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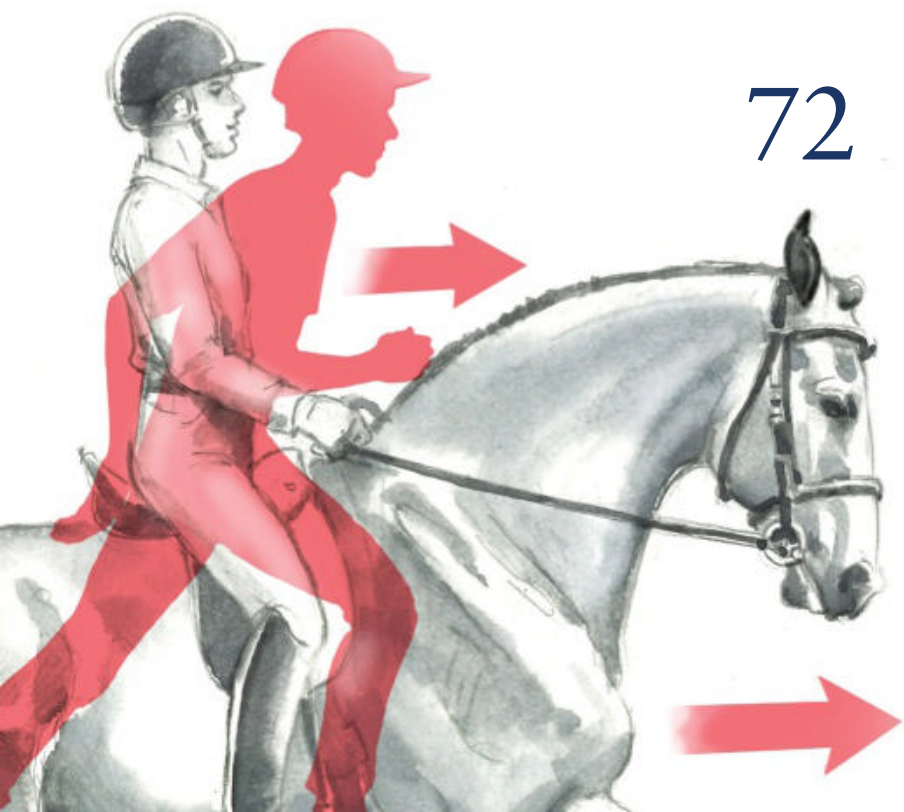
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EDITOR'S NOTE

Strategies for Confidence

Recently I've been on a journey to increase my confidence. So I was thrilled to read two articles in this issue with trainers talking about the topic and their strategies for solidifying it in themselves, their students and their horses. I've made a condensed list of the tips from top hunter rider Geoffrey Hesslink (page 34) and equitation trainer Stacia Klein Madden (page 42). Also included are ideas from Olympian Bezie Madden (page 16) and a few that I've learned.

1. Work with a trainer who gives you the feeling that you can do anything.
2. Keep mistakes or setbacks from affecting long-term goals. Focus on what you can take from each round and apply it to the future.
3. When you do make mistakes, be kind to yourself.
4. Make your nerves work for you: Recreate the pressure you feel at shows during every practice round at home to get used to how it feels.



KATHY BLANK



SANDRA OLIYNYK

5. Realize your nerves are showing that you care about riding/competing and be excited about that.
6. Let go of the belief that you're only as good as your last round.
7. Make your plan to ride a course that suits your horse and try to stick with it.
8. If nerves have your heart racing, practice breathing in for six seconds, holding for three seconds, breathing out for six seconds.
9. Focus on crucial basics, including flatwork and rider position—leg position, hip angle and release.
10. Keep your training simple by mastering the small things, one at a time, using repetition and consistency.
11. Practice rideability exercises, such as lengthening and shortening your horse's stride, changing tracks to fences, riding trot fences and focusing on steering.
12. Study a competition's previous courses and set similar lines and jumps at home. Break the exercises into manageable sections.

As you work on your confidence, remember that riding is a journey. Some days will be good and others not so much. On good days, let that feeling swell inside so you can recall it when needed. And finally, send me the confidence-boosting strategies that work for you at soliynyk@equinenetwork.com.

Take care.

Sandy

Sandra Oliynyk, Editor



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Why is gut health so crucial for the overall well-being of horses?

ER: Gut health is fundamental to a horse's overall well-being because it directly impacts their digestion, nutrient absorption, immune function and even behavior. A healthy gut ensures that horses can efficiently digest and absorb the nutrients from their feed, maintaining their energy levels, body condition and overall vitality. Additionally, a well-functioning gut supports a robust immune system, reducing the risk of infections and diseases. Establishing good gut health is

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DR. CLAIR
THUNES, PHD.

recovery. So many of the disorders and diseases we have struggled with we now know are directly related to their gut health.

How does gut health impact a horse's feed utilization and nutrient absorption?

ER: A healthy gut optimizes feed utilization and nutrient absorption by maintaining a balanced microbiome and effective digestive processes. This balance allows for the efficient breakdown of feed into essential nutrients that the horse's body can absorb and use. Conversely, poor gut health can lead to malabsorption, where nutrients pass through the digestive system without being adequately utilized, resulting in weight loss, poor condition and other health issues. When the gut isn't healthy, it is impossible for the horse to convert feed efficiently, often leading owners to feed more and more when the problem isn't the amount of feed, but the health of the gut.

Can you explain the gut-brain axis and its significance in equine behavior and health?

ER: The gut-brain axis refers to the bidirectional communication between the gastrointestinal tract and the central nervous system. This connection is significant because it influences a horse's behavior, stress response and overall mental health. The gut produces various neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, which affect mood and behavior. Thus, a healthy gut can lead to a calmer and more balanced horse, while poor gut health can contribute to anxiety, behavioral issues and stress-related problems. Arrogance, stubbornness, spookiness and tension are symptoms of poor gut health, not the horse being "bad" or "difficult." These behaviors are simply the horse's way of telling us that their insides are not working how they should.

CT: We know more about it in human nutrition than we do in equine. Large amounts of neurotransmitters such as dopamine are released in the gut during the digestive process, especially during microbial fermentation. Those also may have a somewhat calming effect on horses. We know the gut is intimately tied to brain function, and therefore behavior.

How can horse owners maintain optimal gut health for their animals?

ER: In addition to regular veterinary check-ups with



dental exams and routine deworming care, horse owners can maintain optimal gut health by providing a balanced diet rich in a variety of fiber sources, ensuring constant access to clean water and minimizing stress. Not feeding enough long-stemmed forage in the diet is the most common mistake people make, followed by an inadequate vitamin and mineral profile in the diet. Any change in feed will cause a dramatic change in the microbiome, so preventing abrupt dietary changes is paramount.

In my opinion, any horse who trains or competes will also benefit from a good quality, complete gut health supplement. This will help support the unavoidable stressors in diet and management that these horses can experience. Supplementing with products

9 SIGNS OF AN UNHEALTHY GUT

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days to not release the horse. You'll see top riders releasing the horse more than this. It looks like she's using the horse's mouth for balance. She needs to give more of a release so that that horse can use his head and neck.

Upper body: Her eyes are looking up and ahead. Also, I like that her back is flat but not stiff.

Horse: The horse has a beautiful expression. Although his knees aren't perfectly square, he's classic enough with his front legs, especially since it looks it's an equitation class. The horse is making a nice jump over the fence. It's a sweet, very pleasant photo.

Turnout: The turnout is excellent. The horse is gray, and he's beautifully turned out and clean. The bridle looks like it fits properly. The tack is clean. The horse's boots are clean. The rider's

1 Overall: This is a nicely turned-out pair, but the rider needs to make some adjustments to her leg and release to take her riding up a notch.

Leg: The stirrup is too far out on her toe, so I'd like to see it right on the ball of her foot. She's turning her toe in a little, which is causing her knee to pinch the saddle and her lower leg to be insecure and slide back slightly. It looks like the angle in her ankle is good other than her toe needing to be turned out more. But she has the most contact in her knee, which is making the lower leg fairly insecure. In fact, the horse is jumping out from underneath her because she is a bit behind the motion in this photo. But other than that, I like the angle in her knee.

Hip angle: I like the angle in her hips over the fence.

Release: I'm going to pick on the release because it looks like she's restricting the horse. It's kind of the fashion these

boots are clean. All in all, her horse, tack and clothes look impeccable. I love the turnout.

