

Alternative Treatments Make Good Horse Sense

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Thoroughbred owners should consider how chiropractic and massage therapies enable horses to perform better.

What's good for the Yankees is also good for our four-legged athletes. Just as New York's star baseball players routinely turn to massage and chiropractic therapy to relieve their overworked muscles and dislocated joints, so can thoroughbred horses benefit from this alternative health care regime. These two complementary treatments can resolve many existing health problems afflicting racehorses and prevent new ones from occurring without the residual side effects that drugs often cause. As a further bonus, owners can expect improved track performances.

Chiropractic Therapy

The health and well being of any racehorse hinges upon the correct alignment of their body parts. That's why trained veterinarians in recent years began incorporating chiropractic therapy for the diagnosis and treatment of musculoskeletal disorders in horses. As has been proven in the treatment of human athletes, chiropractic techniques not only correct spinal dislocations, but can also identify and treat many other previously undiagnosed or poorly managed health problems affecting horses.

This conservative and safe therapy requires that practitioners make small adjustments to the horse's spinal column to relieve pressure between stressed vertebrae. When the bones in the spinal column are adjusted and correctly aligned, the horse's spinal nerve

functions improve, allowing the animal to more readily heal and eventually function to his fullest potential.

The technique that chiropractors use is straightforward. They apply quick, controlled and forceful hand movements or thrusts to the vertebrae in the spinal column and to other specific areas and joints. Often the horse experiences immediate pain relief, as well as increased range of motion. Now walking and running with greater ease, the horse can resume a more normalized gait.

Keep in mind that the number of treatments necessary to resolve health problems does vary. Acute injuries may resolve themselves in a few treatments. Chronic problems, however, often require months of treatments.

Other Chiropractic Benefits

Another beneficial side effect from a chiropractic adjustment is improved organ function.

Since each spinal nerve within the vertebrae leads either directly or indirectly to a specific organ, research suggests that this treatment can also improve cardio, respiratory and gastro intestinal disorders and other organ functions.

Alignment Problems

Repetitive use injuries are especially common with high performance animals such as thoroughbred racers. However, by properly aligning joints, veterinary chiropractors can minimize such injuries.

There is a direct relationship between a horse's joint angles, hoof patterns and weight bearing. For

instance, abnormal weight bearing and altered gait can cause injuries to a horse's neck or back muscles. Similarly, the manner in which a horse's hoof hits the ground (also described as their strike pattern) and the degree of impact can cause misaligned joints.

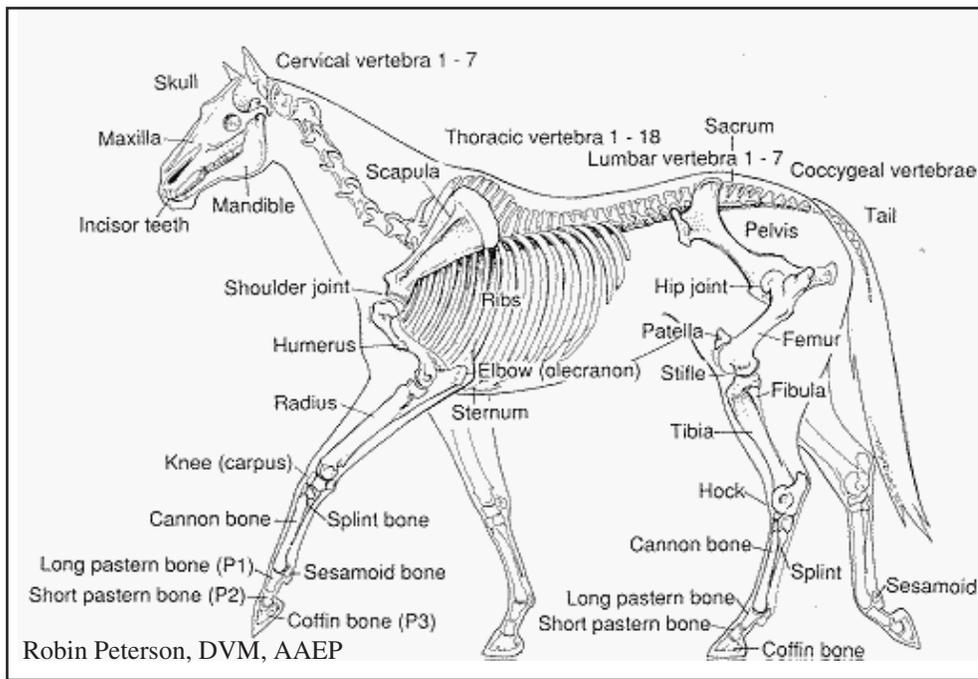
Forelimb lameness can be a direct result of abnormal weight bearing, causing pain in the withers area. Subluxations, a term used by chiropractors to describe the partial dislocation of a joint, can also result in stiffness and abnormal motion due to pain.

