whether it's from natural ticklishness or pathology, will become less and less agitated when it comes time to cinch up. If you don't see an improvement in a week or two, continue to experiment but call your veterinarian if you suspect there is a deeper physical problem.

#### **IN PRACTISE – 5 GOLDEN RULES FOR GIRTHING**

- 1. Use only clean girth that is in good repair.*
- 2. Tighten the girth one hole at a time, or tighten a cinch gradually, giving the horse time to relax between adjustments.*
- 3. Make the girth only as tight as needed to secure the saddle; just because you can tighten a girth further doesn't mean you should.*
- 4. Pull the horse's front legs forward after girthing to smooth the skin and stretch the muscles.*
- 5. Whenever possible, loosen the girth for cooling out.*

## 2. Sour About The Saddle

*Scenario:* The horse acts up when the saddle is placed on his back.

*Potential remedies:* different saddle pad, re-stuffing panels of the saddle, switching to a different saddle, treatment of a physical problem.

A horse that is compliant until the weight of the saddle settles on his back is most likely reacting to that specific pressure. These horses may be "cold backed" and sink as you mount them or even buck a bit when you first move off. Horses who object to the feel of the saddle may also be anticipating discomfort they associate the tightening of the girth. Because of that possibility, you'll need to conduct a physical investigation of the girth area as described above. If nothing obvious turns up, focus your attention on the saddle area.

Begin your detective work by running your fingers along the top of his withers and spine, first with light pressure and then more firmly. Again, you're looking for "hot spots" of sensitivity, defects in the hair or underlying tissues, obvious irregularities in the bone or any swelling. Also check the skin and muscles alongside the spine, throughout the area where the saddle rests and under the saddle flaps. Even if all looks normal, any sudden reaction by the horse, such as a groan, wince or "sinking" away from pressure, may be a sign that something is amiss.

Once you've located a trouble spot on his back, try to correlate it to one of the most likely culprits – an aspect of your pad or saddle fit. If your horse's withers are tender, for example, check the clearance of the pommel and pad over that spot. If a horse has a hot spot on either side of his spine, about halfway down the length of the saddle, you'll want to check to make sure your saddle doesn't "rock", putting intense pressure in that area.

Think creatively because the answers aren't always obvious, I've seen horses that have developed very tender flanks because of dirty, stiff saddle flaps that dig into their flesh as the rider applies leg. A quick saddle check can be done by most observant horse-people but if you feel unqualified, ask an experienced friend or barn-mate, or call in a professional saddle fitter for an assessment. In addition, your veterinarian may offer insights into the potential for deeper trouble in the back.

Fixing saddle-related problems may be as simple as switching to a different saddle pad or as involved as finding a new saddle. Keep in mind that this is a trial-and-error process, so you may end up temporarily making the problem worse, in which case backtrack and try another change. Most saddle-fit issues will resolve quickly after one or two sympathetic saddling sessions with a suitable combination of saddle and pad.

In some of the most frustrating cases, horses with apparent saddle-fit issues do not improve, despite extensive changes to their equipment. These cases typically require a professional assessment from a veterinarian to rule out other, non-saddle-related pathology.

A horse may have rolled on a rock, for instance, or cracked his withers when he fell backward while rearing or have some other type of injury unrelated to being ridden. A surprisingly common source of this type of injury is pressure or rubs from an ill-fitting blanket.

The trauma done to the withers in these horses can make the frantic when anything or anyone touches their withers, and a change in saddles will make no difference. Again, you need to think creatively and be persistent in order to help your horse.

### **EASY DOES IT**

*When investigating a suspected girth problem, take a critical look at how you actually place the saddle on your horse. If you tend to toss it up on his back in haste, you might be making the problem worse. Lift the saddle in the correct position over the back and set it down gently – it's a good habit to adopt when dealing with any horse, not just the sensitive ones.*

### 3. Mind Over Matter

*Scenario:* The horse gets agitated at the mere sight of the saddle and girth, even before it is placed on his back.

*Potential remedies:* tack up in a different location, change handling technique, revisit training basics, adjust work regimen.

