

The ‘Creaky’ Performance Horse

Seasoned sport horses are invaluable, but they often need a little extra TLC to continue performing well into middle age

Older, experienced performance horses are worth their weight in gold. They’ve been there, done that and have amassed skills that literally take ages to learn. Thanks to advances in veterinary medicine, these horses are living and remaining active longer.

But, years of training and many miles in the show ring mean these horses need a little extra TLC to stay sound. Depending on the horse and the discipline, that might mean more time warming up or periodic joint injections when he starts to have a hitch in his giddyup.

Finding the Source of the Creak

Early in the summer of 2016, Tracy Bartick-Sedrish, DVM, and Steve Sedrish, MS, DVM, Dipl. ACVS, owners of Upstate Equine Medical Center, in Schuylerville, New York, experienced the same disappointment many of their clients struggle with. Their aged Western performance horse, Spoon, went lame. Lower limb radiographs came back clean, and ultrasound revealed nothing out of the ordinary. The couple opted for an MRI, which revealed subtle changes in the navicular bone, which is at the back of the foot, and the impar ligament attached to it.

“We went to the extreme to find out why he was sore and gave him the summer off,” Sedrish says.

Foot pain like Spoon’s, joint stiffness, and back soreness are telltale signs that your performance horse is aging.

“Often older performance horses don’t exhibit overt signs of lameness,” says Ashlee Watts, DVM, PhD, an assistant professor in large animal surgery at Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine, “but when we flex them and ask them to trot in-hand, it shows up.”

It’s easy to chalk this up to a cold



Stretching exercises before riding can help horses with joint and/or muscle stiffness.

morning or the need for a warmup, but, Bartick-Sedrish says, “It’s important for horse owners to realize that any soreness or stiffness is really lameness.”

Veterinarians grade lameness on a scale of 1 to 5, with the severity of pain becoming more evident as the grade increases. It’s most likely that what they’d consider a “creaky” performance horse would fall into the Grade 1 category.

For English sport horses, this subtle soreness often manifests as foot pain and suspensory ligament desmitis. The latter is an obscure lameness that develops over time and can be so mild that horses only display discomfort when the inflamed suspensory ligaments are palpated. Osteoarthritis (OA) is also common, showing up in different joints based on use.

“In hunter/jumpers (OA) is perhaps more likely in the fetlocks, whereas in dressage horses it’s more likely to be

in the distal (lower) hock joints,” says Julie E. Dechant, DVM, MS, Dipl. ACVS, ACVECC, associate professor of Clinical Surgical & Radiological Sciences at the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine.

Older Western performance horses are also prone to foot pain—which can be a sign of developing podotrochleitis (e.g., navicular disease)—and OA, especially in the distal hock joints or the stifles.

Lingering stiffness from prior tendon injuries and back soreness are also common. An incorrectly fitting saddle coupled with long hours of riding can contribute to these clinical signs.

Schedule an exam with your veterinarian to assess your horse’s musculoskeletal health and develop a long-term management strategy that works for him.

The Sedrishes encourage clients to also take video and/or photograph their horses

to provide an objective baseline look at the horse's current body condition and overall health, and then take additional images regularly over time. These serial images help the owner detect problems and intervene early, before they cause fitness and performance setbacks.

Pre- and Post-Ride Protocols

One practice your veterinarian might suggest if your horse is showing his age is an adequate warmup and cool-down routine that includes stretching.

"Horses are like human athletes," says Sedrish. "Their bodies need time to prepare for and recover from exercise."

"Stretching exercises prior to mounting could benefit some horses with joint or muscle stiffness," Dechant adds.

Picking up the front legs one at a time and gently pulling them forward can help stretch out the shoulder muscles. Carrot stretches (TheHorse.com/34482) that encourage the horse to bend his neck and extend through a range of motions can help with neck stiffness.

Get in the habit of using the same warmup routine every time you ride. Allowing the horse to stretch and asking him to walk and trot prepare his body slowly for the more rigorous work to come.

Dechant cautions that longeing might not be the best warmup exercise for horses with stiffness or soreness; it forces the horse into tighter circles and increases the stress on aging muscles and joints. Instead, she recommends warmups that include walking or trotting in straight lines or on large circles.

A post-ride cool-down routine is as important as a preride warmup.

"As a former marathon runner, I can attest to the fact that we always spent at least a half-hour walking and moving after a race," Bartick-Sedrish says.

The same holds true for a working horse. Walking under saddle or hand-walking for 10 to 15 minutes after a ride provides the horse's body time to stretch out after exercise and relax. If you have access to trails, take a leisurely loop around the property to give your horse a chance to cool down slowly and enjoy a change in scenery.

