



HEALTH ZONE

Lameness

Dealing with the Arthritic Horse

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Older horses often develop arthritis (joint inflammation) in various joints after hard use or repetitive wear and tear. Broodmares and stallions retired from racing may have joint issues, and older horses that are still racing may have soreness that needs to be managed.

Painful, stiff joints can often be managed to keep most of these horses comfortable enough to continue performing. The farrier can usually help, with proper shoeing, and some cases may need to be managed medically.

Paul Goodness, chief of Farrier Services at Virginia Tech's Equine Medical Center in Leesburg, Va., says horse owners and trainers need to be aware of some of the things that can make a difference for these horses, other than just medication.

"A combination of a lot of little things that we can do may really help in the management of an arthritic horse—and prolong the horse's comfort (out in the

pasture or during athletic work), to keep these individuals going longer," Goodness said.

Some of them can go on a long time in a reproductive or performance career, with a little help.

"Exercise is very beneficial," he said.

Many things available now are not mainstream

Any horse (or human) with arthritis tends to become more stiff/sore when inactive. The old saying, "Use it or lose it" is true for arthritis.

"Here in Virginia, one of the challenges is that certain times of year the ground becomes rock-hard," Goodness said. "It rarely freezes for very long, but sometimes it quits raining for a month

or so and with the clay base, the ground becomes dry and hard. Horse owners need to keep an eye on the footing if the horse is out at pasture. Sometimes the horse is better off being in, on soft shavings or some kind of soft footing in a run-in shed—where he can get away from that rock-hard ground during those weeks. But in general, the more these horses are out, moving around, the better off they are.

"The same goes for when we are asking them to work," he continued. "The rider or trainer needs to be conscious of the surface and footing. If there's a choice, choose the softer footing."

Pounding at speed on hard surfaces will aggravate joint soreness.

"It's important to have a good dialogue with your veterinarian or even several veterinarians if the horse is becoming sore," he said. "Find out what the various treatment options might be—both conventional and unconventional (such as acupuncture and laser therapy), or some of the nutraceuticals. There are some things your regular vet may not think of or have a thorough understanding about, but which can still be useful.

"There are many things available now that are not mainstream. Every horse is different, and different treatments may help some horses more than others. Sometimes a person has to be willing to experiment," he said.

"There are also many different therapeutic options that your farrier can employ, and different types of shoes that might help—if conformation of the hoof is a problem. We may use bar shoes or pads to rein in a hoof abnormality and put it in a more mechanically advantageous situation.

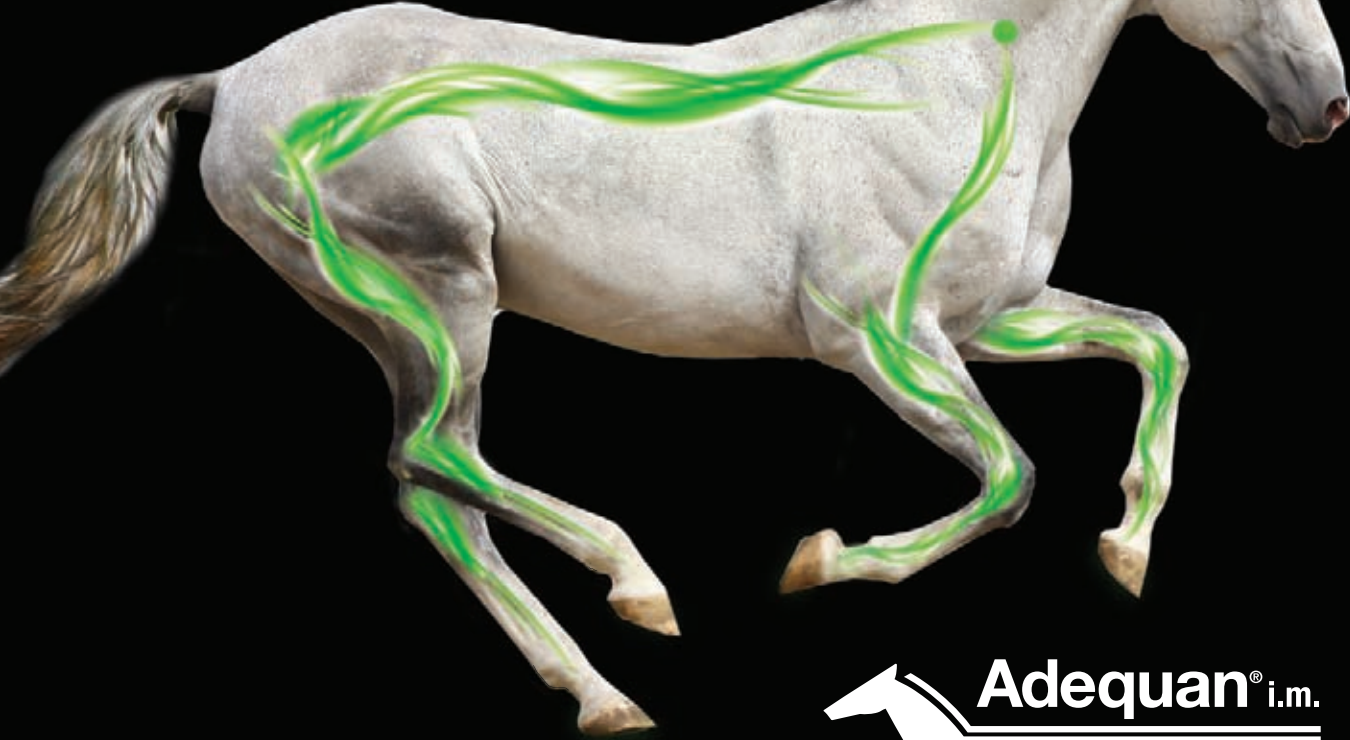
"Today we also have choices for softer materials to use as shoes. There are several good synthetic shoes and pads available that can be tried. There are many things that we can do now, and it may pay to try several, because we don't always know how the foot is going to respond. It may take trial and error to find what works best for that particular horse. Sometimes it might just be using