Horses who act up as the saddle is carried toward them are the toughest cases to solve because so many factors may be at work. It is possible that the horse is anticipating pressure from the girth or saddle, which means you'll have to follow the steps for investigating those possibilities, which can take weeks. If you rule out pain from the saddle and girth, you're faced with an even more challenging case: a horse that objects to the entire process of saddling.

This means you'll need to continue and even expand your detective work until you discover those details of the saddling process that bother your horse the most.

Even small changes may make a difference. For instance, if you always tack up in the cross ties, try putting the saddle on your horse in his stall. The simple change of location might be enough to overcome his association. Likewise, you might want to try tacking up in a different order, saddling your horse before bridling him or vice versa to see if that helps.

Again, think creatively. Your horse can't tell you what specifically annoys him and you'd be surprised to find out what some horses object to. We once owned a horse who was perfectly content to stand for saddling if it was done from his left side. Attempt to do it from his right – or even have someone standing on that side – and he would cow-kick with alarming force and accuracy. It took weeks of experimenting for us to figure this out, and we never did discern why he had this foible.

Were we accommodating a "bad" behavior? Perhaps, but such accommodation is often necessary when the return is a safe, happy, useful animal. It seems a reasonable trade-off to me.

#### **CONFORMATION - *The shape of girth woes***

*A horse's conformation can make him more susceptible to girthness. In particular, two specific equine body types are especially prone to girth problems, either as a direct result of the conformation itself or because of the misguided efforts of people to compensate for it.*

***Potbellied horses.*** *Some horses and ponies have large, pendulous bellies that tend to push any girth forward, particularly during strenuous or fast work. As the girth slides forward, it can press on more sensitive areas of the pectoral muscles or painfully pinch the skin behind the elbows.*

*Certain types of girths are less likely to slip forward - cotton string girth, for instance "grab" somewhat better than slick leather models – but a more surefire fix is a crupper to keep the saddle and, therefore, the girth in proper place.*

***Upside-down-pear-shaped horses.*** *These horses have a wide upper body and low withers, combined with a narrow pectoral region. If you could view a "slice" of the horse's barrel at the girth line, it would resemble an upside-down pear. In horses with this type of conformation, a girth may not make contact with the entire belly, which makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to tighten the girth enough to stabilize the saddle.*

*What's more, if an overzealous rider is determined to do so, he can over-tighten the girth to the point of pain or injury. Using a breastplate and crupper on such horses can help to stabilize the saddle and prevent dangerous over-tightening.*

If you can't isolate a specific aspect of saddling that sets a horse off, you can try to make entirely new associations with the process. This is essential retraining the horse to accept tack, starting from square one. Spend time grooming him, focusing on itchy spots he likes to have scratched. A treat or two to set the mood is also a good idea. When it's time to saddle the horse, allow him to sniff the blanket and perhaps rub his shoulders, sides and flank before carefully placing it on his back. If he objects, stop and return to an activity he is more comfortable with. Once you can place the saddle pad on without reaction, follow the same routine with the saddle, allowing him to sniff it and very, very gently placing it on his

back. Reward desired behaviors with a rub on the neck or treats and ignore the unwanted behaviors, taking them as a sign that you've rushed things. After several such sessions with the pad and saddle, you can move on to adding the girth.

There is always the possibility that the horse reacts to saddling because of what follows. Consider whether the horse is overworked or might be simply bored by repetitious under-saddle work. If this may be the case, rethink your riding and training goals. A month long hiatus from ring work might change his outlook: If other aspects of his working life improve, a horse may suddenly and permanently lose his tendency toward girthing.

Anyone who has ever had a girthy horse knows how frustrating it can be. The solution to a girth problem may be as minor as a tack change or as significant as a completely new approach to training.

As with solving practically any equine behavior or training problem, finding the remedy for girth-related issues requires that you devote the time and energy necessary to identify the root cause. This isn't quick or easy work, but consider it a long-term investment in your horse's comfort and happiness.

## Once-Over Grooming

by: Nancy S. Loving, DVM • July 01 2011 • Article # 19023

As your horse leans into the satisfying feel of the brush and curry, you have an opportunity to do more than clean away dirt, grime, and loose hairs. Grooming also gives you visual and tactile information about your horse's health, and if done on a daily basis it can help you catch potential health problems early. Familiarize yourself with your horse's normal vital signs, sensory reactions, and physical characteristics so you can detect when something isn't quite right.

