

Racing Older Horses — Tips on Keeping Them Sound

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS / PHOTOS BY ANNE M. EBERHARDT

HORSES ARE TREMENDOUS ATHLETES. Keeping them fit and at peak performance can be a challenge, however, since even a subtle or minor injury might result in an “off” day with the horse not doing his best. Racehorses are asked for their best efforts in every race, and it takes dedication and care to keep a horse racing well for multiple years.

Richard Budge, trainer at WinStar Farm near Versailles, Ky., has been working with racehorses for a long time. Born in England, he worked with horses there and then in France. After he came to the U.S., he worked for Dogwood Stable (in Georgia at that time) and assisted in breaking its yearlings. He also worked for trainer Steve DiMauro for many years in New York, California, and Florida. After

getting his trainer’s license in 1997, he trained privately for Art Preston’s LOR Stables, winning many stakes races from a European-styled training center in Texas. Budge began working at WinStar in January 2002 and has been responsible for the preparation and rehabilitation of the WinStar racehorses.

Keeping the older horses going to the best of their abilities is one of his many

goals. He is currently working with about 120 horses. This includes the 2-year-olds that he trains, along with the older horses, and the ones being rehabbed after injury—getting them back to fitness and racing again.

“Their training program depends on what kind of rehab they need, and this depends on what kind of surgery or injury they’ve had,” Budge said. “Some come to me after surgery, and some come just to be freshened up and become more ready to race again. We develop a plan for each of them when they arrive.

“Everything we do is geared to the individual and what that horse needs, and



WinStar Farm trainer Richard Budge oversees horses galloping on its synthetic surface

our plans are flexible. If it's a rehab case, some horses recuperate quicker than others; we mainly have to 'listen' to the horse and see how he's responding to all the therapies and treatments. Some make it back to racing successfully, and others unfortunately do not. Of those that don't, most of them can go on to a second career that's not as strenuous."

Budge feels lucky to have some great clients—WinStar and some outside clients who bring horses to him.

"We want the best for each horse, but we do our best to get them back to the track, if possible," he said.

"A surgery horse may have stall rest and hand walking, and possibly some paddock turnout followed by exercise with AquaTred and/or sessions with the saltwater spa, vibration plates, hyperbaric oxygen therapy, etc., depending on the injury they are coming back from."

There are many options now to assist the rehabilitation process.

"WinStar provides me with all the tools I need to bring a horse back to soundness," he said. "WinStar recently hired Shannon Ritter as the rehab manager, and she oversees a lot of that, taking care of those horses. I was doing that up until now.

"We make a plan for each horse and do a very methodical step-by-step process. Being a private training center, we can use the tools at hand and do different things and be in control of how these horses train. We may exercise the horses clockwise and then counterclockwise—left-handed and right-handed—using different muscle groups, and develop the muscles on each side of the horse equally," he explained.

"We also have a synthetic surface, a dirt surface, and a turf surface. This can help guide us as trainers. Some horses that we freshen up we will take to the turf, enabling them to exercise European style; it gives them something open and not as constricted as a racetrack. This can help freshen them mentally along with the physical exercise. We can also do swimming and AquaTred. It helps to have all these options.

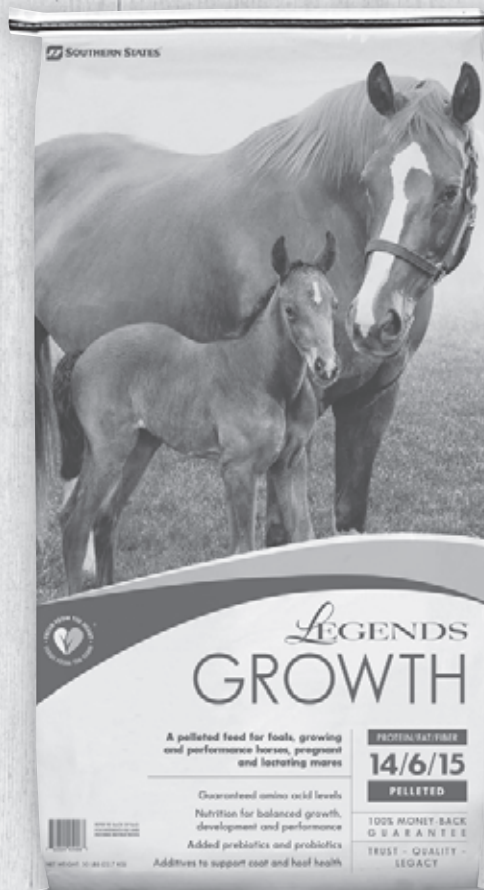
"The challenge at the racetrack is that you are unable to do that," he continued. "At a private training center we can do many different things. We have a turf gallop and an uphill track that we use a lot—one of the few in the country. It's English style, doing the uphill or interval training back-to-back. We go up the hill twice and that gives horses coming off an injury a way to build fitness again without so much pounding and concussion and in relatively straight lines with no turns. There's a turn going into the hill but then it's straight uphill. It gets the horses fitter without overstressing their legs.

