

Chiropractic Care of the Breeding Stallion

The discerning Thoroughbred breeder will invest a great deal of time, energy, and finances when considering the “perfect” stallion for their mare. As the stallion managers and owners focus on promoting their stallions in order to secure valuable breeding contracts in this highly competitive scenario, it is critical their stallions maintain optimal physical and emotional well-being both during breeding season and also during the off-season. Regular chiropractic care to the Thoroughbred stallion can accomplish this goal.

Spinal manipulation of the human body has been performed for thousands of years by the ancient healers, medicine men, and shamans. Hippocrates (circa 460 B.C.-370 B.C.), known as the Father of Western Medicine, advised: “Get knowledge of the spine, for this is the requisite for many diseases.” The current understanding and application of chiropractic principles was developed in 1865 by Daniel David Palmer. Palmer’s basic philosophy was that the application of chiropractic methods and manipulations was not only to address conditions where nerve interference existed due to “subluxations” (vertebral misalignments), it was intended to restore balance, prevent illness and/or injury and promote overall health and performance.

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The veterinary community soon realized that the successful healing methods and preventative care chiropractic provides to the human patient can successfully apply to the animal kingdom, more specifically to the equine patient.

During the chiropractic consultation of the equine patient, the chiropractic physician will determine the history of the horse, illnesses, injuries, and traumas. A gait and stance evaluation will be performed. The practitioner will then perform an inspection of the horse’s spine from head to tail using manual palpation. Testing of range of motion, muscle movement, or spasm, and signs of neurological or biomechanical integrity will also be performed by the chiropractitioner. At times questions will be



A consultation performed by a chiropractic physician is the first step

asked regarding current lab work or the use and administration of medications and/or feed supplements in an attempt to determine if there is any underlying source for any imbalance seen or a lack of equine performance.

In regards to incorporating a chiropractic protocol for the breeding stallion, it is important the stud manager takes note of the physical and also the emotional stresses that the breeding stallion endures during his career at stud.

Most popular breeding stallions garnered their attention in the breeding shed from their successes on the race-track. These equine athletes were conditioned for a specific "job" and their bodies are not prepared for the drastic change in biomechanical and neurological stresses in their stud careers.

The breeding stallion's body must be re-conditioned. Therefore, the breeding stallion should not be viewed any less important than the racehorse in regard to receiving regular chiropractic care as both a preventative measure



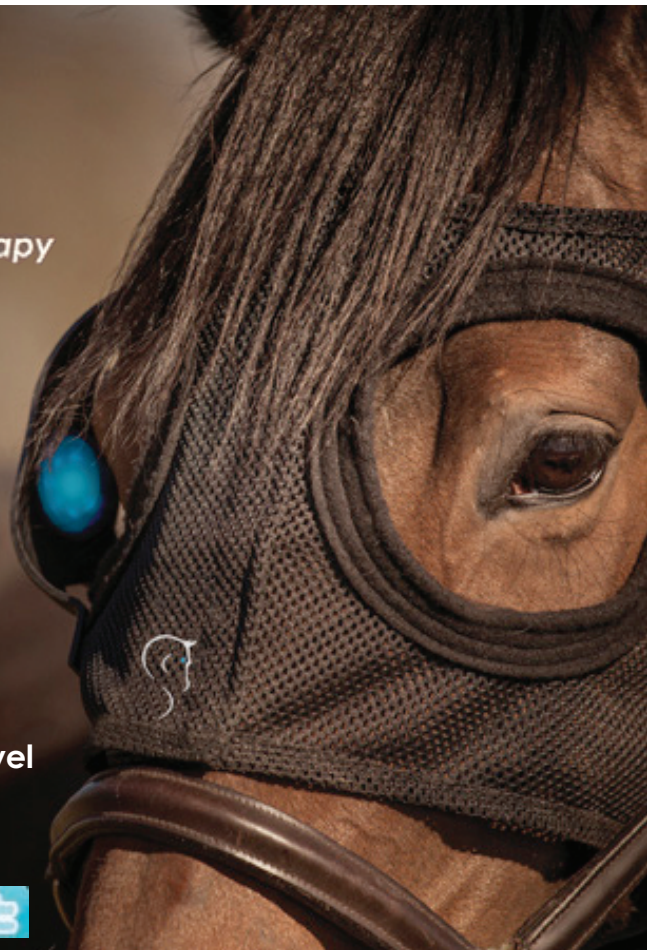
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and an effective treatment for musculo-skeletal or neurological injuries. This is especially applicable to stallions breeding in dual hemisphere seasons, as they may live cover as many as 125 mares per hemisphere.

Stallion performance is crucial for the breeder and the horse's ability to properly mount, maintain position, breed, and ejaculate seminal fluid is dependent upon good strength and overall health.

Any component of the nervous sys-

tem may directly or indirectly stimulate reactions within another component by means of an internal reflex reaction. Determination and correction of spinal subluxations (misalignments) or spinal compression is mandatory for effective management of common functional disorders of the motor structure that can create pelvic dysfunction, discomfort, or performance that can effect the stallion's ability to cover mares.

