



Does your horse
need maintenance?

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Maintenance - does your horse need it?

by Tina Watkins

I have many clients that ask me, "Why do I need to maintain my horse?" Perhaps because of all of the financial investment they have poured into their horse they ask "Is this sport worth this, and can I save somewhere?"

Today 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 trainer, veterinarian, body worker, nutritionist, saddle fitter, farrier, and other professionals as essential team members, without whom your horse will not be functioning at their highest level. The information that professionals such as myself provides allows owners, riders and trainers to be aware of small postural issues before they turn into lameness problems that will affect performance.

You may be thinking that your horse is fine and in good shape – great! This is a horse that needs maintenance. Maintaining a body that is healthy is easy; the professional needs to perform only slight adjustments to the horse's posture to keep the body flowing in harmony.

As soon as an owner says to me that their horse is stiff, sore, fatiguing quickly, breathing harder than normal, sweating more than normal, striding short, exhibiting change in temperament – these are all signs that the body is telling us there is a dysfunction. This is no longer considered maintenance, and has moved into being a pathology.

The body is an amazing thing: it will find a way to keep working under, at times, immense strain. This is where soft tissue imbalances turn into a ticking time bomb, waiting for a trauma, fatigue or a miss-step to take a seemingly healthy body to lameness. This may sound like doom and gloom, and I have to say I have had clients say to me that the reports they get on their horse always seem like there is so much wrong. Here is where I want to turn your thoughts around.

Here is where we start looking at these asymmetries and imbalances as a road map to training. Instead of looking at what is not right with a horse with imbalances, let's look at it as positive pointers for where to focus your attention in the training program. I get excited when I am able to tell a client 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 before its body started to feel the strain of everyday work.

No horse, dog, cat, rabbit or human is perfect in the way they move. For horses that carry a rider, the postural imbalance can be compounded with the rider, who is often far from functionally balanced themselves. Add the stress of the sports in which we engage, and the fact that we are strapping a saddle to their back, tied down by a girth right around their lungs, and it's a wonder they agree to do anything for us!

This is the magic of riding. These horses do work, most love to work, some are so competitive that they feel sad when they know they just had a bad round. This is the spirit I want you to think of when you train. 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. The sky is the limit, and for you jumpers, jumping into the clouds is what dreams are made of.

So back to maintenance, how does one decide on a schedule for your health care team to visit? Each horse is an individual with different requirements, but here are some factors that will help you with your decision.

Conformation. Is your horse's conformation ideal for the intended sport? The higher you want to jump, the more impact your horse receives 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 therefore will create problems in the soft tissue.

Conditioning. So many horses I see have to go to a show and do twice or three times the workload they are being asked for at home. The level of condition must be higher than the level being exerted under stress.

Past trauma. This affects the horse's overall soundness. Remembering that even if an injury is healed, that tissue has muscle memory and if the horse has compensated for a long time, under stress the tissue will go back to old patterning.

Stress level. This is one of the most overlooked areas in a horse. Stress compromises the gut, the nervous system, the concentration, the 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.

These are just the tip of the iceberg when we start to consider all the factors that affect your equine athlete. Feed, footing, environment, age, hydration, fear, breeding, and many more factors come into play when thinking of what is affecting your horse's athletic health.

As a horse owner, what do you do about it? You surround your horse with qualified professionals that can assess, and work with you and your horse, raising your awareness and keeping you focused on your horse's individual wellness. Keeping your horse sound and healthy, and sailing you to the heights of which you have dreamed!

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