"Ideally, the grooming area should be well-lit to provide the best view," says Julie Wilson, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM, of Turner Wilson Equine Consulting LLC, in Stillwater, Minn. "The parts (of the horse) most likely overlooked are the ones you may not groom every time due to time constraints, the horse's behavior, or an 'inconvenient' location." Thus, it helps to formulate a standard pattern that you follow with every grooming, whether you work front to back or bottom to top. If you stick to a routine you're less likely to overlook an important area.

### Feet

If you groom from the bottom up, you might start by picking out the hooves. This important step should be done daily to remove accumulated manure, debris, or stones from feet. But also pay attention to your horse's body language: "Reluctance to pick up a foot often signifies pain in the opposite hoof--the horse may not wish to put full weight on the standing limb," says Wilson.

Wilson recommends careful scrutiny of the sole and frog structures in particular. "The sulci of the foot (the grooves on either side of the frog) should be checked for abnormal moisture or smell that may indicate thrush."

Eleanor Lenher, DVM, of Deer Creek Equine Clinic in Powhatan, Va., concurs: "A thrush infection can be painful to the point of making a horse lame. Any foul odor or black discharge should be monitored and is worth a call to your veterinarian just to be sure it's not too serious.

"Another area to keep an eye on is the white line (where the hoof wall meets the sole), which can be prone to bruising or separation, particularly if your horse's feet are late on a trimming cycle," she continues. "Irregularities of the white line can lead to white line disease or may indicate a bout of laminitis." In addition to making your daily observations, maintain an ongoing discussion with your farrier at every trim and shoeing so you'll be familiar with potential issues and be able to recognize a problem quickly.

As you examine the shod horse's hooves, check that horseshoes are aligned properly and aren't twisted or sprung, and check that all horseshoe nails are present and taut. Tighten any that are loose by steadying the nail on the bottom of the shoe and then hammering the clinch where it protrudes on the outside of the hoof wall. Or, call your farrier to replace them. If you find that your horse has stepped on a nail or has a foreign body lodged in the foot, call your veterinarian immediately to evaluate and possibly take radiographs (X rays) before removing the object, says Lehner. "Even if your horse doesn't yet appear lame or sore on the foot, this helps determine which structures have been penetrated so the best course of action is taken to achieve recovery," she explains.

## **Legs**

Picking your horse's feet also provides a good opportunity for checking the animal's delicate legs. "Any resistance to routine hoof picking should prompt more careful palpation for swelling of the joint areas and tendons and ligaments along the lower leg," says Wilson.

Lenher notes that picking up the feet also allows you to check the leg joints' range of motion. "Gently flex all your horse's lower joints to feel the normal range of motion," she advises. "Knowing in advance what is normal for your horse lets you detect early problems." For joints higher on the leg, Lenher points out, "The carpal (knee) joints should flex to almost touch the cannon bone to the forearm." Pain along with unusual resistance to flexion might indicate an issue that needs to be addressed.

"However," she continues, "some horses have limited range of motion, particularly in the fetlocks--this may or may not affect their athletic ability or work." Hind limb joints such as the hocks are harder to assess, but Lenher comments, "If your horse that normally doesn't mind having his legs manipulated begins to resist, contact your veterinarian to check for a problem."

Tactile evaluation of the limbs as you groom also is important. "Run hands and fingers along your horse's legs to assess for lumps, wounds, scabs, sensitivity, and anything that you might feel rather than see," says Lenher. "Look also for visible swelling or bumps. Early detection of wounds, injuries, strains, or sprains can make the difference between a short layup and a career-ending injury." If you discover a wound, clean it well (e.g., flush with saline) and try to determine its depth. Then apply antibiotic ointment and bandage when appropriate. If you have any questions about its seriousness, call your veterinarian.



After a rigorous workout, "Pay attention to your horse's reaction to post-workout bathing and scraping," Wilson urges. "Look for new swellings or muscle tremors." Also try to identify muscle soreness as you groom--palpate the large muscle groups of the shoulders, chest, back, and hindquarters.

