

The All Important Hamstring

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This month we will look at a part of the horse's body that is often overlooked by the rider and yet essential for any forward locomotion: a group of muscles called the hamstrings.

This is a group of muscles that start either on the spine or on the back of the pelvis and run down the back of the buttock; lateral and medial side of the hip to the hock, stifle, femur and tibia. These are the major power thrusters. Of course they have help from other major muscles during locomotion, but this group specifically moves the hind leg back and has an effect on the leg moving toward and away from the body.

As the end of show season comes to pass, horses often start to get sore and riders can easily overlook soreness in the hamstring area, as it is not a spot we often do any palpation. We don't often push into those muscles and really have a feel to see if there is any apparent soreness. It is much easier to keep an eye on tissue in areas such as the back, where we place a saddle and push down on more often.

The hamstrings are also often overlooked in the ride. Several other muscles, such as the gluteals and quads, assist the hamstrings in locomotion, so it is difficult to pinpoint the hamstrings as a problem spot if a horse feels tight. The hamstring also attaches directly to the hock, which makes this a point of interest if hocks are a treatment area for your horse. If the muscle is tight it will constantly pull on the joint and create more torque than needed on the joint.

See online how to check the hamstrings:
www.absj.ca

Great horsemanship includes taking a whole approach to catch small things before they become big problems.

I recommend having a professional, insured body worker create a stretching and exercise therapy program that is customized to the horse and the problems that exist.

There are two safe and effective ways you can help the horse on your own. First, some light massage with a curry comb. Starting above the hock where the large muscle groups are apparent, work the curry comb in circle up the back of the rump to the point of the buttock towards the spine. Repeat the pattern several

times until the tissue is noticeably warm, indicating increased circulation. This will also soften any spasms in the muscle and take away waste products.

Second, the hamstring stretch. While performing the stretch be careful and aware of the horse's hind legs while handling them, and be aware of your own back while bending over. Pick up a hind leg, cupping the fetlock with both hands. Take a step toward the horse's head, bringing the hind leg with you while keeping it in line with the front leg. Moving the hind leg away from the straight line can place stress on the hock and stifle. Stretch the leg forward as much as the horse is comfortable – listen to the horse as they will let you know when it is hard or how far they can go. If the horse is relaxed, hold the stretch for 10 seconds and progress in time as the horse becomes more adept at stretching.

Note the differences from side to side. Stretching done correctly is safe for every sound horse and should be done after every ride.

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