What you'll see in the video: In the video, the class is an equitation work-off, so it is a short video. Like in the photo, you can see the rider pinching with her knee, which is not a good base of support. Her lower leg is swinging slightly, and she tends to get left behind the motion in the air as she opens her hip angle and uses the horse's mouth for balance. I actually love this horse. He looks like a steady eddy.

The rider has a good feel for pace and rhythm, but she needs to make her base of support more secure. She can do that by working without stirrups and working in her two-point position, making sure her contact is more in her calf and thigh than her knee. Then, she'll be able to have a better base of support and be able to control her body better.

AMY K. DRAGOO



Beezie Madden captured Olympic show-jumping team gold medals in 2004 as well as 2008, where she also earned the individual bronze medal, all riding Authentic. She won the FEI Jumping World Cup™ Final in 2013 with Simon and in 2018 with Breitling LS. Other accolades include an Olympic team silver medal in 2016 riding Cortes 'C,' with whom she also took FEI World Equestrian Games team and individual bronze medals. She won the prestigious 2019 CP 'International' at CSIO Spruce Meadows and was voted the 2019 USEF International Equestrian of the Year. She and her husband, John, are based out of John Madden Sales in Cazenovia, New York.

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COURTESY RACHEL NORGATE

3 Overall: This looks like a skilled pair with excellent turnout for a hunter class. Some minor changes to the rider's leg will improve her form.

Leg: The stirrup is in the correct position right on the ball of the foot. Her toe is slightly turned out, which I like. Her angle in her heel is almost exaggerated. She's pushing down with her heel so much that it's pushed her lower leg forward slightly. If she could relax that a bit and open her knee up, I think that would make her leg just about perfect.

Hip angle: I like the angle in her hips. She's nicely closed in her hip angle over the fence.

Release: She's using a nice short crest release, which is good. She doesn't have a loop in the reins but she's also allowing the horse to use his head and neck as much as he would like.

Upper body: Her eyes are looking up and straight ahead to the next fence. Her back is nicely flat.

Horse: It looks like the horse is looking up to the next fence, too. He has a beautiful expression and jump. I love the classic style with his front legs. His knees are even a little higher than his elbows, and they're very even and square. He has a beautiful shine to his coat.

Turnout: The turnout on the rider is excellent. I like the gloves, especially for the hunter division, and the boots are polished. The end of the stirrup leather is neatly trimmed. 🐾



MARGIE FORBES

2 Overall: I'm going to be a little hard on this girl because she looks like a capable rider, but I think her lack of proper basics could inhibit her from being a top rider.

Leg: The rider doesn't seem to have much control over her lower leg. She has little contact other than her heel and ankle gripping the horse. Her leg has slid forward, which has caused her seat to go back and up. I'd like to see the heel down more and more bend in the knee by bringing her leg back. The stirrup needs to be moved back so it's on the ball of her foot.

Hip angle: If she had more angle in her lower leg, that would open her hip angle, putting her seat closer to the saddle. Then, she wouldn't have to duck with her body to stay with the motion of the horse.

Release: I'd like to see a more generous release. You can see the bit is pulled back in the horse's mouth, and she's restricting the horse's use of his head and neck in the air.

Upper body: The rider's eyes are looking forward to next fence, which is good. Her back is nicely flat without being stiff.

Horse: The horse is making a nice jump over this fence. I'd like to see him with more freedom in his head and neck, which might open his bascule better, allowing him to round in his back. I think he would make a more generous jump and show more scope if he had more freedom, though it looks like he's a perfectly capable jumper.

Turnout: I don't like the loose, untucked T-shirt. The boots are not polished and a bit dirty. The tack and the horse look OK. I'd like to see the bridle fitted better. The top part of the noseband should be tightened to bring the ring off the horse's cheekbone so it's more in line with the cheekpiece, and the throatlatch needs to be loosened.

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The Connection Between the Rider's and Horse's Backs

Help your horse to find the balance into a more open frame.

This is Lindsey Auclair and her 7-year-old RPSI gelding Marius EWSZ, also known as “Banana.” Here is what Lindsey had to say: “We’re working Second Level with thoughts about more advanced collection and learning our changes shortly. He is a quirky, weird, wonderful fellow with comfortable rhythmic gaits. [The photo is] from a particularly difficult ride.”

I often hear during a lesson or a clinic the complaint of why the horse has to show his difficult side today because he can be so much better. And I am always answering that I am there to help when it is needed, and when everything is going fine and smooth I cannot help them as much! I myself have had some of my most valuable lessons on days that were “particularly difficult.”

Stretching Toward The Contact

The photo shows Banana in trot and even though he is active from behind, he clearly a bit too tight in the neck and his nose is behind the vertical. Lindsey is in rising trot, just before landing and looks very concentrated and attempting to be upright in her body.

Banana is active behind but does not step far enough forward and under. The horse ideally should step all the way under the rider’s seat. When the horse stays a little shorter, the balance tips more forward. So to keep his balance, Banana shortens his neck by curling a bit behind the vertical. He does

not look “pulled” back; he needs this to keep his balance. Only with a more forward hind leg will he be able to lift his back and raise the shoulders, and then he can reach out with the neck to the contact without tipping out of balance.

One can imagine that stretching toward the contact is a bit like “looking over a cliff.” It is a great view, but if you are not secure on your base, you will not take the risk. Here, the activity of the horse’s hind leg, the strength of his back and the security of the rider will have to become the anchor for the horse to dare to reach forward into the contact in balance.

Adjusting the Rider’s Position

Looking closer at Lindsey’s seat and balance, I notice that she carries her shoulders, chest and hands beautifully, but her leg position is slightly turning out and her lower back has a tendency to hollow. If you stand on the ground similar to a riding position with slightly bent

and spread legs, you can feel that if you turn your legs with the knees and toes out, the lower back will hollow more. Doing the opposite—turning the heels out—will result in more abdominal activity and filling out the lower back.

When landing back in the saddle with the rising trot, the seat bones should move forward as if the hamstrings pull them toward the knee. The interplay of the hamstrings with the lower abdominal muscles keeps the pelvis more upright and the lower back won’t hollow. In the saddle, this requires secure contact on



LAUREN PITYLAK

▲ Lindsey Auclair and Marius EWSZ, or “Banana,” are schooling Second Level.



Susanne von Dietze is a leader in equestrian biomechanics. A physiotherapist, licensed Trainer A instructor and judge for dressage and show jumping, she gives lectures and seminars throughout the world, including at the prestigious German Riding Academy in Warendorf. She is a native of Germany and now lives with her husband and three children in Israel, where she competes at the international level. She is the author of two books on the biomechanics of riding: Balance in Movement and Rider and Horse, Back to Back.

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CLINIC with Susanne von Dietze

the stirrups during rising as well as when lowering the seat back to the saddle. This explains why riders should keep a slight inward rotation of the thigh and the knees and toes should point forward. This position allows the most secure balance and allows maximum elasticity to absorb the horse's movement.

If you try jumping up and down on the ground, you will quickly feel that the lower back has less stress when the feet and knees are pointing forward. However, when they point out, the lower back and hips cannot be as elastic.

The Rider's Influence on The Horse

The horse's topline is the rider's backline. This statement has been an eye-opener for understanding the balance between rider and horse for my own riding and teaching.

Modern training methods don't only look into muscles, but the fascial connection is becoming more important. We have a superficial backline fascia that connects top to bottom. It starts at the eyebrows, runs over the head, down the neck and spine, along the hamstrings, past the backs of the knees around the ankles and all the way to the big toes. Any elastic strap will only secure something when it is pulled and stretched. A hollow back can be like a loose rubber band and does not provide elastic stability. Understanding this, the fascial backline connection can become the anchor for the horse to find the balance into a more open frame and start daring to "look over the cliff."

When Lindsey is riding with more awareness to this backline in her own seat, I would recommend the following exercise—first in walk, later in trot and canter.

Ride the horse forward to the bit, then let the reins get longer and allow the horse to follow and stretch. There will be a point when instead of lower-

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ing, the horse will tuck in the nose. At this point, use leg and encourage the horse to move a bit more forward and very slightly lift the neck up an inch before returning to stretch deeper again.

When you hold a bridle in your hand on the crownpiece, the bit should hang directly under the crownpiece. If the horse has true self-carriage and is supple, the bit should hang under the poll. By tucking in the nose, the horse does not need to provide lift and self-carriage, and the bit hangs more passively under the second and third vertebrae of the neck rather than the poll. It will feel soft in the mouth for the rider, but it is not connected and any transition or change can result in bracing and unwanted tension or movement of the neck.