"Anytime a horse is ridden harder or longer than normal or after a horse show or event, check for excess sensitivity in any one area," Lenher says. "While I don't recommend that an owner massage or knead sore muscles (without training in massage therapy), I do stress the importance of identifying any swellings or hypersensitivity." Monitor sensitive areas to check for improvement, and call your veterinarian if soreness is slow to resolve.

### **The Saddle and Girth Areas**

When grooming around the saddle and girth areas, look for signs of saddle pressure or pinching. "Three major signs of new problems are local pain, hair loss, and/or swelling," says Wilson. "Chronic problems may lead to thickened skin, or subcutaneous or fibrous nodules." Chronic pressure on points of the body injures skin cells; white hairs growing on a dark-haired horse or dark hairs on a light-haired horse are evidence of this.

"Use gentle finger pressure along the back and loins to check for sensitivity," Lenher suggests. "Also, note any swelling, abraded, or raw spots beneath the saddle area or girth." If your horse shows abnormal sensitivity or swelling, make an appointment with someone to check your saddle fit and, in the meantime, minimize swelling by cold-hosing the injured area. Apply antibiotic salve to tack abrasions.

Some horses display behavioral signs while being groomed that might indicate a problem is brewing. "Odd behavior (e.g., the horse moves away, pins its ears, tries to kick or bite, or flinches when an area is touched) may signal pain," says Wilson. "More subtle problems in the saddle and girth area may elicit a behavioral change only when the owner goes to put the saddle on or tightens the girth or cinch." She also suggests owners track their mares' heat cycles to determine if changed behavior might be related to estrus.

"Sensitivity around the girth area has been correlated with gastric ulcers," Lenher adds. Therefore, know your horse's normal responses to grooming so you are aware of new behaviors that might signify physical issues such as ulcers. On the other hand, if you're well-aware your horse is ticklish in the flank area, his reaction to being groomed there shouldn't prompt a call to your veterinarian. You should, however, groom slowly and carefully around his known sensitive spots, says Lenher.

As you groom your horse through the seasons, take note of how well he sheds his hair coat, particularly in springtime. A horse that isn't shedding well or whose shedding is delayed might be a cause for concern. "If the horse is middle-aged or older, metabolic disease like Cushing's syndrome is important to rule out," notes Wilson. "Internal parasites are more often the issue in neglected or

young horses. However, other illnesses affect hair shedding by impacting nutrition." Consult your veterinarian about hair coat abnormalities.

### **Less Visible Areas**

In areas that aren't readily visible, it pays to perform a diligent tactile examination. "Use your hands to check under the girth, belly, and groin for small wounds, insect bites or hypersensitivity reactions, ticks, swelling, or other problems," Lenher urges. "Afterward, smell your hands to check for bad odors (that might be associated with a dirty sheath or udder, or with an infected wound)." Also carefully--and safely--feel between the hindquarters and inner groin, as these are common places to find ticks.

### **Visible Signs of Problems**

As you groom, look carefully for other telltale signs of health issues. Diarrhea stains on the rump, for instance, might be associated with internal parasite infection or gastrointestinal tract problems such as intestinal irritation from sand ingestion or malabsorption. Excess dietary fat or some forms of malnutrition can elicit loose stools. And, Wilson points out that nerves or stress also can lead to transient bouts of diarrhea.

Dark, creamy material spattered on your gelding's rear legs should indicate it's time to clean his sheath to remove smegma (secretions and debris) deposits. A swollen sheath also might indicate a need for cleaning, as do broken hairs at the top of the tail--tail rubbing is a common response to sheath irritation, but it can also be a sign of pinworms or a tick lodged near the tail/groin area.

Regarding mares, Lenher says owners should remove dirt accumulation around mares' teats, check for swollen teats or udders that might indicate mastitis (inflammation of the mammary glands), and watch for redness, scaling, or hair loss that indicates dermatitis (inflammatory skin disease). Excess vaginal drainage in a mare might simply be a sign that she is in heat (estrus), or it could be related to uterine infection, urine pooling, or urinary tract problems. "A veterinary work-up is a good place to start to track down the sources of these problems," Lenher says.

"Gray horses need to be monitored everywhere for melanomas, including around the anus and under the tailhead," reports Wilson. "Likewise, when a male horse extends his penis to urinate, inspect him carefully. Look to see if nonpigmented areas of the penis or sheath appear reddened and inflamed, possibly indicating cancer, such as squamous cell carcinoma."