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COURTESY PAUL GOODNESS

Paul Goodness, chief of Farrier Services at Virginia Tech's Equine Medical Center



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an asymmetrical shoe with one side of the shoe wider than the other side,” Goodness said.

If the horse is stiff and stumbling, the shoe may need an easier break-over to minimize tripping.

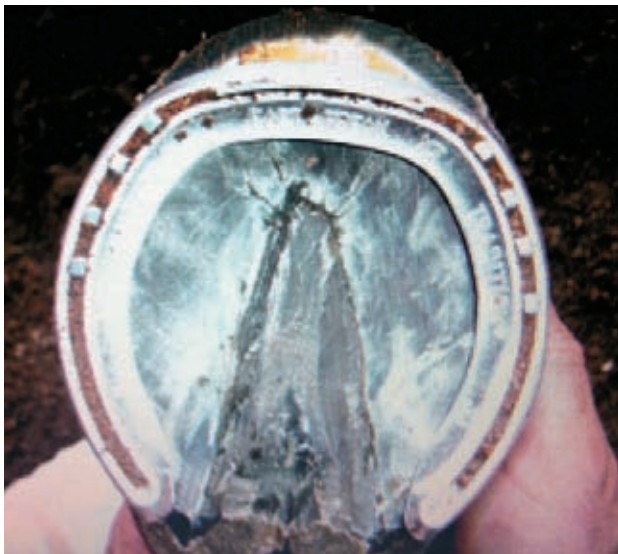
“This can be adjusted in many different ways,” he said. “One thing the farrier can help with is changing the mechanics of how the lower leg works. This can be one of the most dramatic differences.

“Farriers play a significant role in keeping the horse moving comfortably, secondary to the steroids and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications that we now have available. It all helps, and it takes a team—everyone working together—the owner or trainer, the farrier, the veterinarian, and whoever is

responsible for the management of that horse (the one who decides the turnout time, work schedule, and so on). We all need to be talking about options,” he said.

“Today a lot of these problems are caught pretty early and we can make some adjustments. I see older athletes going on for years. For instance, we now talk in terms of a ‘little bit of ringbone’ instead of thinking that all ringbone is career-ending ringbone.”

Many new technologies have become



COURTESY STEVE NORMAN

A shoe with a breakover point that is moved back from the toe

available in therapeutic shoeing and medications.

“There is new knowledge every day. We need to keep our eyes open and be willing to try some different things—and accept that not all of them are going to work,” Goodness said. “Maybe plan B or even plan C or D might be the key for this particular horse.”

Todd Allen, a farrier in Vandergrift, Pa., says arthritis may affect different joints in different horses—everything

from ringbone to sore hocks.

“Ringbone occurs most often in the front limbs, and it can be very painful if it is articular (in the joint),” Allen said. “The horse is lame and we have to do what we can to relieve that discomfort. The best thing we can do as farriers is work with the vet and get a proper diagnosis—whether it’s high ringbone, low ringbone, etc. (the exact location of the ringbone), and see what we can do to make the horse more comfortable in its movement.

“There is always one given, and that’s break-over,” Allen continued.