Playing with the horse's balance around the point where they can "look over the cliff" and slowly encouraging him for more by supporting him with good activity and a securely anchored seat and backline can be very rewarding.

I am positive that working on this basic element will be the key for Lindsey and Banana to find better balance and self-carriage and advance into the collected movements with more harmony as a partnership. 🐾



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2024 Paris Olympics

A LOOK BACK

Riders at the Paris Games share their thoughts on the competition.

**COMPILED BY KATHLEEN LANDWEHR
WITH JENNIFER O. BRYANT AND
SALLY SPICKARD**

W

hat were some of the most memorable insights from riders at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games?

Twelve days of

equestrian competition took place July 27–August 6 at the Chateau de Versailles, about 15 miles southwest of Paris. Horses and riders put forth their best effort in hopes of claiming a medal.

Riders spoke with the media after their rides each day and shared their thoughts on the competition, the experience and their partnerships with their horses. Here are some of their thoughts.

EVENTING

Boyd Martin (USA)

After his cross-country round with Fedarman B (Bruno): “I heard more cheers ‘Go Bruno’ than ‘Go Boyd!’ There’s plenty of our stars and stripes out there and a lot of French people going ‘Allez, allez, allez. (Go, go, go.)’ It was a wonderful feeling though I tried not to look around too much, but it was one of the most memorable cross-country rounds of my life, just because of the setting, the venue, and the crowds and the moment, so I’ll remember this one forever.”

Mike Winter (CAN)

On being the Canadian team’s pathfinder with El Mundo: “I tried to be a good caretaker of my position of going first and put a score on the board and a good caretaker of my horse’s well-being and give him the best possible ride I could around there and bring him home safely with a score that can contribute to the team.”

Laura Collett (GBR)

The eventing team gold and individual bronze medalist on Michael Jung (GER) and Chipmunk FRH winning individual gold: “The best man won. Michael Jung is the big master. He’s raised the sport to 10 different levels and missed out on so many championships on that horse. I wanted him to win just as much as I wanted myself to win.”

Michael Jung (GER)

On winning the eventing individual gold medal with Chipmunk FRH: “I tried to stay really focused and concentrate through the whole week. I tell myself, ‘it’s just a normal show.’ It’s not always easy with so many spectators and on such an important show. But I think it’s quite important that the horses feel it’s nothing special. I needed a few times to look on the board to see if was really true. It was a very special moment for me. I think I need a moment to realize all of it.”

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Boyd Martin and
Fedarman B



Mike Winter
and El Mundo



Michael Jung and
Chipmunk FRH



From left:
Christopher
Burton,
Jung and
Laura Collett

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Steffen Peters and
Suppenkasper



Cathrine
Laudrup-Dufour
and Freestyle



Jessica von
Bredow-Werndl
and TSF Dalera BB



Charlotte Fry
and Glamourdale

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SHANNON BRINKMAN

SHANNON BRINKMAN

DRESSAGE

Steffen Peters (USA)

On the lead-up to the Olympic Games with Suppenkasper alongside teammates Marcus Orlob and Endel Ots: "We came with such a great atmosphere from the training camp here. We had such great camaraderie, so much humor. I'm not used to being on the team with three guys. So this was incredible. We really had a good time."

Jessica von Bredow-Werndl (GER)

The dressage team and individual gold medalist on TSF Dalera BB, who competed at the final championship of her career in Paris: "This is very emotional because it's not so many more competitions I'm going to ride with her. She's always leaving her heart in the arena for me. And especially in such a big atmosphere, her antennae are always with me. When I'm totally focused, she is, as well. I've never had this feeling with another horse in my whole life."

Cathrine Laudrup-Dufour (DEN)

The dressage team silver medalist on building a partnership with her horse, Freestyle: "It's been a matter of creating a good friendship and really getting to know her inside out, not as an athlete but as a horse. So I'm really proud that she let me in there and that she wanted it."

Charlotte Fry (GBR)

The dressage team and individual bronze medalist after her freestyle with Glamourdale: "The support from the public today was incredible. I never experienced anything quite like that."

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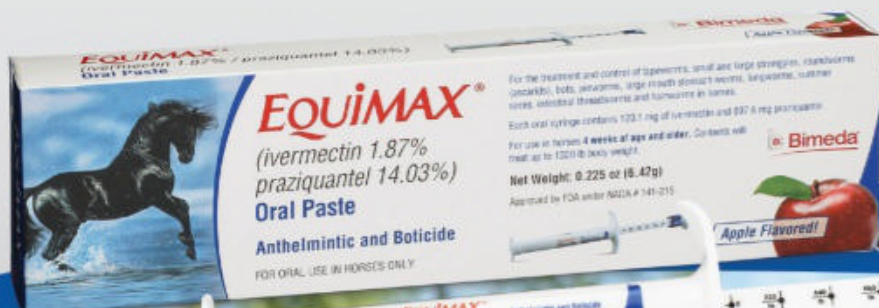
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From left: Karl Cook, Laura Kraut and McLain Ward



Olivier Perreau and Dorai d'Aiguilly

Christian Kukuk and Checker 47

Maikel van der Vleuten and Beauville S

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JUMPING

Karl Cook (USA)

After winning the jumping team silver medal alongside Laura Kraut and McLain Ward: "I'm still digesting. It's what you hope for when you're a kid wanting to go to the Games one day. It's really special. It was amazing to compete with people I've watched and respected and learned from for so many years. And to be on the inside, watching how it all works and to be able to go in and jump and do it all together was incredible."

Olivier Perreau (FRA)

The jumping team bronze medalist after having the first clear round of the day in the Jumping Team Final with Dorai d'Aiguilly: "I was really concentrating to make sure I didn't get any faults. When I realized I had done such a good round, I just let go, and the emotion came out."

Christian Kukuk (GER)

After winning the jumping individual gold medal with Checker 47: "It's the most emotional day in my life, honestly, in my career. This is the highest you can achieve in our sport. I'm one of only a few who can call themselves an Olympic champion and gold medalist. That is something that will stay."

Maikel van der Vleuten (NED)

The jumping individual bronze medalist on his horse, Beauville Z: "We took a lot of time in the beginning to get confidence in each other. I needed to understand my horse in and out, and the other way as well. Once I had the feeling he was believing in me, I think we got to a very great partnership. And that has already brought us fantastic memories." 🐾



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Top U.S. hunter rider and trainer Geoffrey Hesslink talks about overcoming competition nerves and how he's paying that forward to his students and horses.

BY ALANA HARRISON



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▲ While it's easy to get wrapped up in comparing yourself to others, Geoffrey Hesslink, pictured here with Monarchy, said the most successful riders are able to let go of that thinking, especially in such an unpredictable sport.

► Hesslink and Holsteiner gelding Drumroll received top honors at the 2023 Hunter Spectacular at Traverse City and placed second at the 2023 USHJA International Hunter Derby Championship.

A

fter years of working on solidifying his own confidence, top U.S. hunter rider and trainer Geoffrey Hesslink set a goal to foster a training environment prioritizing that quality in his horses and students.

“When I was younger, I resonated with trainers who gave me the feeling that I could do anything,” he said. “Even when my students are nervous or unsure about a new experience, if I maintain 100-percent confidence in their abilities, they can push themselves further than they thought possible.”

Following a stellar Junior career, Hesslink focused on developing a program centered on the health and happiness of his human and equine athletes. In addition to teaching confidence, the horseman also prioritized trainer–student communication—a philosophy he incorporates into his training program at Hesslink Williams, the business he owns and operates with his partner, Brendan Williams.

Emphasizing crucial basics with both his horses and students, Hesslink strives to keep all experiences—at home or in the show ring—positive. He wants to prevent mistakes or setbacks from affecting long-term goals.

“There is always another horse show and another class. I wish I learned that earlier in my riding career,” he noted. “We ride, we

SHELBY PHILLIPS PHOTOGRAPHY

CREATING CONFID



ENCE



ANDREW RYBACK

▲ Hesslink and Spencer, one of the newest mounts in his program, claimed the 3-foot-6 Performance Reserve Championship last May at Old Salem.

doctor recommended horseback riding for physical therapy. This misfortune would shape the trajectory of the young horseman's life. But growing up in a non-equestrian family in a small town in Vermont, not exactly a hub for horse activities, he struggled to feel accepted by his peers early in his career.