### **Face, Eyes, and Ears**

As you clean your horse's face, pay careful attention to the eyes. "Eyes should be checked for discharge, cloudiness, squinting, or discomfort," says Wilson.

"Any tearing from the eyes should be noted and monitored," Lenher adds. "A small amount of drainage might be due to a passing irritation or wind, but excessive tearing, squinting, pain, or sensitivity to light are red flags that require an immediate call to your veterinarian. Eye problems are best attended promptly—a delay can cost more money and possibly your horse's vision." While waiting for veterinary attention, garb your horse in a fly mask to lessen the sun's glare and to protect from insects and wind.

"If you notice any abnormal eye position or nystagmus (rapid involuntary eye oscillations), this could be early signs of neurologic disease," comments Wilson. "Also, localized sweating around the eye could indicate localized nerve irritation called Horner's syndrome." She also recommends checking for abnormal redness or growths in nonpigmented skin around the eyes and on the third eyelid that could foretell early squamous cell carcinoma.

Ears are less commonly a problem, but Wilson recommends checking ears regularly for discharge, ticks, gnats, warts, sarcoids, or aural plaques (skin warts caused by a papillomavirus). "If your horse normally has no issues with you bridling, touching, rubbing, or brushing around the ears and suddenly becomes 'ear shy,' it's appropriate to have him examined," notes Lenher.

"An area of the face that may harbor a problem is found around the throatlatch and beneath the jaw bones," Wilson explains. There are multiple lymph nodes in these areas, as well as salivary and thyroid glands. On occasion a lump might appear from an erupting or draining tooth. If you see any abnormal enlargement in the face, contact your veterinarian. Wilson also reminds owners to check for ticks under the jaw, as well as at the roots of the forelock and mane.

### **Take-Home Message**

"Regular grooming helps you stay on top of your horse's normal idiosyncrasies and physical characteristics and alerts you to any abnormalities," stresses Lenher. A grooming routine fosters your ability to find problems early on so that health issues don't become serious emergencies. "Your veterinarian is an invaluable resource for all questions regarding your horse's health. Call if you have questions about any odd thing you find," says Lenher. "That's what we're here for."

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## RIDE MANAGERS' FORUM

### Why I am a rider - and a ride manager

By Debbie Zanot

*On November 9, 2011, the sport of endurance riding lost a dear friend. Debbie Zanot, longtime endurance rider and ride manager of the much-beloved Elk Valley rides held in Pennsylvania during the late '90s and early 2000s, was a friend and inspiration to so many of us. She is survived by her husband, Gene Zanot, also a longtime endurance rider. May she rest in peace.*

*The following is an essay Debbie wrote a few years ago, and shared with me. It is poignant and a fitting memorial to the woman we all knew and loved. ©Patti Stedman*

My dream as a kid was to ride across country, sea to shining sea. Since I am female, life got in the way, you know . . . love and marriages just ate up all those brave adventuresome dreams. When I heard about endurance riding I thought I might be able to see the country on a horse incrementally. What I did not expect was to learn how ignorant I was about horses or how little I knew about myself.

My older sisters were endurance riding in the early '80s but I had a husband then that was not cooperative. By 1987 I got rid of him and my next husband was all for whatever I wanted to do, so I borrowed my sister's spare horse and trained as she taught me what was required.

The first lesson I learned about myself is that I was not very smart about underwear. After 10 miles of trotting and cantering over hill and dale my underwear had crawled and adhered to a place they were never meant to be. I was in agony and my sister informed me if I wanted to be an endurance rider I had to put up and shut up.

Oh no! I could not put up or shut up and I stopped my mighty steed, got my pocket knife out and cut those nasty panties off. Lesson #1: Comfort of the rider is important, get rid of nasty panties.

Sis kept warning me that my borrowed horse would be "different" during a ride, but I thought, "Nah! I totally charmed Rhett." This horse was really my horse now and he was push button. Uh huh! So my next lesson about endurance horses came to fruition on my first ever 50 at the Groundhog Ride in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. It was a multiple event with bike riders, runners and horses.

