STOP ASSESS ADDRESS

by Dr Victoria Hamilton

Reducing limitations and fulfilling all possible potential should be the aim of all who are dedicated to the well-being of performance horses and to the future of their chosen equestrian sport.

So often, the most successful trainers are not the best riders but are the best managers of their equestrian partners, primarily because they are skilled in 'listening' to them by watching out for signs that indicate something is amiss. Early detection of problems, then being brave enough to do something about issues rather than ignoring them in the hope that they will go away, is what managing equine athletes is all about. Not doing so is a bit like the person who finds a lump on themselves and is too frightened to go to the doctor for fear it will be something sinister, rather than seeking help straight away to prevent it spreading and becoming life threatening.

If something is not working or going to plan with a performance horse, it's time for change by using the motto of Stop, Assess, Address. A great book to read on this subject is Dr Spencer Johnson's, Who Moved My Cheese?, as the principles in this may not only be applied to life in general, but also to the training of horses.

As riders, we need to eliminate emotions, as these interfere with the good detective work and objective decision-making required to solve the problem at hand. We need to learn to look for reasons why a horse may not be doing what we wish it to do, other than believing it is 'naughty' or 'has an attitude'. There is usually a reason for every reaction a horse makes; it just may not seem logical to humans.

Resolving Resistances

An incorrect response or a resistance is usually due to pain, discomfort, prior association with either of these, a misunderstanding or by the horse being asked to do something impossible due to bad conformation or bad riding (such as setting a horse up incorrectly for a jump or the rider's position being contradictory for what they are asking).

So how does one tell whether a horse is not performing well due to confusion or discomfort? Lots of questions need to be asked to develop the overall picture and, often, it comes down to the experience of the rider. If the horse works better when the rider is under instruction then the rider may not be using clear enough aids at home. If the horse works better on different arena surfaces, then maybe it has sore feet or joints. If various saddles make a difference, this may be due to the person riding slightly differently in each one or perhaps because the horse is more comfortable in one compared to the others. Is the horse better after a day off or worse? Maybe altering the feeding regime makes a horse work differently. Possibly the most important question to be answered is "Has anything changed recently?", highlighting the necessity for a comprehensive diary to be kept.

If there is a specific problem, a different approach should be tried by checking both long and short term preparation to determine if the horse had the correct lead-up exercises - not only to understand

what is required but also to develop the muscle strength to be able to do the next stage. Even on the actual day the problem occurred, perhaps it was a matter of racing straight into something because it was what had been planned for the day instead of systematically working through a logical group of exercises to lead up to the one in question. Try to think like a horse and look elsewhere for reasons why there may be trouble.

Language Barriers

Shouting a foreign language does not make understanding it easier and often instills a degree of anxiety, so care needs to be taken when increasing the aids to achieve the response required. Hitting harder doesn't help with jumping something higher or running faster than one is capable of - whether in relation to an animal or human - and, in some cases, retaliation in undesirable ways and bad vices can be the end result.

A Wholistic Approach

Problems that occur with new movements need to be investigated differently to those in established movements. There is much more chance of the rider being the cause of difficulties in new movements therefore, in these cases, instructors should be asked for help. In the case of problems arising in established movements however, a veterinarian is most likely the best person to approach for advice - being trained to diagnose problems and address the issue of poor performance by looking at the overall picture. Often the signs as to which body system is affected may be very subtle and not obvious even to a trained eye, but are able to be detected via blood assessment, scans or other diagnostic tests.

An example of how a vet may 'work up' a case of poor performance can be seen by looking at the situation where a horse doesn't want to go forward - appearing sour, dull and not interested in work. This may be totally out of character yet, in the rider's opinion, nothing new has been started in this horse's training program and there seems to be no reason for the change in behaviour.

As part of a vet's wholistic approach, the musculo-skeletal system is assessed for signs of pain or wear and tear. If lameness is apparent - and this may be so mild that the vet is the only person who can see it - nerve blocks are likely to be performed to isolate the problem to a specific area before radiographs or scans are taken. The importance of nerve blocks should never be underestimated as, in some cases, there may be x-ray changes present that may not be the actual cause of the horse's current problem. If the nerve blocks are not done, a misdiagnosis may occur.