"Mentally, it took me a long time to get past that and to feel confident in my own skin," he noted. "But over the years, I became more self-assured in trusting my program."

This sentiment didn't come easily for him as a young rider. An inherently high-strung person, Hesslink put a lot of internal pressure on himself. He did his best to ignore the show-day jitters, with the false belief that top athletes didn't get nervous. But this tactic proved futile. "Time after time, I would let the nervous energy get the best of me," he said. "I couldn't allow myself to be in the moment and execute what I knew I was capable of."

So, Hesslink learned a different approach. He recreated the pressure he felt at shows during every practice round at home and every class at schooling shows. Getting used to the feeling when there wasn't as much pressure helped him manage it for more intense situations. When important competitions arrived,

make mistakes, we either execute the plan or we learn from it. I focus on what we can take from each round and apply it to the future."

Finding His Stride

After Hesslink broke his arm in a playground accident as a kid, his

doctor recommended horseback riding for physical therapy.

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SHELBY PHILLIPS PHOTOGRAPHY

▲ Hesslink prioritizes open, honest communication with his students and finds it key in helping them develop confidence.

he experienced feeling excited about showing versus nervousness or fear.

"Nerves are a good thing—they're evidence that we truly care about something. With this mindset, I've learned the more I amp myself up ahead of a big event—meaning the more I care about it—the more I can make the butterflies work for me in the moment," he explained. "My favorite rounds are the handy portion of a derby, either coming in with room for improvement and leaving it all in the ring, or coming in on top knowing the pressure is on and I get to be as handy as possible."

Perspective's Role in an Unpredictable Sport

In an unpredictable sport that's replete with highs and lows, Hesslink also learned that holding on to perfectionism only hindered his ability to gain confidence and progress. With time, he discovered the benefits of allowing his young horses to learn while showing versus expecting or demanding perfection every time. Horses, he noted, like us, learn best from their mistakes.

"It's easy to expect perfection every time, but that's just an obviously impossible, pointless goal. At the end of the day, I've learned to simply listen to my horses," he said. "I let them tell me what's going on, what they need or what I can do differently or better. Listening is key for communication and confidence."

Hesslink noted that comparing yourself to others or believing your worth as a rider is only as good as your last round is easy. But in his experience, the most successful riders let go of these unproductive notions.

"I try to keep all of this in perspective. This is a very hard sport to predict," he said. "You always need to strive to reinvent yourself and improve in order to help your horses and set yourself up for success—and listening to what they're telling us is the best way to accomplish that."

Keeping Butterflies at Bay

Hesslink found that once he learned how to manage his nerves, his confidence naturally improved. While some riders



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▲ As a young rider, Hesslink resonated with trainers who gave him the feeling he could do anything. With this in mind, he strives to instill confidence in both his horses and students.

only focusing on my ride. I know my horses. I make a plan and try to stick to it.”

These days, Hesslink doesn't entertain too many superstitions during his pre-competition routine, but he devoutly adheres to two things: breathing and bananas.

“If I can feel my heart racing or the adrenaline pumping while my horse and I are walking the course or in the schooling ring, I make myself do a specific breathing exercise,” he explained. “My coach calls it 6-3-6. You breathe in for six seconds. Hold it for three seconds, and then breathe out for six. This really helps my heart rate go down, and I can feel the butterflies settling a little bit.”

His other mandatory show-day task to help stave off nerves includes snacking on a banana. One of Hesslink's early coaches as a Junior rider advised him that the fruit's high-potassium content and other nutrients help eliminate the physical feeling of butterflies in your stomach.

“Whether it's a mental or physical thing, eating a banana

tamp their butterflies by watching a few rounds to see how the course rides in real time, he avoids the show ring at all costs.

“I need to be distracted and not thinking about how others rode a certain line or whether the course looks harder than expected or walked differently than people are riding it,” he said. “I do better by

Career Highlights

- 2014 USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals—East winner
- 2016 National Hunter Derby Hallway Feed Rider Champion
- 2016 USHJA Reserve National Hunter Derby Rider of the Year
- 2017 USHJA International Hunter Derby Finals Reserve Champion
- 2017 USHJA International Derby Finals Champion
- Winner of the 2022 \$100,000 USHJA/WCHR Peter Wetherill Palm Beach Hunter Spectacular
- 2023 Pennsylvania National Horse Show Leading Hunter Rider
- 2023 \$100,000 WCHR Central Hunter Spectacular at Traverse City Spring
- Second-place finish at the 2023 USHJA International Hunter Derby Championship

before a big competition makes me feel better,” he laughed. “If it works, it works, right?”

Instilling Confidence in His Horses

Hesslink also prioritizes peak conditioning for the horses in his program. Over time, he found that improving their fitness levels goes hand-in-hand with developing confidence.

“I like my horses to be a bit more fit than I think most hunter people do,” he noted. “And I don't drill them because they just don't need to practice that much. Instead, I focus on keeping them fit, happy and healthy. I think my horses jump very well based on the less-is-more approach.”

Hesslink keeps his horses' day-to-day exercise routine simple, even down to the jumps in his practice arena. “I keep my jumps plain. I use the more traditional ‘hunter’ jumps at shows to encourage my horses to be more engaged,” he said. “And I typically only jump them once or twice a week if they're not showing just to keep that jumping muscle sharp.”

Hesslink is also a big believer in keeping his horses' moving. Barring inclement weather, his horses get turnout time every day and are ridden at least once (sometimes twice) a day. This might include a leisurely trail ride in the morning, turnout through the mid-morning or early afternoon, and then a training ride in the afternoon.

“I like my horses out of their stalls as much as possible. Working them out in the fields and on trails keeps them fresh and happy to do their jobs in the ring, so we always try to mix that up,” he explained. “I also utilize lunging quite a bit more



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than just as a quieting mechanism. I like to work my horses without a saddle or rider to allow them to just move freely. This gives them a chance to express themselves while exercising and work different muscles than they do while being ridden.”

Hesslink also stresses the importance of instilling confidence in his young horses from an early age to prevent them from feeling anxious or afraid they can't do something. He keeps their training relatively simple and focuses on things he's confident they can physically do.

“I'm a firm believer in the importance of flatwork basics,” he said. “When they have that foundation of being really broke on the flat, it makes everything easier.”

As his youngsters get fitter, Hesslink starts to slowly ask more of them to bolster their confidence. Specifically, he incorporates a lot of gymnastic work.

“Even though they don't understand everything yet, the gymnastics present a fitness element where I purposely don't help them that much,” Hesslink noted. “It might be a bounce to a one [stride] to a one or a bounce to a bounce to a two [stride]. Sometimes I include a vertical; other times an oxer. I trot into the exercise and just let them figure it out on their own. Learning how to gauge the distances themselves also helps them make a better shape over the jumps. Just drilling singles or courses requires less thinking on their part.”

Trainer–Student Communication

Akin to the communication established with your horse, Hesslink believes that open, honest communication with your trainer is key to developing genuine confidence. This is whether you aspire to compete at the highest level of the sport, show in a local walk–trot class or simply want to hone your skills in the lesson ring. When students feel comfortable talking to their trainers, Hesslink said it eliminates any gray areas that might result in miscommunication or none at all.

◀ Hesslink and one of his top hunter mounts Trademark won the 2022 Traverse City Hunter Derby.

“I want my riders to feel like they can ask me anything. Even if it's, ‘Hey, I don't feel great right now. I don't want to do this. I'm having a bad day. I'm frustrated that I'm not making more progress. I don't feel comfortable doing that exercise.’ Whatever it might be,” he said. “I think open communication is a big reason that my students have experienced so much success.”

Just like his horses, Hesslink wants all his students to feel confident. “And the best, surest way to gain confidence is mastering all the small things, one at a time,” he said. “Nothing should be overfacing for horse or rider. Repetition and consistency will boost confidence over time.”

He noted that many riders have a basic understanding of stride and track to be able to ride and execute a hunter course, but they often lack genuine confidence in their and their horses' full potential. At home, Hesslink keeps his students' training simple, but disciplined—much like his horses' regimens. He has them stick to simple exercises over rails and small jumps to maintain their fitness, as well as riding out on the trails to keep them physically and mentally fresh.

“We could practice a lot of difficult courses at home, but at the end of the day that would only drain our horses,” he said. “And they already give so much when we're showing.”