I was so excited I could not sleep and before dawn -- as I was finally nodding off -- Buck Shrader blasted over his loudspeaker the famous Tarzan call. The camp was awake and bustling, horses were nickering to one another and me, I was captivated by the entire scene. It was still dark as the National Anthem hauntingly echoed over the hills and I stood with hand on heart with goosebumps of excitement, knowing somewhere inside of me that life as I knew it was about to shift.

The runners padded by like spirits and vanished into the morning mist. Next the bikers came by, their wheels making that whispering sound, departing in the dawn's early light.

Next it was the horses' turn to go and I was ready, seated on Rhett in the army saddle that was popular in early endurance riding, my heart beating in my throat and thoughts fluttering through my mind like bats coming out of a cave. It was not quite daylight and we were literally off and running. It was at that moment I again heard my sister's words, "He will be different on a ride."

The first loop was a blur and the mentor my sister had picked for me left me in the dust. I caught up to her at the vet check and decided right then and there I would be leaving her for the rest of the ride.

People lesson: When your competition tells you they are going to ride slow, roll your eyes and say, "That's good, me too."  
Horse lesson: Horses really are different on a ride.

Rhett picked his own speed and forgot all that bonding and the meaning of "whoa." Second and third loop -- blur blur -- but the fourth loop is engraved in my mind for eternity.

Lesson: Check tack for soundness and make any repairs before the ride and carry extra everything in your trailer. Five miles to go and we were in sixth place (I was told) -- not that I cared, I still had not exhaled since the first loop. I was in full

survivor mode. I was proud of the 90° turns I had stayed on and I was damn proud of this horse that never missed any of them or got off balance as I was hanging on his side riding Indian style.

Five miles from the finish as we made one of those hairpin turns my stirrup leather broke and fell, clattering on the road. The competition said, "Aren't you going to get your stirrup?" with the ghost of a smirk on her face.

I said, "What for? It isn't going to do me any good," thinking she just wants to get ahead of me, and Rhet was't having any of that stuff, he was "different" in a ride.

I remember as I passed another rider on the dirt road riding jockey style, totally at the mercy of Rhet, screaming, "How far to the finish?"

Lesson: It is easier to ride with no stirrups than with one.

After five miles of slamming my pelvis on the high cantle of that lovely saddle Rhet and I galloped across the finish line in sixth place.

Someone at the awards banquet asked me how I liked my first ride as he squeezed the muscles across my shoulders. Instinctively, I knew better than to scream out in pain and said, "It was wonderful! I can't wait to do another."

That was many moons ago and now you are asking me why do I do it?

In my first endurance ride experience it was the shock and awe that drew me into the sport but as years and horses passed it became much more than a thrill, more like an addiction. What other activity can satisfy:

- The need to ride more than on weekends
- Riding on new trails every weekend
- Meeting fun people of like mind
- Honing your skills as a horseman
- Getting physically and mentally fit
- Becoming part of a great scientific experiment, learning more about horses than you ever dreamed was possible
- Forming bonds with horses and horsemen that go beyond shallow acquaintances
- Ridding yourself of selfishness
- Prioritizing how you spend your time and money
- Learning who you are and what stuff you are made of, galloping on a wooded trail on a moonless night
- Learning how to overcome ADD by becoming a ride manager
- Having the greatest memories to flash before your eyes when you draw that last breath.

Did you ever try having a horsie conversation in a group of non-horse people? Soon your unfortunate dinner partner tries to move away from you or they rudely turn their head to talk to someone else. Has any of your non-horsie relatives said with disgust, "Are horses the only subject you can talk about?"

Have you ever felt out of place at a gathering because your idea of getting dressed up is a newish pair of jeans and your latest T-shirt from a ride? Have you found people cringing as they look at your bad hair and ragged, dirty fingernails and numerous boo-boos in different stages of healing?

If you like to trot and canter out on the trail and you are leading a group of trail riders who want to ride for five hours at a walk and you excuse yourself and tell them you will wait for them at the next turn and when they finally get there they are giving you really dirty looks and you are wondering what the problem is? If you start carrying a flask and calling it snakebite medicine as you plod along with your trail riders you should probably become an endurance rider.

Are you getting the picture?

