

# THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTENANCE

Tina Watkins

Many clients ask me, "Why do I need to maintain my horse?" Perhaps when they consider all of the financial investment that they pour into their horse they are trying to find a place to save a bit of money in this inherently expensive sport. I hope to make you think twice about trying to save money on your horse's maintenance program.

We all knew getting into horses that the purchase price was not the most expensive part of horse ownership. From my eyes as a member of your horse's health care team, I see your veterinarian, body worker, nutritionist, saddle fitter, farrier, and other professionals as essential team members, without whom your horse will not be functioning at their optimal level.

The information that these health care professionals such as myself provide allow owners, riders and trainers to be aware of small postural issues before they turn into lameness problems that affect performance.

The body is an amazing thing. It can find a way to keep working under immense strain. This is where soft tissue imbalances, as the symptoms listed above, turn into a ticking time bomb. A miss-step, trauma, or fatigue can take a seemingly healthy body to lameness.

I get excited when I am able to tell a client about the postural asymmetries with their horse. I start to think of ways that the body can be built, to gain strength and bring that horse not only back to health but to a better place than it was at before this body started to feel the strain of everyday work.

This is the magic of horses and riding. Most

## *The Importance of Maintenance*

of these horses love to work – some are so competitive that they feel sad when they know they just had a bad round. This is the depth of heart that allows a horse to work with some soreness, some stiffness. Now imagine the expansion that horse could achieve with perfect balance and symmetry in the muscles, bones and connective tissue.

How does one decide on a schedule for your health care team to visit? Each horse is an individual, of course, but there are a few factors that can affect the schedule.

**Conformation:** is your horse built conformationally for your sport? The higher you want to jump, the more impact your horse feels on the landing side, and the more effort it takes to propel the horse's mass over the jump. Conformational asymmetries will be taxed and can therefore create problems in the soft tissue.

**Conditioning:** is your horse fit enough for your sport? So many horses I see have to go to a show and do 2-3x the workload they are being asked to at home. The level of condition must be higher than the level being exerted under stress, otherwise more issues will arise.

**Stress:** the environment surrounding the horse affects total body function. Stress compromises the gut, the nervous system, concentration, rest and recovery ability, and almost every organ and body function. The study of stress is just starting to surface in both humans and horses.

As a horse owner, you should surround your horse with qualified professionals that can assess the health and well-being of your horse and how the above factors are affecting its daily life. The team of healthcare professionals will raise your awareness and keep you focused on your horse's individual needs. A sound and healthy horse gets you to the heights you have dreamed of!