Hesslink incorporates exercises like adding or leaving out strides over small jump courses to help his students develop confidence in their eye and finding their distances. Similarly, he challenges them to change tracks in lines to ride them in a different number of strides. He also has students trot jumps to enhance their horses' fitness and strengthen their hindquarters.

“The idea is we're practicing everything that we'll experience in the show ring in a simplified way. That way, when we get to the show and put it all together, it's like second nature,” he explained. “We like to make sure that the horses and riders are confident and feeling fresh when they get to the show. And keeping everything simple at home helps to ensure that.”

THIS ARTICLE WAS WRITTEN from the Practical Horseman Podcast episode with Julia Buitenhuis and Geoffrey Hesslink, (Episode 94, February 2, 2024). Scan the QR code to listen.





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4 Exercises for a WINNING EQUITATION ROUND

Stacia Klein Madden shares how she gets her students ready for big competitions.

**BY STACIA KLEIN MADDEN WITH JOCELYN PIERCE
PHOTOS BY SANDRA OLIYNYK**

LHeading up to a big competition, like the USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals—East, I always want to make sure my students and their horses are well prepared. To do this, I set a course with questions they will likely see at the competition and break it down in manageable sections. The course we are going to practice for this article is an adaption of a previous year's USEF Talent Search Final. While I can't predict exactly what's going to be in the class again, perhaps we will see some form of these questions.

Almost all the exercises in this schooling session focus on rideability. The big questions will be on steering and the ability to lengthen and

▶ To prepare for the upcoming USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals, Abby Jorgensen and Clash Heldenlaan Z practice Exercise 1 (see page 46), riding over the center of a Swedish oxer.



AMY K. DRAGOO

ABOUT STACIA KLEIN MADDEN

Known as one of the most successful trainers of young riders in the country, Stacia Klein Madden began her career as a successful Junior, winning the 1987 ASPCA Maclay National Championship and placing in the USEF National Hunter Seat Medal Final and USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals—East. She turned professional in 1988 and started working out of Beacon Hill Show Stables, now located in Colts Neck, New Jersey. Madden also worked for Johnny Barker in North Carolina, before returning to Beacon Hill where she began teaching and developed a passion for working with young riders and matching them with horses.



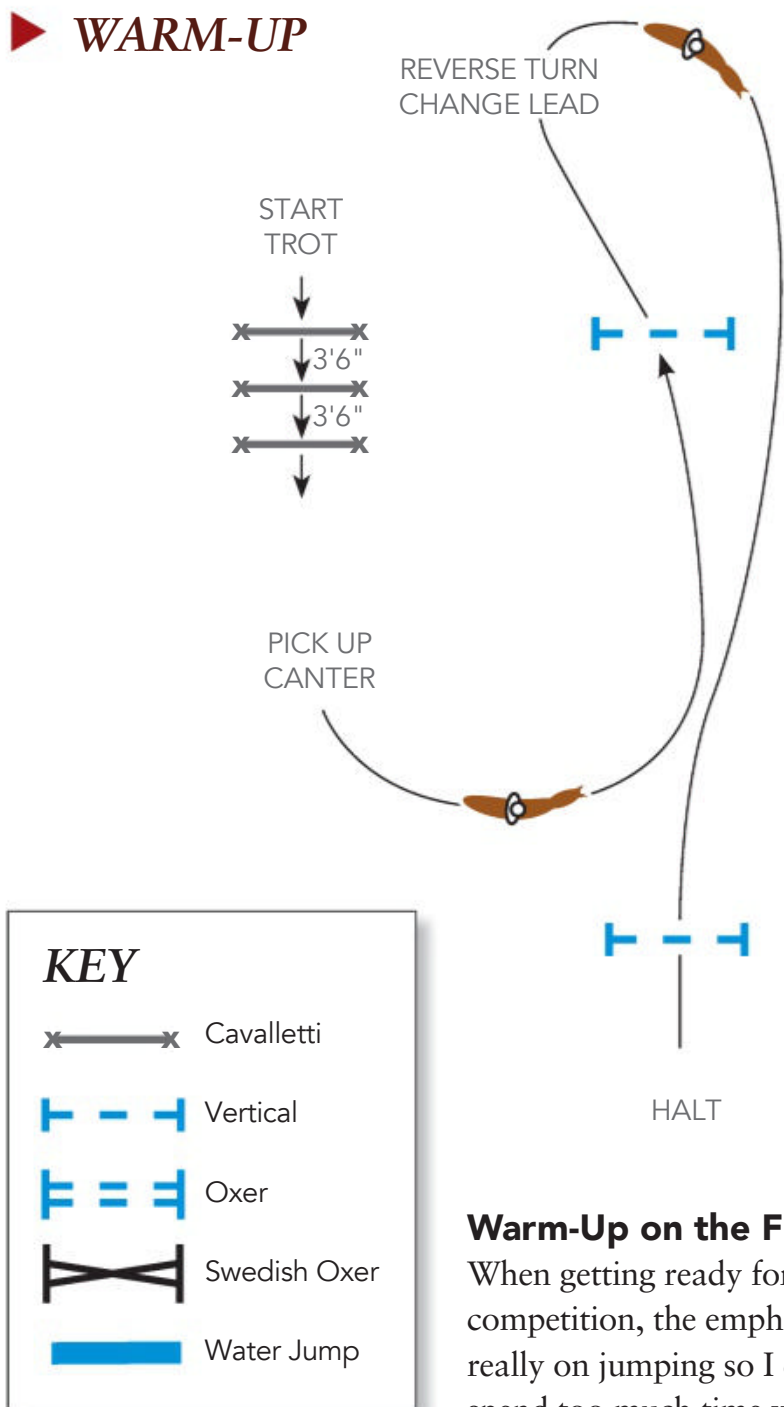
shorten the horse's stride while maintaining the horse's jumping style. But the main goal for this session is to present the exercises so the horses can understand and succeed, which will build the confidence of both horse and rider.

Before tackling individual jumping exercises, we do a light warm-up on the flat and then a simple jumping warm-up with a few cavalletti to introduce the horse to some gymnastic elements.

Setup Note

I set the course so it's very comfortable and inviting. For riders and horses competing at 3-foot-3, I set them at 3-foot or 3-foot-3. For riders and horses competing at 3-foot-6, I set them at 3-foot-3 or 3-foot-6. You can make the jumps a little bit taller or wider, but keep in mind that will affect how some of the distances ride.

► WARM-UP



Warm-Up on the Flat

When getting ready for a big competition, the emphasis is really on jumping so I don't spend too much time warming up on the flat. Since the

jumping exercises are going to be questions on steering and going from long to short and short to long, I have my students practice this on the flat in trot and canter. It's also important to ride from the leg to the hand to make a good connection and create balance, so the horse can be adjustable in his jumping efforts.

Start in a nice extended trot rising on the long sides of the ring, then shorten the step to a working trot sitting on the short sides. To get the horse light to the inside leg and rein, ask for a few steps of shoulder-in, and then allow him to go forward and straight.

Pick up the canter and counter bend slightly down the long sides of the ring to prepare for counter-canter. We counter bend the horse before counter-canter because it's a good test to make sure the horse isn't going to anticipate a flying change. He should not change his lead because of the way he's bent. A lead change should come from the rider's leg. Ask the horse to come back to an active walk to properly set him



◀ Abby separates her hands to help guide and collect Clash through the cavalletti exercise, which is a good introduction to the more complicated gymnastic exercises to come.

up for the counter-canter by slightly bending him toward the lead and cantering from the inside leg. Practicing the counter-canter is important because it is one of the tests riders will see in competition. After about a lap in counter-canter, make a reverse turn back (turning from the inside of the arena to the outside) to the true lead and do an extended canter down the long side of the ring, then back to working canter on the short end, continuing to go back and forth from lengthening and shortening to make sure the horse's stride is open enough for the forward parts of jumping exercises to come. Then, change direction and repeat the trot and canter work. Once the horse is warmed up on the flat, shorten your stirrups a hole or two before jumping.

Warm-Up Over Fences

Setup: Place three raised cavalletti 3-foot-6-inches apart in the center of the ring. Set two single verticals with nice ground lines on the rail.

Purpose: This exercise warms up the horse and rider for the exercises to come. The cavalletti are a good introduction for the more complicated gymnastic exercises they will practice later. Additionally, the long approaches to single jumps with nice ground lines with one jump off each lead are a good place to start before getting into more difficult exercises.

The Exercise: Tracking left, trot three cavalletti in a row. Then pick a canter, jump the first vertical, ride a reverse turn and change your lead, then jump the second vertical on the right lead.