Also common are vertebral column injuries — those injuries that occur at the base of the skull. For instance, when a horse fights the bit, it can throw their jaw out of whack. The head and cervical vertebrae can also easily get jerked out of alignment. However, all of these alignment problems can be remedied with chiropractic techniques.

Aligning the front end is particularly important. The horse's power comes from the rear, but the weight is in front. In fact, the front limbs (starting at the shoulder) carry 60% of the horse's weight.

Chiropractic treatments effectively contribute to the physical rehabilitation of a horse by restoring normal joint and musculoskeletal functions. They reduce the pain, muscle disuse and atrophy caused by these injuries, while stimulating the nerve reflexes.

Chiropractic therapy also provides relief for animals with vertical column (back) injuries or early osteoarthritis of the vertebral column. However, it isn't a cure all for all back problems. Fractures



and infections, for instance, require other types of medical treatment.

How The Treatment Process Works

How does a 150 lb veterinarian doctor fix a 1000-1500 lb horse? One vertebra at a time. However, before beginning any treatment, the veterinarian must first conduct a thorough medical evaluation and history of the animal.

The chiropractor must then create a setting that makes it easy for the horse to relax. Most treatments are done without sedation, employing a trained handler and conducted in a relatively quiet place with minimal distractions. Light sedations are only administered if the horse is nervous or tense.

Chiropractic adjustments take place with the horse in a standing position. For some adjustments, particularly when addressing a horse's back, the chiropractor must leverage him or herself higher than the animal. Bails of hay situated around the animal can provide the necessary height.

After determining the specific area that needs attention, the chiropractor applies the hand technique described earlier, involving quick, controlled and forceful hand movements or thrusts to the spine, joints or other areas. To correct pelvic pain associated with the sacroiliac joint; the veterinarian must apply force to the top of the pelvic region (also known as the tubae sacral).

Don't forget, chiropractic techniques can also be used to prevent injuries. For instance, one of the most beneficial and

advantageous things to do for racehorses is to provide them with a pre-race stretch. This wellness technique helps improve racing speeds.

To conduct a pre-race stretching, the chiropractor applies a short sequence of minor chiropractic manipulations and mild stretches along the horse's neck, front legs, shoulders, and along the carpal bones in the front of the knees to lengthen and relax the muscles. The hind legs are stretched laterally so that the hip joints also benefit from a light stretching. The result is, the muscles are better prepared to absorb the impact from racing, and the horse functions faster and more efficiently on the track.

There are additional sequences for post-race stretching. Since the adjustments are painless, horses usually react favorably to the therapy.

Massage Therapy

Massage is a systematic manipulation of the soft tissue to promote circulation and lymphatic drainage, and decrease muscle spasms. As such, it's a logical technique to apply to racehorses.

Massage works well in conjunction with chiropractic techniques. In fact, the two modalities work hand in hand. For instance, similar to chiropractic therapy, when a veterinarian massages a horse, she applies a stretching technique to restore normal muscle length and to protect muscle tissue from potential strain and stiffness.

Tightly wound leg muscles, for example, are less able to negotiate successful strike patterns or absorb heavy impacts. In fact, tense muscles create undue pressure on ligaments and tendons, which in turn causes undue pressure on joints. As a result, these critical body parts become more susceptible to injury.

By applying measured hand pressure to certain points or knots in the soft tissue, muscle tension is gently released. This manual healing technique – which employs pressure traction, rubbing and the compressing of soft tissue — relieves pain and prepares injured muscles for exercise at their fullest capacity. Effective massage can also speed up the rehabilitation period usually required to recover from muscle overuse.

Alternative Treatments vs. Drug Treatments

Chiropractic manipulation and massage are proven modalities that successful athletes have been incorporating into their training and health routines for years. There is every reason to expect these alternative treatments to have the same positive and winning effect on thoroughbreds as they have on the New York Yankees.

Certainly, medical experts say that drugs are not the answer. In the fifty years that many assorted drugs have been utilized as a treatment device for racing thoroughbreds, records indicate that racing times have not substantially improved. In other words, drugs are not enabling horses to break racing records.

On the other hand, chiropractic and massage therapies provide tangible support for horses to successfully compete at their greatest potential. And it helps them extend their racing years. Your thoroughbred deserves the same opportunities as any other great athlete.

A comprehensive plan that incorporates chiropractic and massage therapies can be designed with the trainer and attending veterinarian to suit the needs of your horse. Please contact me if you'd like further information.

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