

As it works to provide horses healthy and happy lives, WinStar Farm believes in giving older horses, such as pensioner Tiznow, plenty of paddock time



Wise Moves

EXERCISE OFTEN IMPORTANT IN KEEPING OLDER STALLIONS HEALTHY, PRODUCTIVE

By AMANDA DUCKWORTH / Photos by ANNE M. EBERHARDT

MANAGING THE CAREER of a successful stallion is a multifaceted endeavor and some of his needs change as he ages and his body and abilities likely change. It is up to his handlers to recognize and accommodate those needs as time advances.

Two big issues older stallions face relate to fertility and mobility. Some horses remain physically able to do the job, but their fertility lowers to a point where pensioning is a logical step. On the other hand, some stallions experience little in the way of fertility woes,

but they are no longer able to jump mares safely. As live cover is a requirement for Thoroughbreds, either of these problems can lead to the end of a stallion's breeding career.

As is true with most other things relating to equine health and welfare, a good working relationship between the stallion manager and the horse's veterinarian is the best bet for a long-term success story.

The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) explains it thusly: "It is the opinion of the AAEP

that proper management of the breeding stallion is paramount in obtaining optimum breeding efficiency. Proper management requires close cooperation between the licensed veterinarian and stallion manager. The licensed veterinarian can contribute various diagnostic and therapeutic procedures to this partnership."

When it comes to managing older stallions and pensioners, Larry McGinnis, the longtime stallion manager at WinStar Farm, boils it down to four words: "Listen to the horse."

WinStar is home to two pensioners: Distorted Humor, who will turn 30 in January, and Tiznow, who will be 26. The former was pensioned for physical reasons at the end of 2021 while the latter was pensioned at the end of 2020 due to fertility issues. Leading sire Speightstown, who is still actively breeding and is about to turn 25, is also under the care of McGinnis. Famed shuttle stallion More Than Ready was active this year, at age 25, before being euthanized in August because of the cumulative effects of old age.

"You can manage some physical issues, but fertility is harder to control," McGinnis said. "With Tiznow, his fertility was the first to go while Distorted Humor began having physical limitations breeding mares. Tiznow was fertile his whole life, and then just all of a sudden, when he was 22 or 23, it began to tank. They are on



supplements most of their lives, and Congrats and Tiznow are the only two we've had here where their fertility went down pretty quick. There's not a whole lot you can do about it. Then you have stallions like More Than Ready, who was bred this year, and his fertility was 90%."

It should come as little surprise that McGinnis believes a main factor in helping stallions remain active as they age involves keeping them in good health when they are younger. At WinStar, that policy involves providing stallions ample exercise and turnout time.

"Our belief is that we want our stallions to have happy, healthy lives," McGinnis said. "They are outside as much as they can be. Speightstown has some limitations because of his



**LET THEIR BODIES
HANDLE THINGS
AS MUCH AS YOU
CAN. HELP THEM,
OBVIOUSLY, BUT
TRY TO GIVE THEM
A NATURAL LIFE."**

—WINSTAR FARM STALLION
MANAGER LARRY MCGINNIS
ON A LESS-IS-MORE
APPROACH

previous colic issues, but More Than Ready, Distorted Humor, and Tiznow were out every night up until the last few years when they really started to get older. That's very important.

"We also have an exercise routine we did with those guys. Tiznow was not involved with that because he really didn't want to do it, and More Than Ready didn't because he traveled a lot, but Distorted Humor and Speightstown got ridden or put on the walker for most of their lives, and I think that is an important thing. We only ride the ones that enjoy it. If they don't, we put them on the walker, but most of them are pretty good. It's just like with humans—you have to eat right and get exercise. That's what we did with these guys."

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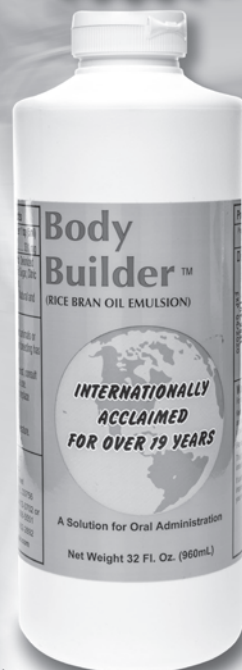
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WinStar Farm president, CEO, and racing manager Elliott Walden enjoys some time with Distorted Humor, who will turn 30 in 2023

Archiv: European Journal of Physiology published a study that examined the scientific reasons why staying active can lengthen a horse's life expectancy in "Exercise regulates shelterin genes and microRNAs implicated in aging in Thoroughbred horses."

"Aging is a complex biological process involving the progressive loss of bodily functions and degradation of serial, repeated DNA located at the end of chromosomes—the telomeres," explained researchers. "The rate of telomere shortening is predictive of lifespan, which is an observation consistent amongst vertebrates. It also seems to be affected by psychological stress and exercise training. Whilst the former is associated with accelerated telomere shortening, those regularly active or engaged in endurance training possess longer leukocyte telomeres than inactive controls."

For the study, the exercise training used on Thoroughbreds was a typical high-intensity workday and comprised a short warm-up of walking and trotting before increasing to a canter and finally a gallop. In all,

40 Australian Thoroughbreds of differing ages were used. The younger horses were all in active race training while the older horses were retired. All of the horses in the study had raced multiple times.

Researchers tracked the GPS and heart rate data, which showed the horses were working at near-maximum intensity during the exercise session. Researchers examined the influence of a single bout of vigorous exercise training on leukocyte telomerase reverse transcriptase (TERT) and shelterin gene expression, and the abundance of three microRNAs (miRNAs) implicated in biological aging in Thoroughbreds.