How to Ride It: When riding toward the trot cavalletti, separate your hands to help rate your horse's speed and steer, to guide and to collect. Stay a little to the front of the saddle over the trot cavalletti so you don't fall back on your horse. After the last cavalletti, collect, keep contact on the outside rein, pick up the left lead canter, get off the horse's back and jump the single vertical out of stride. You want the horse to be connected in the bridle and adjustable in his canter. Then, like you practiced on the flat, make a reverse turn, change your lead and ride the long approach over the other vertical on the

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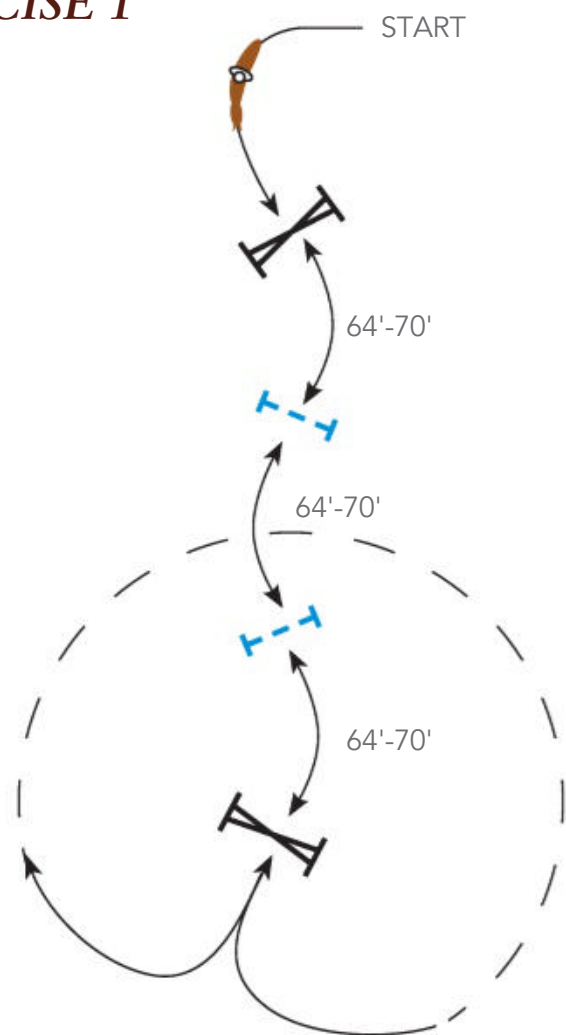
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► EXERCISE 1



right lead. If your horse is heavy in the bridle or getting quick, halt him in a straight line after the last fence.

Exercise 1

Setup: Build a bending line of four fences, all set 64-70 feet apart in the center of the ring. The line will be jumped in both directions, and includes a Swedish oxer, wall, liverpool, and a second Swedish oxer.

Purpose: The bending lines can be ridden in a very direct four-to-four-to-four strides, or with a little shape in five-to-five-to-five strides. We will ride the five-five-five to show steering, control and straightness.

The Exercise: Start by jumping the last Swedish oxer in the line on a long approach to give the horse a warm-up fence. Then begin the exercise. Track left, canter down the long side and jump the first Swedish oxer, put in five strides to the wall, five strides to the liverpool and five strides to the second Swedish oxer. Since you come off the turn to the first jump from the left, when you finish over the Swedish oxer, stay to the right, circle through the middle, and then jump the line in the opposite direction off the right lead.

How to Ride It: In this exercise, turn with both reins to the middle of the fences. This is challenging if you depend on the crest release instead of an automatic release or if you have a bad habit of opening your thumb and resting it on the horse's neck because you're not able to be independent and steer each

stride. The horse doesn't necessarily have to land on the correct lead in the line, but if you're on the correct track, balanced and riding leg to hand, the horse should be able to make the change in the middle of the line.

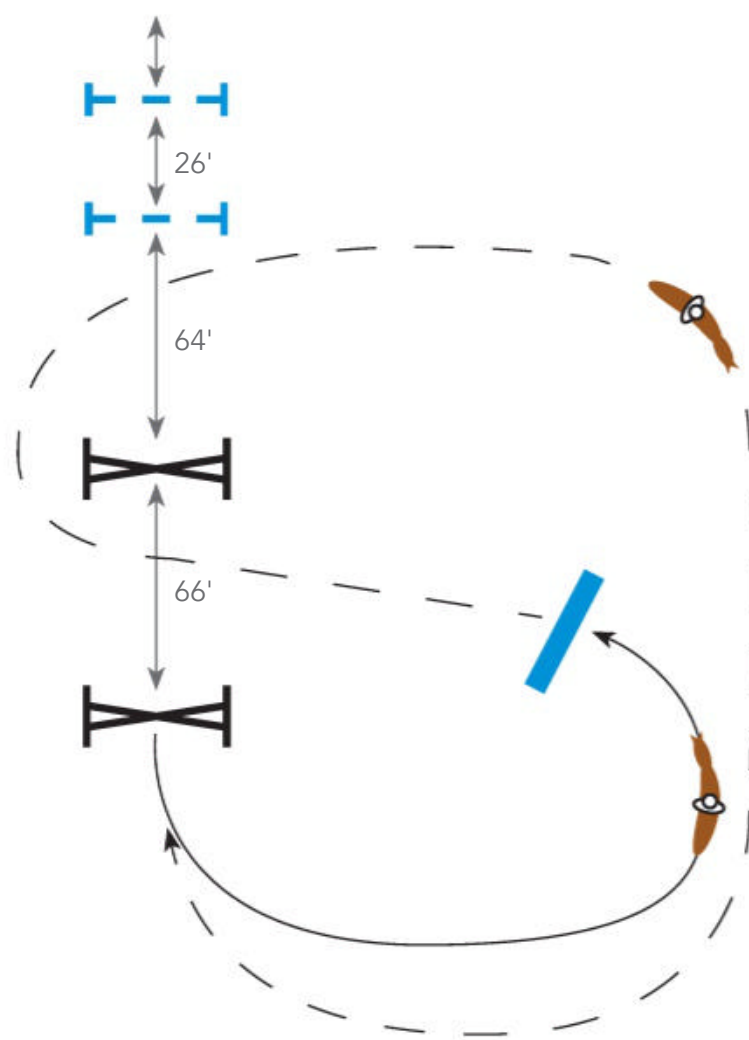
I like to use the Swedish oxers on the outs because riders tend to track wide by using their track instead of collecting the horse to fit the striding. If you overshoot the track instead of collecting the horse, you will end up on the tall side of the Swedish oxer and could knock it down. Keep in mind if you have to override the liverpool because the horse hasn't jumped it yet today, then it's going to be a bit harder to get him back together and might make the striding to the next jump a little shorter.

Exercise 2

Setup: Build an outside line of four fences. Set two verticals one stride (26 feet) apart, then measure four strides (64 feet) to a Swedish oxer and then a longer four strides (66 feet) to a second Swedish oxer. Set a water jump on an angle toward the end of the ring. (If you're not jumping water jumps, set a liverpool or regular oxer instead.) I like to use striped rails on the verticals because it helps the rider focus on keeping the horse in the middle.

Purpose: This is a good test of adjustability to see how well the riders can lengthen and shorten the stride and keep

► EXERCISE 2



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▲ **Exercise 2:** Katie Kanner has jumped the out of the one-stride and next will ride a steady four strides to the first Swedish oxer. Kid Safari DH is wearing a fly mask for protection from the sun because of an eye issue.

the horse in the middle of the jumps. The one-stride requires the horse and rider come in at a specific speed and distance and the rider has to judge the striding in the four stride and then again in the longer four stride, all while maintaining straightness because of the Swedish oxers. Because of this,

it's also a good line to practice the automatic release, which is more advanced than the crest release.

The Exercise: The line will be jumped in both directions, starting with the left lead over the in-and-out verticals. Pick up the left lead canter and jump the one stride, to the nice four to the longer four. Once you've ridden through the line, change direction over the water jump, make a big circle, and jump the exercise from the other way, starting with the Swedish oxers. Coming from this direction, the line will ride as a long four to a steady four to a short one.

How to Ride It: Try to jump in the middle of the fences. Ride with short reins and a strong position through the line. At the water, give a nice release, get right up to the box and ask the horse to stretch across so he doesn't land in it. Then quickly check that your reins are short enough to collect and balance for the next fence. The water might encourage the horse to come in on a big stride, which may help to get the long four stride between the Swedish oxers. Use your voice going into the steady four and short one-stride to collect your horse and then finish with a nice, straight halt. The halt reinforces the idea that you're asking the horse to collect.