Conditioning your horse and yourself for competition takes care of the need to ride more than two times a week, gets yourself in shape, and satisfies the need to get out in the woods. Going solo is a necessity for ridding your life of the noise and various trials. It takes care of insanity that tries to intrude and builds confidence and a bond between you and your horse as partners.

However, to teach your horse how to compete sanely with others you do need to find a riding partner and that sometimes can be a challenge.

I think of it as a game. How can I lure a prospective training partner into riding with me? Most trail riders are out unless you see one riding a frustrated Arabian and the other trail riders making nasty jokes about the crazy Ay-rab. You can see the relief in that person's eyes when they see another Ay-rab. You might be able to convince that person that they and their horse have potential they never dreamed possible as you tell them tales of exciting rides and exotic places and wonderful people of like mind and Ay-rabs, lots of Ay-rabs.

If you have exhausted the pool of trail riders for a candidate, get creative. Host an endurance ride and invite new meat to help clear the trails. Put them on your spare Ay-rab and during the long hours sawing, dragging logs, clipping overhanging branches, filling in holes and flipping rattlesnakes off the trail, watch their eyes. Is there a gleam of satisfaction showing? Is the person complaining less how they hurt? Has that person stuck with you for more than a week?

When ride day arrives make sure one of the loops goes by the prospect's house. If you spot the entire family up before dawn waiting for the horses you can be pretty certain you will get a kid or two, or maybe that person that has been clearing trail with you, as a future training partner -- or perhaps get them into the sport. This is ideal since you know they will have to condition their horse. You are never out of the loop in endurance riding. If you can't compete because your horse is lame or you are lame there is always something to do.

I became interested in being a ride manager for several reasons. We wanted to share our corner of heaven on earth with fellow endurance riders, wanted to make a contribution to the sport that has given us much happiness, and of course, my ongoing quest for a prospective training partner.

If you suffer from ADD it is a sure cure. Ride management teaches organizational skills you never dreamed you had. During the bleak sunless winter months you must line all your ducks up in a row, getting all the paperwork ready for your ride. As soon as the ice is off the mountains it is time to do your favorite obsession: ride, ride, ride the trails.

If you are a person who handles surprises well the ride manager job is for you.

If you can rationalize losing money with humor, ride management is for you.

If you want to improve your people skills, you will do so as you recruit faithful friends to volunteer or host a ride, but the most important trait for a ride manager is endurance itself. But if you are a competitor I guarantee you can do it and it will be exciting.

My favorite ride manager surprise was having a great turnout -- horses and trailers and little pup tents all packed tightly in ride camp. All went well during the day with parking everyone, vetting in horses and the part I liked the least, talking in front of a group about the trails. I was standing on the picnic table beneath the canopy when a storm started. Little did we know there were tornados spotted on Doppler radar. The wind suddenly ripped the canopy in half and guests were abandoning ship like rats.

The electricity went out and in the pitch black the wind howled. With flashlight in hand, I watched and prayed (oh yes, faith is a must) as the little pup tents were swaying to and fro, screaming to be freed. I tried not to think in negatives, like freed pup tents, running horses, limbs falling on horses and trailers, etc. Prayer worked.

The next day I wished riders the best out on trail, not knowing the extent of devastation or how far they would get. Prayer worked; all was well. Surprise!

(Endurance people are rarely crabby except before a ride when nerves are high and they just need to ride, but it is always good entertainment if you are the one listening. Plus you can acquire new phrases to use on your mate in the future.)

Endurance riding teaches you not to be selfish. If your horse got pulled pity parties are out because you can always crew. Just grab a bucket and sponge and go help the next person in the vet check. You can be a gofer for the ride manager who is short a hand and looking wild-eyed. You can redirect your disappointment into a positive as you watch the smiling faces of fellow riders.

There are many answers to why we do it. We all have a book in us because endurance riding is an ongoing story. It defines us for life. It is a wild, fun family of people from all walks of life, all ages, and all of us value being diverse individuals.

What other sport can you get to know a person without knowing their name or what they do or where they live by spending hours riding in the dark in a strange land and positively know that person is a wonderful human being without guile that you could trust your life to? What other horse sport do you know of where your horse gets to know you better than your spouse does? Long live endurance riding!

*Debbie Zanot completed 2,970 endurance and 30 limited distance miles in 18 years of AERC competition.*