"Regular exercise training improves health span and may attenuate biological aging through the preservation of telomeres," researchers concluded. "Current evidence suggests that exercise modulates TERT and telomerase activity, yet whether other molecules, such as miRNAs, have roles in telomere regulation is unclear. Here, we observed dynamic up-regulation of whole blood leuko-

cyte TRF1, TRF2, and POT1 gene expression and concomitant decreases in miR-223 and miR-486-5p, immediately after a single bout of vigorous exercise, which returned to baseline levels 24 hours after the training session in Thoroughbred racehorses.

"Furthermore, relative to the younger horses, retired—middle-aged—horses, not currently in training, exhibited significantly lower whole blood leukocyte TERT mRNA and elevated POT1 mRNA and miR-223 expression. Therefore, a vigorous bout of exercise led to transient increases in key shelterin components and miRNAs implicated in biological aging in a large, athletic mammal, the Thoroughbred racehorse."

More Than Ready's routine differed from others at WinStar because he was the poster boy for successful shuttle stallions. He shuttled to Australia a remarkable 19 consecutive seasons and was a top stallion in both regions. There has been some debate about the effects of shuttling on a stallion's fertility, but, according to research, More Than Ready's extended period of success was not just a fluke. In 2017, *Theriogenology* published the study "The effect of dual-hemisphere breeding on stallion fertility."

For the study, researchers examined the breeding records of both first-year shuttle stallions and experienced dual-hemisphere stallions. They also took into account variables such as seasonal pregnancy rate, pregnancy rate per cycle, and first-cycle pregnancy rate, book size, total number of covers, distribution of mare type (maiden, foaling, and barren) within a stallion's book, cycles per mare, and mare age. Several different considerations were analyzed, including comparing fertility to stallions that did not shuttle as well as long-term effects of shuttling for multiple seasons.

"Fertility of dual-hemisphere breeding seasons was compared to

single hemisphere (SIN) breeding seasons within the same 16 stallions and was found to be similar between the two groups,” researchers concluded. “The effect of the number of consecutive dual-hemisphere breeding seasons on fertility was examined and was found to remain unchanged. In summary, no adverse effects of dual-hemisphere breeding on fertility were detected.”

Although they have aged, and two were not bred this year, the older stallion guard at WinStar is still being represented at elite levels. Speightstown ranks among the Top 10 leading sires, More Than Ready is in the Top 25, and Distorted Humor and Tiznow are in or near the Top 40. This year Distorted Humor was represented by his 19th

grade 1 winner with Santin, who won the Old Forester Bourbon Turf Classic Stakes and Arlington Million Stakes (both G1T), while Speightstown has sired 25 grade 1 winners overall, including three in 2022, thanks to the efforts of Olympiad, Shirl's Speight, and Switzerland.

In addition to using optimized nutrition and exercise regimens, McGinnis is a believer in the “less is more” approach to animal husbandry. Supporting a horse through an issue is important, but so is providing the horse's body a chance to do what it is designed to do.

“We don't do a whole lot to them,” he said. “Their whole careers I haven't done much to them. Issues pop up, and they may have been on anti-

inflammatories for a bit, but they came back off of it. We didn't do a lot of injecting things. The less you do, the more you have in your pocket as they get older, and even then, you may not need it. They may just get older and not be able to breed anymore.

“For instance, our oldest horse, Distorted Humor, had some issues over the years, but he never stayed on anything for any length of time. I think that's important, too. Let their bodies handle things as much as you can. Help them, obviously, but try to give them a natural life. At 29, Humor is amazing. His father, Forty Niner, passed away in Japan not too long ago at 35, and we hope to keep Humor around that long, too. He is part of our family.”

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Speightstown, who has twice finished among North America's leading sires, is scheduled to stand for \$80,000 in the 2023 season

Having been the WinStar stallion manager for more than two decades gives McGinnis an edge when it comes to noticing any issues or changes in the stallions under his care. That awareness can be crucial as horses start to age. Tied into that is having a good relationship with the farm's management team. At WinStar, that means working with Elliott Walden, president of the operation, and David Hanley, general manager.

"As stallions get older, you can see how they change," McGinnis said. "I have been with our stallions forever, and so you notice subtle things that start to happen as they are breeding. You notice, 'Oh, he didn't do that last year,' or 'He's doing this differently.' You see things happen as they get older. As they get older, things change, and being aware of it means you can manage it and help them out. You do what you can.

"I can talk candidly to David and Elliott about what's going on with the



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horses and what I think. They will ask at the end of the breeding season, 'What do you think about next year?' I have to tell them if we should cut a stallion back a bit or if they are doing great. We don't want to overex-

ert them as they get older. As they get older, our stallions' books get smaller and smaller, and that's intentional. It makes it a little easier on them. Of course, if someone comes up and says, 'Hey we want to breed this really great mare to Speightstown,' we will figure it out, but we aren't going to push him too hard."

Management programs have to be tailored to fit both the expectations of an organization as well as the individual horses within it, but in the end, McGinnis strongly feels that the idea of letting horses be horses aids in any given stallion's longevity and welfare.

"I'm firmly convinced that the exercise and turnout schedule that we have has to do with their longevity," he said. "They are healthier for it. They will stay up if there are bad storms or it is extremely cold outside, but they are outside as much as possible. I think that helps them tremendously. Ultimately, my best advice is to listen to the horse." **BH**



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