Bilateral Vs Unilateral Lameness

At times, when lameness is blocked out, the horse can become sore in the opposite leg - indicating a bilateral lameness. These

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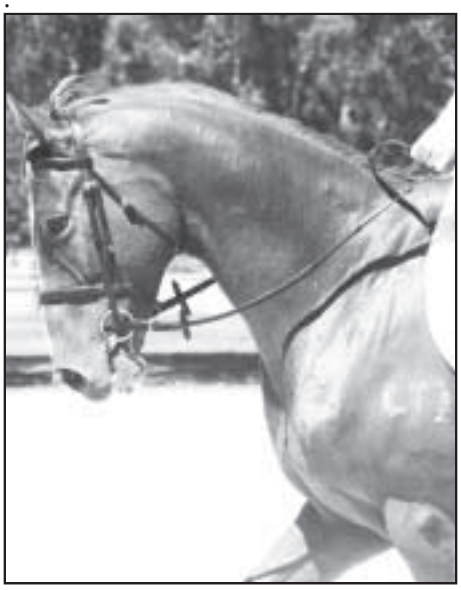


A quick check to determine if a lameness is bridle lameness is to drop the contact with the horse's mouth, as it will become more regular if this is the problem.

lamenesses can be difficult for the rider to detect, as the soreness is in both legs so, to the rider, the horse doesn't feel uneven. Until the pain in one of the legs is removed by the injection of local anaesthetic by a vet during the blocking process, it isn't apparent how severe the lameness really is in the other leg.

In contrast, unilateral lamenesses will show as an irregularity in the gait and may only be present on a particular surface, when going one way or even only during a particular movement. The horse may or may not 'warm out of it'.

At any time during training, if an irregularity occurs, a check should immediately be made to determine if this is due to pain or is a bridle lameness. A quick and effective method of telling the difference is for the rider to break their connection with the horse's mouth by dropping the contact on the reins. If the horse becomes regular, the problem is more likely to be a bridle lameness therefore help needs to be sought from an instructor. If there is no improvement when the contact is dropped, the next step is to lunge the horse to see if there is any change. If the gaits are regular, the problem may lie with the saddle and/or the rider's positioning. In cases where the horse is still irregular on the lunge, it is actually lame and veterinary advice needs to be sought.

Some lamenesses may be particularly difficult to pick up, especially if they are very mild or slow in their onset. Muscular pain is often an indication of pain elsewhere - with many horses exhibiting soreness in their backs and necks having problems lower down in their legs. The list of changes in the way a horse works that may be contributing to a drop in performance is never-ending but may include suddenly stopping at fences, not wanting to 'sit behind' or being less willing to perform lateral work. With the latter, if there appears to be more difficulty going in one direction, this can be a helpful indication to a vet in determining if the problem is on the medial (inside) or lateral (outside) aspect of the leg.

An example of a subtle change a rider may notice is the tendency for a horse to become heavy in the hand or set in the neck, when previously it was always lovely and light. This may be due to foreleg pain, prompting the horse to seek support on the rider's hands. Often, there will also be soreness in the muscles at the base of the neck (sternocephalic and brachiocephalic muscles) as these tend to tense as the sore legs make contact with the ground. Whilst chiropractic treatment and massage may help alleviate the muscular pain that goes along with such lower leg problems, the underlying cause must also be correctly identified and addressed.

Continued

Stop, Assess, Address Continued...

Gut Feelings

Poor performance examinations should assess the gastro-intestinal tract, as ingestion of sand that has accumulated in the gut could be causing pain during work. There is also the possibility that an absorption deficiency is preventing the horse from obtaining the full value out of its feed, even though its diet appears, on paper, to be adequate. Its stable and paddock environments may also provide clues to enable the vet to fully assess this area.

Heart, Lungs and Blood

Assessment of heart and lung function, both at rest and under stress - be it directly after exercise or with the aid of a re-breathing bag - is an important part of a poor performance work up. In some cases, a horse's inability to work to its maximum capacity could be due to a respiratory allergy or mild chronic infection, reducing the amount of oxygen being released into the blood stream. Although some respiratory ailments are difficult to diagnose and complicated to manage, a diligent horse owner can be advised by a vet on how to do this, thereby achieving amazing improvements in the affected horse's performance and well-being.