"Loosen the reins, and allow the horse to stretch out and relax," Dechant says. "Letting the horse have some free paddock or pasture turnout (or at least some hand-



Aged Western performance horse Spoon benefited from a few months off work after an MRI revealed slight changes to his navicular bone and impar ligament.

COURTESY THERESA DENATALE

walking and hand-grazing) will allow the horse to stretch its neck to the ground and provide some continued mobility."

Back in the barn, other post-ride practices might benefit older horses.

"Some horses may benefit from some icing or cooling for 15-20 minutes to reduce inflammation in areas with previous injuries, and wrapping to support limbs and prevent swelling," Dechant says.

Many owners use commercial ice boots for this purpose, while others simply reach for ice packs or bags of frozen vegetables.

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DR. TRACY BARTICK-SEDRISH

Some owners use magnetic or heat-reflective blankets, therapeutic plates, and therapeutic laser treatments before or after training sessions. "Soft-ride boots during transportation or extended stall time can help alleviate foot pain," says Watts.

Long-Term Considerations

Still other management methods can help horses continue performing at their best. Make it a point to maintain your horse at a proper weight and body condition (ideally, a 5 on the 1-to-9 scale) for his

body type, as excess weight stresses joints.

A horse's weight is also a good indication of how he is feeling overall. "When you have a horse hauling to an event every week, it takes a toll, and the horse can begin to lose weight, which can lead to other problems," Sedrish says.

Another way to manage these horses is by decreasing the duration or intensity of their exercise. A horse's ideal exercise level depends on his athleticism, pre-existing problems, and fitness level.

Watts says to be sure the horse is fit enough to do what you're asking of him. These seasoned horses should not need much active training—learning new skills or perfecting those they already know—so focus instead on maintaining fitness.

Often, says Dechant, paddock or pasture turnout provides light exercise that maintains mobility.

Quality footing is essential for any horse, but it's more important in horses dealing with some degree of wear and tear.

"Good footing is only one of several factors that can help to slow the progression of arthritis, but it's an important one," Watts says.

Similarly, regular trimming and proper shoeing are critical for any age horse, but it's even more important for older performance horses that are already experiencing occasional hoof pain. If shod, some shoeing methods can help maintain soundness.

"A slight change in the foot's (toe or heel) angle could mean the difference of being sound or lame and winning or losing an event," Sedrish says.

When You Need a Little Extra Help

Many older performance horses' care regimens include regular injections by the veterinarian. The most common injectables are polysulfated glycosaminoglycan (PSGAG) and hyaluronic acid (HA).

"These may have the greatest effect when given directly into the joint, but there may be some benefit to systemic administration through intramuscular injections for PSGAG and intravenous administration for HA," Dechant says.

Many owners also add nutraceuticals, such as glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate, and methylsulfonylmethane (MSM), to their older sport horses' diets. Nutraceuticals are formulations defined as nutrients but used to prevent or treat disease.

"I am a big believer in hyaluronic acid and chondroitin sulfate," Sedrish says, "but they are not all created equal. Your veterinarian can help you select one that meets your horse's needs."

In one study, researchers found that nutraceuticals containing avocado/

soybean unsaponifiables (e.g., oil, fat, wax mixtures) have beneficial effects on joint cartilage. And results from Watts' 2016 study on the effectiveness of resveratrol, a molecule in red grape skin, for managing joint inflammation indicate that it can help alleviate joint-related lameness (read about the study at TheHorse.com/38317).

"This a good, safe way to keep these horses feeling good," Watts says.

Dechant also suggests feeding a diet high in omega-3 fatty acids, which are anti-inflammatory, and avoiding feeds that are high in omega-6 fatty acids, which are pro-inflammatory.

Owners and practitioners are also turning to chiropractic care, acupuncture, and electrical stimulation treatments to relieve soreness and keep horses feeling well and performing at their best. There are varying opinions about the different modalities and a variety of people performing the services.

"Like in human medicine, it's important to remember that some horses respond well and others won't," Sedrish says. Many times, while beneficial, these

modalities are treating clinical signs and not the underlying problem.

"As long as you work with a veterinarian, and there is not an issue that needs medical treatment, alternative therapies may work for your horse," Watts says.

Take-Home Message

With so many improvements in equine care and health, more horses are living long and productive lives. Sometimes, maintaining soundness is as simple as giving your aging horse time off when he's feeling "not quite right." Spoon, for instance, since his summer of rehab and a few shoeing adjustments, now feels great, says Bartick-Sedrish.

"Any effort toward preventing exacerbation of wear-and-tear injuries will go a long way in maintaining their performance and soundness," Dechant says.

Watts agrees. "With a little extra TLC, older performance horses can be kept in use and competition for many years," she says. "Keeping your veterinarian involved will help you to identify and manage new problems, keeping your aged horse healthy, happy, and performing." 🐾

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