“We always move it back, making it as easy as possible for that horse to break over. Another important thing on those horses is to have plenty of support on the back of the hoof, so the hoof doesn’t sink into the ground quite as far. We use a pour pad on a lot of horses, and that keeps them on top of the ground. I pour all of my ringbone horses. I believe that the bones descend as that foot loads, and I think there’s sometimes a little pinching as those bones/joints descend. They press together in the load phase in the stride,” he said.

“So I use a lot of pour pads to prevent or minimize some of that downward movement of the joint and the bony column. I’ve had very good luck with that, to provide more support in the heel area. We can use a bar shoe or an open heel shoe with pour pads, and I use pour pads regardless, though a lot of it depends on what the vet recommends,” Allen said.

“Sometimes joint supplements can be helpful for horses with arthritis, or use of Adequan, Legend, etc. Surpass is a topical cream that can be applied to the painful area (such as knees) to help reduce inflammation. I generally toss out several ideas to the owner or trainer, but also tell them to contact their veterinarian.”

There are a number of joint supplements that have been used for many years that seem to help some horses.

“There are many products and drugs being utilized to help arthritic horses, so

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I recommend asking their vet for guidance in a choice of treatment,” Allen said.

He also recommends asking the vet about drug choices, because there are some new products out there, and information gleaned from the Internet may be misleading.

Troy Price, a farrier in Uniondale, Ind., works with a number of arthritic horses.

“They are not always old horses. Some are middle-age and are still very active, and some are still racing—but they’ve had a lot of wear and tear on joints because of a strenuous career,” he said.

Some arthritic horses can be difficult to shoe because their leg joints are stiff and it’s painful for them to have the leg flexed and held in shoeing positions.

“I tell these clients that if they can exercise the horse a little before I get there—lunge them around, put them on a walker, or let the horse out in an arena awhile—this can limber them up before I shoe them,” Price said. “This seems to make a big difference.

“I have some clients who use Bute (phenylbutazone) or some other form of pain relief for the horse before I come to work on the feet. And when I work on these horses I keep their arthritis in mind, trying to help them find a comfortable position as I hold that leg.”

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Horses are amazing athletes that run, jump, and spin with great agility. As with all athletes, they are susceptible to injury and subsequent lameness.

Musculoskeletal injuries are the most common reason why horses cannot perform. These injuries plague almost every U.S. horse operation. Lameness tops the leaderboard for economic costs in the horse industry.

So, what can we do? A lot. Combating lameness starts with timely recognition that the horse is injured. This process often is challenging because the causes of lameness are many. Injury can be due to one wrong step, multiple wrong steps, or just too many steps. These ultimately result in failure of the intricate, yet harmonic, biomechanical integrity of tendons, ligaments, bones, and joints.

Once a horse is injured, veterinarians must do their due diligence to accurately diagnose and administer injury-direct-

ed therapy. Today's horse greatly benefits from the plethora of tools that assist in this process. Technological advancements have made digital radiology, digital ultrasonography, nuclear scintigraphy, MRI, and CT widely available. These modalities enhance our ability to correctly diagnose injuries and to identify prodromal abnormalities before catastrophic breakdown.

Equally beneficial, new treatments such as minimally invasive procedures, improved surgical implants, and regenerative medicine are making forward strides in the post-injury health of the horse.

There is hope that rapid injury identification combined with accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment will result in return to athleticism and return to the winner's circle.

By Dr. Elizabeth Davidson, associate professor of Sports Medicine, Penn Vet's New Bolton Center



COURTESY TODD ALLEN

Farrier Todd Allen, right, discusses a shoeing option with a client



COURTESY TROY PRICE

Farrier Troy Price works with a number of arthritic horses

The owner or trainer may need to work with a veterinarian regarding pain management for the arthritic horse. Some horses do better when kept on a constant low level of Bute, especially older horses with very painful joints. A little pain management may make it to where the horse is more comfortable and can move around more without stiffness and pain, and the movement and exercise increases blood circulation and lubrication and helps keep the joints more supple. A little anti-inflammatory medication may help the horse a lot, just like it does for a per-

son with arthritis.

Some of these horses are not old and retired. They may just be a little stiff and gimp when they first start working, then "warm out of it." The exercise aids blood flow and joint lubrication.

"Horses are a lot like us," Allen said. "When you first get up in the morning you are a little stiff, and then after you get going and move around and have breakfast you start feeling better. The older we get, the more aches and pains."

The seriousness of arthritis may de-

pend on the individual horse and what he's been doing. As the old saying goes, "it's not the years; it's the mileage."

If there's been a lot of concussion and wear on those joints from strenuous use, the horse may become sore and stiff at a younger age than an old horse that's led a less strenuous life. Care and maintenance considerations, however, can help the arthritic horse whether he's 15 or 25. **BH**

Heather Smith Thomas is a freelance writer based in Idaho.