Blood tests, to check the function of some of the internal body organs and to analyse for signs of infection or anaemia, are

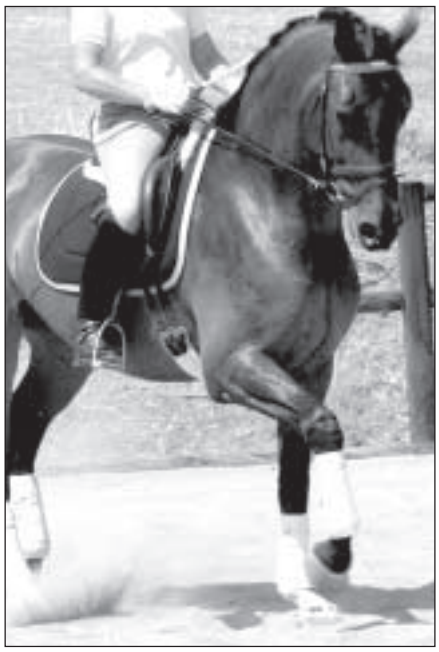
Pointers For Peak Performance

The management of day to day issues - correct feeding, stable hygiene, worming, sand drenching, shoeing, dentistry, and saddle fitting - is carried out by most riders at a fairly basic level and, if a horse has no problems and is competing at a level lower than its limit, this is usually adequate. Each of these areas, however, needs to be studied in detail when a horse has a specific health issue or is competing at the top end of its limit and cannot afford to have any facet of its management program rate-limiting or not up to par. The following are some points to consider both to boost performance and to maintain optimum well-being;

FEEDING: Although some people believe unprocessed feed is the only way to go, being more natural for the horse, the amount of work performance horses are expected to do and the environments in which they are kept are quite far fetched from that of their wild ancestors. It makes sense, therefore, that in order to perform to a high level, more success may be gained by feeding processed feeds - especially given the research findings in relation to the fermentation of undigested food in the hind gut and how this can contribute to problems such as fizziness, laminitis and tying up to name a few. Other advantages of processed feeds are that they can usually be taken interstate, they contain minimal dust and there is less need for supplements.

Oils are not only an excellent source of 'cool energy' but also, if the correct type is fed and at high enough levels, they can help regulate inflammatory responses and the function of the immune and reproductive systems. For maximum benefit, the oil fed needs to have the ideal balance of Omega 3, 6 and 9 and, importantly, for an Omega 3 oil to be effective, it must contain three critical fatty acids - Linolenic, Eicosopentanoic acid (EPA) and Docosahexanoic acid (DHA). Oils that only provide Omega 6 and 9, along with incorrectly balanced Omega 3, may contribute to inflammatory responses like laminitis, arthritis and dermatitis. On the other hand, supplementing with the correct ratio of Omega 3 oils has been shown to have a protective effect against degenerative joint disease, respiratory reactions and allergic skin conditions. (*For more detailed information about feeding oils see Fats and Oils in Vol 24 No 3, and Rice Bran Oil in Vol 25 No 2.)*

JOINT CARE: A joint that has been diagnosed as being troublesome, or potentially so, may either need to be injected with hyaluronic acid (which has a lubricating action and is not swabbable) or, in some cases, cortisones (swabbable) to reduce the inflammation. Systemic (ones that act on the whole body) drugs like pentosan polysulphate are also invaluable for stimulating joint healing and repair as they work in co-operation with joint protectants. Depending on the specific condition affecting the joint, these forms of treatment can be combined with a period of rest, a different training regime (such as only stressing once every 3- 4 days) and/or a softer training surface. Depending on the joint, the stress may be greatest in highly collected work, lateral work, extension or jumping, therefore daily work may still be possible but doing all exercises in a given session may not.



Peak Performance requires a complete management program for health and well-being.

STRAIN MANAGEMENT: If scans taken in the course of a lameness work up reveal tell-tale signs of wear and tear, rather than a full-blown rupture, the risk of further damage can be minimised by routinely wrapping the legs when the horse is stabled to prevent filling and/or applying ice after each work session. Magnetic, laser and shock wave therapy, combined with shorter periods of exercise given frequently on not too soft a surface, can also be valuable means of managing such conditions. *(For more information on these treatment methods, refer to Magnetic Therapy in Vol 27 No 1; and Shock Wave Therapy for Lameness Vol 23 No 5).*

SUPPLEMENTS: Vitamins, minerals and electrolytes are not the only supplements available, although these are important if one is designing their own diet based on unprocessed feeds. Particularly critical for high performance levels in long-term disciplines are those which act as joint protectants, while others can assist in promoting the mental well being that is essential for coping with the stress of travel or competing. *(For more information on joint protectants, refer to Greasing The Joints in Vol 26 No 6).* Probiotics, to maintain healthy gut flora, may also be helpful in times of stress or when receiving antibiotic therapy.