Exercise 3

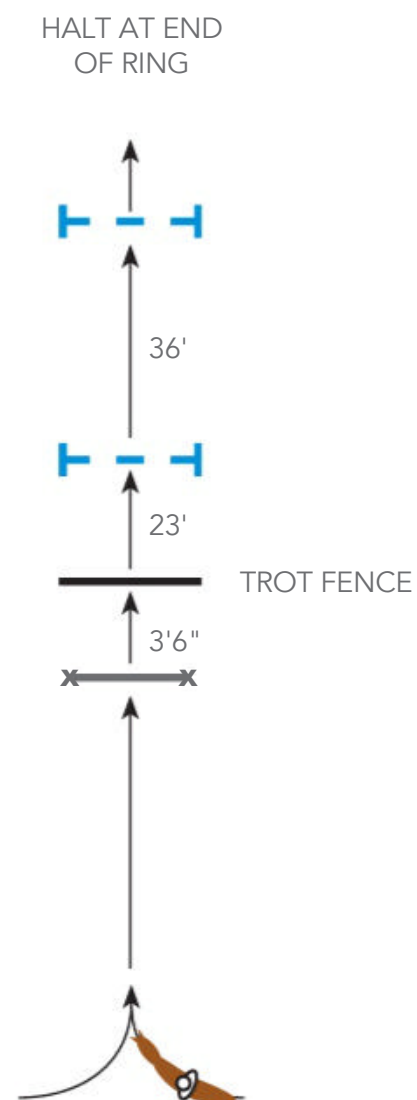
Setup: Set a cavalletti on the ground as a placement rail (3-foot-6) followed by a trot jump vertical or crossrail, then a one-stride (23 feet) to a vertical, then two strides (36 feet) to a vertical.

Purpose: A trot jump is a typical test at a competition that includes a gymnastics phase so it's important to practice this as it can be challenging for horses and riders because it takes a lot of balance and good timing. The placement rail, which will help the horse with timing, is the same cavalletti I used in our jumping warm-up because I want the horses to be comfortable with trotting raised cavalletti before they are faced with three obstacles behind it, which might make them anxious and want to rush.

The Exercise: Trot over the cavalletti placement rail and the trot jump, then canter one stride to the first vertical and two strides to the second vertical.

How to Ride It: Come to the trot fence off the right approach. Keep your upper body tall to invite your horse to wait and be patient. For horses that might be cautious or want to rush the jump and add a canter step, try to keep a soft leg to maintain your connection at the trot. Try not to interfere with

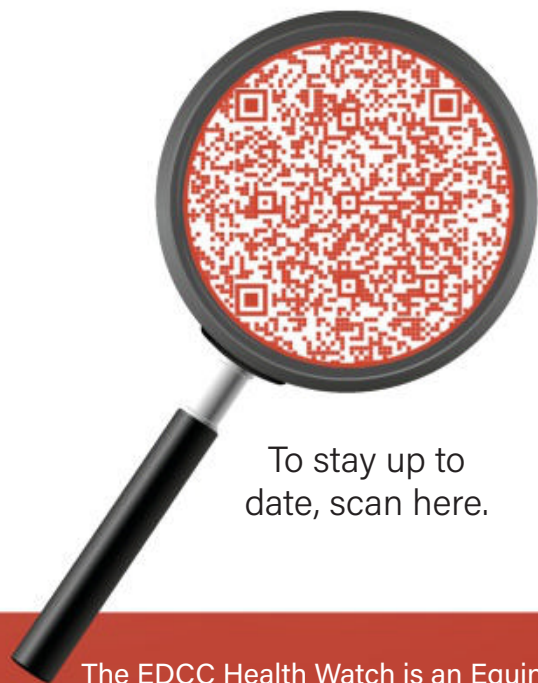
► EXERCISE 3





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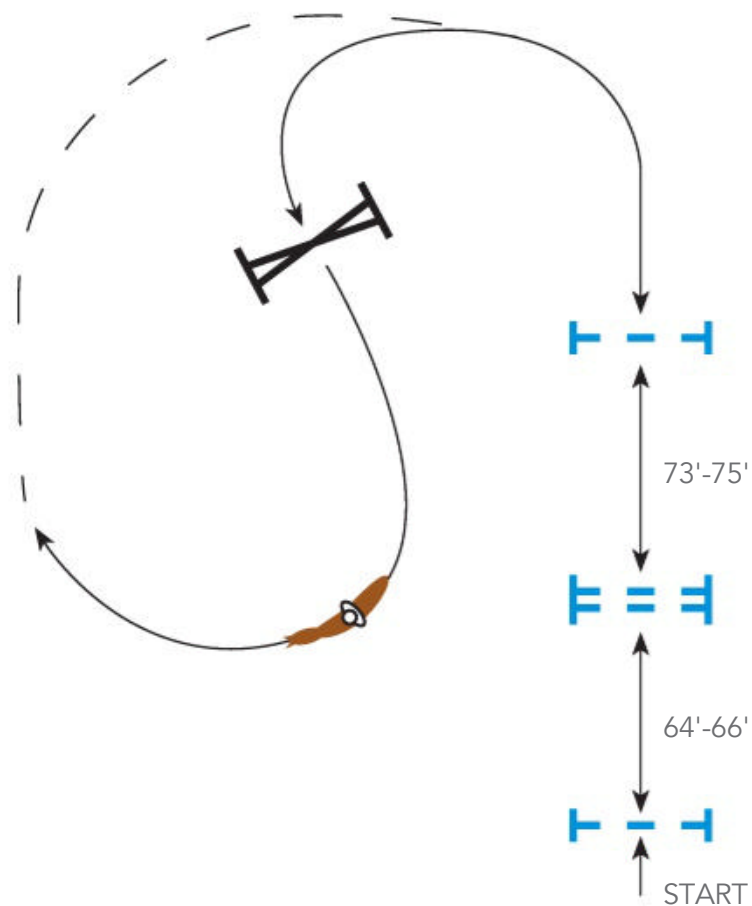
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► EXERCISE 4



your horse's jump and stay balanced at the second and third verticals. When you land from the third jump, turn left and canter down the long side, then bring the horse back to trot and jump the exercise from the left approach. After the second time through, halt straight. The horses do so many courses during the year when you're schooling, it's good to ask for a straight halt after a line to make sure the horse is listening.

Exercise 4

Setup: Build an outside line consisting of vertical to an oxer, four strides (64-66 feet) apart, and then another vertical five strides (73-75 feet) from the oxer.

Purpose: Often the first question in a championship is something that is a bit bold to show that the rider understands how to come in the ring and put the horse right up to the bit. It's also a good test to show the rider's ability to lengthen and shorten. This would potentially be an early line in the course at the competition.

The Exercise: Start by cantering on the left lead and ride the long four to short five. Change direction over the Swedish oxer used in Exercise 1, circle and approach the line from the opposite direction.

How to Ride It: Set your pace on an open stride and start with the long four, then collect your stride to make the short five. Pay attention to every step. Some strides the horse may try to get behind you and need to be put up to the bit by adding your leg. Some strides a horse might be trying to pull the reins through your fingers and will need a half-halt. When you



▲ Exercise 4 is a good example of what could be the first question in a championship—the line is a bit bold to show that the riders understand how to go forward and to also show their ability to lengthen and shorten the horse's stride.

change direction over the Swedish oxer and circle, it should help get the horse soft so you can come back balanced and round, with weight in your heels and wide hands for the collected five. Collect early enough in the five-stride line so that you're coming forward the last stride. This will prepare the horse for the long four that's coming next and will give the appearance of an invisible adjustment. Then halt in a straight line after the last fence.

I like to end the session with the horse doing the exercises correctly, but I never want to drill him over and over to the point where he gets exhausted. Horses usually do something better the second time, which is what we are looking for in this schooling session. By practicing these exercises, you and your horse will feel prepared to tackle the competition course with confidence. 🐾

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UNDERSTANDING DEGENERATIVE SUSPENSORY LIGAMENT DESMITIS

Learn how to manage this progressive, degenerative condition.

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Degenerative suspensory ligament desmitis is a progressive, degenerative condition found in several breeds. It was first discovered in Peruvian Horses, and early-onset DSLD was recognized in some family lines in the 1970s. Many people still think of this as a gaited-horse problem. In recent years, however, DSLD has been diagnosed in many breeds, including Thoroughbreds, Arabians, Quarter Horses and warmbloods.