"Along with all the other tools, we also have swimming. The key is to develop a plan for each horse and follow it along. If we need to go a little slower, we go a little slower. If that horse is able to pick it up a bit, we'll pick up the pace."

As each horse progresses, knowing what the weak spots are and how to deal with those, a person can focus on certain things or make changes. It's a day-to-day flexible program but with an ultimate goal.

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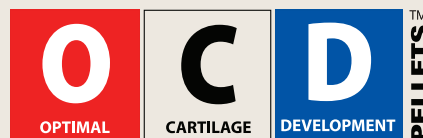
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Horse receiving a salt water spa treatment at WinStar Farm

Some of the older horses simply need some fine-tuning to optimize their athletic ability.

“We work with some older horses that we just need to ‘freshen up,’ and we can dictate what their program should be,” Budge said. “They might need a little green grass and turnout or maybe some hyperbaric oxygen. Many horses that come here have been at the track racing for a year and a half and have never had a break. Now they need a break so they don’t burn out. The time spent here gives the horse a break mentally and also a physical break that helps with bone remodeling and avoiding things like bone bruising.

“We’ve given many horses this kind of break from racing, with good success—horses such as Super Saver. We gave him a little break after his 2-year-old campaign and allowed him some turnout, and he went on to win the Kentucky Derby (Presented by Yum! Brands, G1). Those kinds of things can be important, to figure out what each individual horse needs,” he said.

Some successful racehorses are retired to stud or to the broodmare band after a year or two while others have a relatively long racing career. Trainers try to keep those horses fit enough to continue a successful career.

“The horses we work with here are split between WinStar and other clients, so we cater to what the ultimate goal is for each horse,” Budge said. “Some owners just want to freshen them up and race them for the next three or four years, and others have a distinct goal for a certain race, and we try to get them in the best shape possible to aim for that specific goal.

“The time frame is important for fillies and mares, in terms of breeding season, or when talking about potential stallions going

to stud. You want to make sure the time frame is correct for each horse,” he said.

There are also a few exceptional geldings that continue racing for a longer career.

“We try to keep them sound and fit and healthy. It is amazing how some horses can keep running at age 6, 7, and 8 or even longer,” he said. “In Europe, Dubai, and other places, you see a lot of stakes winners at an older age, with longer careers.

“We had Little Mike here for quite a while, and he was a likeable character (a bay gelding that had a solid racing career until he retired at age 9). You get attached to them after they come through here. Some may not be the top champions, but you remember them—and sometimes the challenges, such as a horse that must go through a long rehab and then gets to break a maiden, and you feel a great sense of accomplishment.

“We are here to try to get the horse sound, healthy, and happy and look forward to what he can do. It really doesn’t matter what level the horse is. It’s a lot of fun if it’s a really talented and famous horse, but we want them all to succeed and run to the best of their ability—whatever that level is. I get as much pleasure out of those,” Budge said.

“That’s usually a trainer’s perspective, to get the most out of each horse while keeping him sound, healthy, and happy. The horse will race longer that way.”

Keeping them mentally healthy is just as important as physical fitness and soundness.

“The racetrack environment—stabled at the track—can be hard on some horses,” Budge said. “Some will do well in that environment but others not as well. We are lucky to have a great owner and some great clients who know when to stop on a horse and give him a little break and freshener. They have confidence in us to get the horse back in good shape, ready to come back strong and continue racing.