Keeping the spinal bones properly aligned and properly stimulating the



A breeding stallion's body must be reconditioned for the new stresses of his job

nervous system prevents disease and promotes overall health and functioning. When the spinal cord is in any way misaligned or compromised by a spinal subluxation, it can block blood flow to critical areas of the body.

The breeding stallion can experience various injuries in the breeding shed that can be successfully improved and/or eliminated with chiropractic care. Some injuries occur when the stallion falls during the cover or when he receives a harsh kick from an unruly mare.

With first-year stallions, many will become over-anxious when led into the shed and will rush the mare, resulting in a loss of balance or hitting the mare with such force causing bruising to the areas of contact, most commonly, the pelvic girdle (pelvis and sacrum).

During live cover, the pelvic girdle can become compromised through sprain/strain of the sacro-iliac joints, sprain/strain of the *longissimus dorsi* muscles (the large muscles which travel bilaterally the length of the lumbar spine) which extend in its sensitivity all the way back to its insertion on the sacrum and can result in discomfort throughout the lumbar and sacral spine, and sacrum subluxation. The lumbar vertebrae responsible for the sympathetic nerve supply to the sex organs, bladder, and prostate is L3, therefore, stallions benefit greatly by having the L3 vertebrae adjusted to insure no nerve compromise to these areas.

On occasion, as with the aged stallion, there can be discomfort in the hocks due to weight bearing and the natural process of joint degeneration due to the aging process.

For example, the stallion can over-exert himself during breeding, causing spasm to the thick muscles in the lower back and also causing the sacrum (base of the spine) to become misaligned. Or as with the aged stallion with arthritis, pain can occur in the lower back, hocks, or stifles due to frequent trips to the breeding shed.

Common issues occurring in the cervical spine (poll and neck) of the breeding stallion include osteoarthritis of the cervical spine due to degeneration with aging and muscle spasm of the cervical spine. Addressing any subluxations and pain at the poll, Atlas (C1), and Axis (C2) is vital to the overall health

of the stallion (as with all equines). The Atlas (C1), which is the first vertebrae

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of the neck that sits behind the poll, is a primary point for sympathetic and

parasympathetic nerve innervation to the entire body and the head. All the diseases of the endocrine organs are also affected at the Atlas (C1). The Axis (C2) is another basic area important to regulate the autonomic nervous system to the entire body. Proper alignment of the poll, Atlas (C1), and Axis (C2) is therefore critical to the overall health of the nervous system in the stallion.

Equine Protozoal Myeloencephalitis (EPM) and Wobbler's disease are also serious issues seen in the spinal cord that can negatively affect the performance of the breeding stallion. EPM is a disease caused by a parasite common to the opossum that invades the brain and spinal cord. Wobbler's disease can



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occur as a narrowing of the spinal cord in the middle region of the neck or can occur as an actual instability of the neck vertebrae.

Both of these conditions can cause the horse to have poor coordination and weakness, especially of the rear legs, and can also exhibit “toe-drag” of one or more rear legs. EPM and Wobbler’s disease can cause a stallion to endure difficulty breeding due to lack of balance. Regular chiropractic care can help reduce symptoms of both diseases by addressing the cervical spine.


In the case of Wobbler’s disease, the cervical spinal cord can become compressed (called stenosis) or there may be vertebral instability. In some stallions with vertebral instability, including 1977 Triple Crown winner Seattle Slew, the stallions receive a titanium implant called a “basket” or a “cage” to fuse the unstable cervical vertebrae and to prevent spinal cord compression. These stallions are able to continue success in the breeding shed for live cover.

This condition, however, is a contraindication for manual spinal manipulation but can be successfully treated with the chiropractic technique called the Activator Technique, which uses an adjusting instrument that is completely safe. Your chiropractic practitioner must be certified in this technique.

(Note: The author is certified in the Activator Technique and has had extensive experience treating these

specific cases.)

Regular chiropractic care of the breeding stallion can save the farm owner and breeder a great deal of money because it can be used not only as a healing technique for acute injuries and performance issues, but also for preventative care. Maintaining the integrity of the spine is critical in maintaining the health of the horse.

Important side note regarding equine chiropractic practitioners: Certified and licensed equine chiropractic practitioners may be either a Doctor of Chiropractic or a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, but not all are adequately trained or experienced in the fine arts of assessment, manipulation, and treatment. As a horse owner, trainer, or farm manager, be certain to inquire of your practitioner’s education and certification. 

Dr. Amy Rock earned her B.S. degree from Western Kentucky University and her Doctor of Chiropractic degree from Texas Chiropractic College and became a Certified Veterinary Chiropractitioner from VOM Technology. Dr. Rock has been showing Saddlebreds since the age of 8 and has won three World’s Championships and numerous High Point awards. Dr. Rock’s experience with Thoroughbreds began as the manager and agent for her parents’ Double R Farm Thoroughbreds in Central Kentucky.



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