There are also many paste products available, ranging from ones designed to aid recovery from strenuous work to those given before exercise for horses prone to tying up. Others are designed to alter gut flora, provide natural pain relief or are a source of specific vitamins for particular problems. Above all else, it is important to check if the supplements chosen can be used together and to be clear as to why they are needed in the first place. The nutritionists and veterinary consultants now employed by many of the reputable feed companies can provide further information on this, as well as virtually any feed-related matter.

STABLE MANAGEMENT: Horses are creatures of habit therefore, when their routine is altered, accidents are more likely to happen. A 'happy horse' is one that knows what is going to happen and when, not one that has no idea when the next feed is coming or is sometimes left out until midnight. Catering for individual preferences between horses in terms of whether they train best 'out of a paddock' or when predominantly stabled can also have a huge impact on well-being and, ultimately, the quality of their work.

Concussion on the legs is a critical issue for the performance horse, so a conscious effort to reduce this should be made wherever possible. Fly control is something that may not be an obvious method of reducing joint concussion, yet lessening the need for 'stomping' and even running away from pesky insects can make an enormous difference - whether this be with the use of insecticides, fans in the stable, rugging, fly boots or a combination of these. The type of bedding used in the stable environment can also reduce concussion forces *(for a comprehensive review of various types of bedding, see Bedding Down in Vol 27 No 1).* Weight control is another factor as, although a well-rounded horse may be aesthetically pleasing, a small amount of extra weight can have a huge impact on the legs and joints.

Dust, even for healthy horses, should always be minimised by dampening the bedding, feed and hay of all those in a stable complex. A high level of hygiene can be created by following some simple extra measures such as picking out feet before horses are brought in or taken out of stables and designating brushes and rugs for each horse to prevent the possible spread of skin problems. Adhering to worming and sanding regimes is essential, these being best being timed to fit around a competition schedule so as not to be done just before a major event.

SHOEING: To maximise performance, shoeing should be carried out as close as possible to the due date without being scheduled for the day before a competition, a long distance float trip or an important lesson.

especially useful in diagnosing certain problems. Horses can cope amazingly well with underlying health issues for a very long time - so much so that the change in them once a management plan to overcome the condition has been instigated is often close to miraculous.

Know Your Horse

In order to prevent any of the problems that can lead to a decline in performance, the message is deceptively simple yet very clear - KNOW YOUR HORSE.

'Listen' by feeling each leg every day, know the amount eaten and drunk and what normal behaviour is in terms of factors such as where and when lying down takes place, the number of manures done in the stable or paddock and the usual consistency of droppings.

Work out how many training days a week suits the physical and mental capabilities of each horse, with regard to their age and experience, and of these how many are to be on the flat, jumping, riding out or lungeing. Determining the most appropriate order of work days to days off can also make a huge difference, with many youngsters best worked two to three days in a row before having two to three days off, while an older horse may perform better on work every second day. In the lead-up to competitions, knowing whether to work a particular horse really hard the day before or to provide only a light workout goes a long way to ensuring optimum performance at the event.

Observe what is normal for your horse and 'listen' by feeling each leg every day.

Stick to a routine that works, day-to-day, week-to-week and year-to-year but, if it doesn't work or ceases to, don't be afraid to change. Pay attention to detail but don't lose track of the big picture. Accept certain events - such as missing a show due to the risk of competing on inadequate grounds for fear of an injury or flare-up of a problem - as, although these may be disappointing in the short term, losing months of training or, at worst, the future of the horse is a far more devastating prospect.

Finally, the overall aim for promoting peak performance is to pick up problems early - even before they are actually problems. Don't ignore warning signs, no matter how subtle they are, in the hope that they will go away. Address them aggressively and diligently, taking no short cuts in any way, and don't be too proud to ask for help by utilising the services of all the experts available from saddle fitters to farriers, nutritionists to people involved in arena surfaces and from vets to instructors.

Following these principles should ensure the best possible chance for a horse to fulfill its potential and to remain at its highest level for as long as possible.

About The Author

A qualified veterinarian and full-time dressage instructor, Dr Victoria Hamilton was the 2001 runner-up at the World Final of the World Dressage Challenge in Germany and has won the Aust World Dressage Challenge Final twice - 1998 on Ardito, and in 2000 on Asaachen.

Julie Wilson photo