“It’s very individual, and we aim to accomplish this for each horse within the desired time frame, but it can be shortened or lengthened if necessary. If we can achieve it, using all the tools and therapies that we have at hand, it’s very

beneficial.”

The challenge of how best to do this for each horse can be very interesting.

“We have a lot of turnover here, with horses coming in and going out,” Budge said. “We have a sense of pride (myself and all my crew) when these horses go back out and do well. We have a great team that includes assistants, foremen, riders, grooms, hot-walkers, etc. We are all connected, and we get attached to the horses.

“We feel our mission is accomplished when they ship out, and double mission accomplished if they win,” Budge added.

Every horse is unique. They all respond differently.

“A certain method may not work with one horse, so we try something else,” he said.

Their talents are very different, too. They are all talented but have their own way of expressing it.

“Just like children, some are very

eager, and others are very lazy,” he said. “Some need a lot of encouragement or guidance or correction. You learn about each horse, and the key is to go from there and figure out which racetrack and which trainer will be best for each of them. Gate works are also important, primarily with young horses, but now and then you’ll get an older horse that needs a little extra attention in the gate and a little more schooling. We are lucky to have a great gate crew here.

“It’s very much a team effort because there are so many things that go into this—the gate crew, veterinarians, blacksmiths/farriers, etc., and all the employees,” Budge said. “It’s really amazing, everything that goes into getting that horse from A to B. It’s not just one person; it’s the whole team. More sets of eyes on that horse always helps. There might be something I didn’t see, but someone else saw it so the whole team helps. Every little

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thing adds up to the big picture, regarding success.”

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“When a horse loads up on the van headed back to the track, our whole team feels like we’ve done our best,” he said. “The horse looks good and feels good, and now it’s up to the horse to go on from there. Even the lowest-level horse, if he gets to run to his full potential, we feel like we’ve fulfilled our mission and achieved our goal.”

Longevity in a racing career depends on many things.

“In this country we have a very rigorous, year-round training regime for these horses,” he said. “In earlier times they used to give racehorses the winter off, and it was similar in Europe. Now it’s changed and many horses are at it all year long—like going to school without a vacation. Sometimes a horse will need a break

physically and sometimes they’ll need a break mentally, but if you give them that break, most of them will come back stronger and better.”

Budge says the key, especially in older horses, is patience.

“In my opinion there is no point in forcing the issue with any horse,” he said. “They will teach us patience. You really can’t cut corners and succeed at reaching your goal. You have to do everything right, and very methodical.

“The horse will tell you when it’s right, and patience is key. It’s tough today in this business. It’s harder to find people with patience in the ‘now’ generation. But racehorses will teach you patience if you really want to succeed. And persistence goes along with that. Sometimes this or that won’t work, but you don’t give up; you keep trying different things, trying to find the key for that particular horse.

If the owner or client is willing to keep trying (and feels there is a future to it), it may eventually work out and everyone is happy.

“I find that the top horses usually stand out right away,” he said. “The middle horses, by the time they are older, you know what you have, but when they are young, they will often change, regarding their performance (such as between the spring and fall of a 2-year-old and the spring of a 3-year-old) because they go through growth spurts, but the top horses generally stand out from the beginning. Some horses, however, need a little time to catch up.”

You may not see that diamond in the rough right away. You always hope to find it, but usually the outstanding ones will jump right out and be obvious. **BH**

Heather Smith Thomas is a freelance writer based in Idaho.



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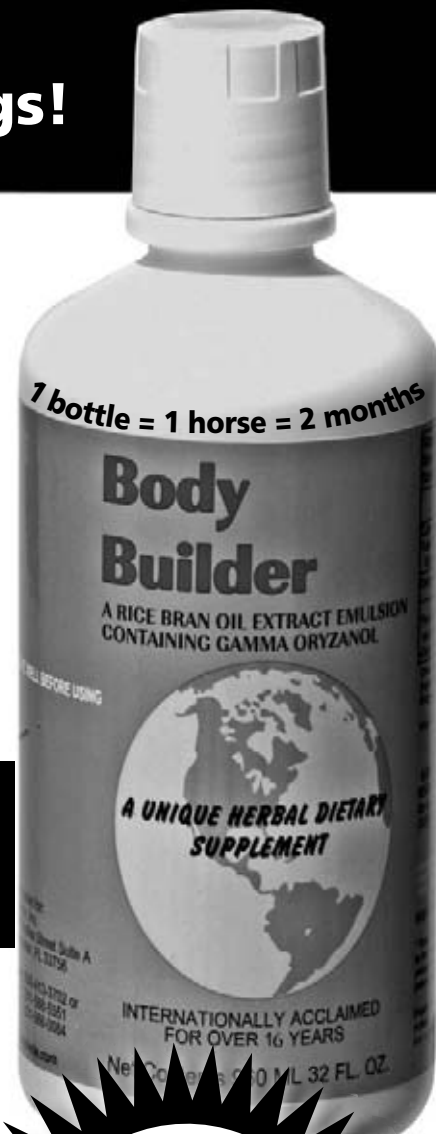
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Q&A with Dr. Susan Stover

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DR. SUSAN STOVER HAS BEEN FUNDED frequently by Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation. Her goal in recent research is the prevention of musculoskeletal injuries in equine athletes. Consequently, her research focus is understanding the epidemiology, pathogenesis, and biomechanics of repetitive, overuse injuries in equine athletes—so that risk factors can be identified and managed for injury prevention. She was interviewed by Jamie S. Haydon, vice president of the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation.

What first sparked your interest in exploring this area of equine research?

My research is motivated by the discovery that injuries develop over time as a result of repetitive training and racing activities. Therefore, injuries in racehorses are preventable—if we better understand the risk factors for injuries and how injuries develop as a result of the risk factors. Further, the potential impact of reducing injuries is huge—to equine, jockey, and industry welfare.

Several pieces of information dictated our current research priority. First, fatal musculoskeletal injury rates are known to be different for different race surfaces. Second, we know that different race surfaces impart different loads to the hoof and limb, with the measured loads on some race surfaces greater than the measured loads on other race surfaces. Third, we know that the mechanical behavior of surfaces varies markedly with how the surface is constructed and managed. So, not all surfaces are necessarily worse or better for injury prevention than all other surfaces, but the mechanical behavior of the surface is the key feature related to injury prevention.

Developing a standard for an optimal race surface “mechanical behavior” for injury prevention would allow racetracks to use whatever materials and management are appropriate for their climatic and operational environments to create a consistent race sur-

face behavior (feel to the horse) whenever a horse trains and races. Consequently, horses in training and racing at different racing venues would have to adapt to only one race surface behavior. Lastly, but key to making a difference, is that improvements to race surfaces would affect *all* racehorses that train and race on optimized surfaces, thus having a large impact on horses and the racing industry.

What was the most significant finding from this research?

This study is envisioned as the first half of a four-year research program to reach our end goal. So far, consistent with our expectations, fractured fetlock proximal sesamoid bones had damage that was present before bone fracture. We learned (consistent with previous studies) that how often and hard a racehorse trains on each type of surface also affects the likelihood for fetlock bone fracture. This validates the need to include how a horse is trained and raced in our study. These are not surprising findings but illustrate that management of both race surfaces and training schedules are needed to prevent injuries. There is not a single solution to injury prevention.

What was surprising is that fetlock proximal sesamoid bones fracture in several patterns, and that the damage that precedes and predisposes to injury may occur in more than one location. However, the current study

has clearly demonstrated that pre-existing mild injuries are associated with the development of catastrophic bone fracture. This has implications, not only for our study but for detecting the damage in live horses before catastrophic fracture occurs. In association with other work on a new imaging technique (positron emission tomography, or PET scan) being explored for horses, there is a good likelihood that the pre-existing mild injuries can be detected in racehorses as improvements in the technique are made more feasible for horses. These developments are huge for future injury prevention of the most common catastrophic injury (fetlock breakdown) in racehorses.

What aspects of the research process are relevant to this project?

It involves why we do research—because there is always more to the story than is initially apparent, and lack of attention to new discoveries through the process could lead to inappropriate conclusions and missed opportunities.

How will this research improve equine health and soundness?

Our hope is that improvements in racetrack surface design and management, along with training guidelines, will not only prevent catastrophic, fatal injuries, but also reduce the mild injuries that delay race training and racing because the mild injuries are the early stages of the severe injuries. Collectively, race horses will be healthier and have longer careers. (In addition to the basic humane goals) this will reduce loss of horses from the racing population and result in an economically healthier racing industry. **BH**