“DSLSD is seen in the suspensory ligament—a degeneration of the ligament itself,” says Sabrina Brounts, DVM, MS, PhD, professor of Large Animal Surgery at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Veterinary Medicine.

The suspensory ligament starts just below the knee in a horse’s front legs and the hock in the hind legs. It runs down the back of a horse’s cannon bone—the bone from the knee or hock to the fetlock—between the splint bones. About halfway down the length of the cannon bone, the suspensory ligament splits into two branches that continue down and then pass around

▲ A Louisiana State University research group found that moderate exercise didn’t seem to exacerbate DSLD and helped horses’ well-being and comfort.



DUSTY PERIN

▲ For horses with DSLD, leg conformation gradually changes as the affected suspensory ligament tissue allows the fetlock to drop.



AMY K. DRAGOO

▲ In a normal hind leg unaffected by DSLD, the suspensory ligament at the back of the cannon bone supports the fetlock.

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The Role of Genetics

The best way to prevent future cases of degenerative suspensory ligament desmitis is to avoid the condition by investigating a horse's genetic history and to have a thorough examination performed by a veterinarian. This might influence the decision of the owner regarding whether to breed that horse.

"Our research can hopefully help owners decide what to do with an affected horse or a horse with increased risk," says Sabrina Brounts, DVM, MS, PhD, professor of Large Animal Surgery at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Veterinary Medicine.

The challenge is that DSLD is known as a complex polygenic disease. "Most genetic diseases and screening tests in horses have been simple diseases, however," Brounts says. "This means that a DNA mutation can result in a horse having the disease or being a carrier, depending on the mode of inheritance [dominant or recessive]."

DSLD is not as simple as a single dominant or recessive gene. "We were hoping it would be, but it's not. It is the result of multiple genetic variations in the animal's genetic material, in addition to environmental risk factors that have an influence," Brounts says.

"We have collected [skin] biopsies from horses with DSLD and did some sequencing of the RNA [ribonucleic acid, which executes the instructions of DNA]," says Jaroslava Halper, MD, PhD, a professor in the Department of Pathology, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Georgia. "We found changes in so many genes [more than 1,500]. Some are overexpressed or more active and some are underexpressed or less active than normal. Even though we didn't have a lot of horses to test, these findings were pretty consistent." The research showed that these genes are more expressed in horses with DSLD.

Halper hopes to expand her research on DSLD and "add more horses to the study, some with DSLD and some without it, and also horses that have skin diseases and horses with other tendon problems besides DSLD," she says. "We would like to see if this approach could be more specific for DSLD than for other skin diseases or other musculoskeletal problems. Eventually we might have a test that could be commercially available to owners and veterinarians," she says.

Selective breeding and identification of affected horses and horses at risk will be needed to help reduce cases. "The more horses we can test, the more we will learn. Some horses that appear to be normal can still have these changes," Halper says.

"We try to help owners with our research, so they can make an educated decision. We'd like to continue our research in other breeds since a genetic component could also be present," Brounts says.

"We hope to make a connection with the human side," she continues. "There is a type of tendon degeneration that occurs in people that is similar to DSLD [tendinopathy of the Achilles tendon in the human ankle]. Maybe the horse can be a model for human research and both species can benefit."



AMY K. DRAGOO

▲ Horses affected by DSLD might not like having a foot picked up because they don't want to stand on the other foot for very long.

the back of the ankle—the fetlock joint—and end on the front of the long pastern bone below. Its job is to support the fetlock as it sinks under weight and returns to normal when the weight comes off.

In a horse with DSLD, leg conformation gradually changes; gradual rupture of the suspensory ligament tissue allows the fetlock to drop. "The pastern becomes

This problem seems to run in certain bloodlines and families.

more horizontal and parallel to the ground and less upright," Brounts says. "When the fetlock drops, it changes the angles of the hocks and stifles, giving the leg a straighter appearance."

Jaroslava Halper, MD, PhD, a professor in the Department of Pathology, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Georgia, adds, "DSLD is not well defined but affects mostly tendons and ligaments, which are con-

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Karen Adams' horse Cordova was diagnosed with DSLD in his early teens and stayed sound until he was 20.

into a competitive dressage horse, but with the hock issue I decided to just ride him for fun—teach him the exercises but not overly demanding work,” Adams said.

In Bill's early teen years, Adams noticed that occasionally his left hind ankle would swell a bit and look puffy. “Sometimes when I dismounted, one or both of his hind legs would quiver a little. ... His left ankle began to sink lower to the ground,” Adams says.

She took him to an equine clinic in Maryland for a diagnosis. The vet there did several tests on his hind legs, and Bill was diagnosed with desmitis. The vet used shock wave laser treatments to strengthen the tissue.

Then Bill had a couple episodes becoming stuck in his stall, unable to get up. “This was scary, but he was still very sound. I just made sure he got turned out at night so he had plenty of room if he had trouble trying to get up, and made sure he was ridden by me or someone else who didn't demand too much of his hind legs. I could do leg-yields and shoulder-in but didn't try to do much that required pushing off with the hind legs,” she says.

Bill stayed sound until he was about 20 years old. Then his vet put him on a daily prescription nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory, which helped to ease discomfort.

One day in August 2013, when Bill was 25, Adams got a call from the barn where he was boarded. “It was really hot, and Bill didn't want to get up out in his pasture. I rushed out there and the vet came immediately, but none of us could get him up. We tried hosing him and a variety of things but he wouldn't get up. I don't know if he didn't have the strength, or maybe something had torn loose, or maybe he just didn't have the heart to try, so we put him down.”

Adams is not sure where DSLD came from in Bill's bloodlines. She suspects that back before much was known about DSLD, she knew three Swedish warmbloods, including Bill, that had the condition. “I think big, large-jointed horses are probably more susceptible to many kinds of leg problems. With my horse Bill, there's no way to know if it was his one-eighth Paso Fino blood or if the Swedish half contributed. It's a degenerative disease that takes a long time to become evident,” she says.

“With Bill, it started with that puffy ankle. In some of my old photos of him I can tell that the left ankle is a little bigger, and also lower. With DSLD the deterioration is gradual and until you see the symptoms you wouldn't suspect it,” Adams says.

Karen Adams is a retired U.S. Equestrian Federation “R” dressage judge, instructor and coach in Keedysville, Maryland, and has had experience with degenerative suspensory ligament desmitis in a horse named Cordova (“Wild Bill”).

Bill was the product of a test breeding between a Swedish stallion and a mare that was a mix of Mecklenburger (a warmblood type bred in the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern region of northeastern Germany), Thoroughbred and Paso Fino. At that time in the late 1980s, stallions had to be bred to test mares to make sure they weren't carrying contagious equine metritis. “He had a huge, lofty trot, and a big, uphill, rolling canter but was oversized for his age,” she says.

Bill, who grew to about 17 hands before he was 3 years old, ended up with three problems: He was operated on before he was 2 years old with osteochondritis dissecans lesions in both hocks. When Adams started riding him when he was nearly 5, she discovered he was a roarer. “I wanted to make him

nective tissue. It affects the fetlocks and suspensory ligaments when the horse puts weight on the leg, creating stress and pressure.

“This problem seems to run in certain families and bloodlines, but we have not yet identified the genetic component that results in these changes,” Halper continues. “There are more cases being diagnosed now than in earlier years, but I don't know if it's become more prevalent or if people are noticing it more today because they are more aware of it.”

Signs and Diagnosis

There are several reasons for suspensory problems, especially in sporthorses like warmbloods or horses who compete in dressage, jumping and eventing. They can twist an ankle or overstretch a ligament, for instance. With DSLD, the horse starts to get a little stiff, but he “usually has no history of trauma, no previous injury or anything a person could pinpoint as a cause,” Brounts says. “This is the classic picture of DSLD; it just gradually develops.”

Another indication as to whether a horse has DSLD is to determine whether it's just one leg versus multiple legs. “With DSLD, usually more than one leg is affected. In most cases, it's both hind legs,” Brounts says. “If it's just one leg, it's probably not DSLD, but you should still evaluate all legs since one side can be more severe (and more painful) than the other.”

Horses affected by DSLD may shift weight back and forth on the hind legs or be more comfortable on one than the other. These horses might not like having a foot picked up and don't want to hold it up



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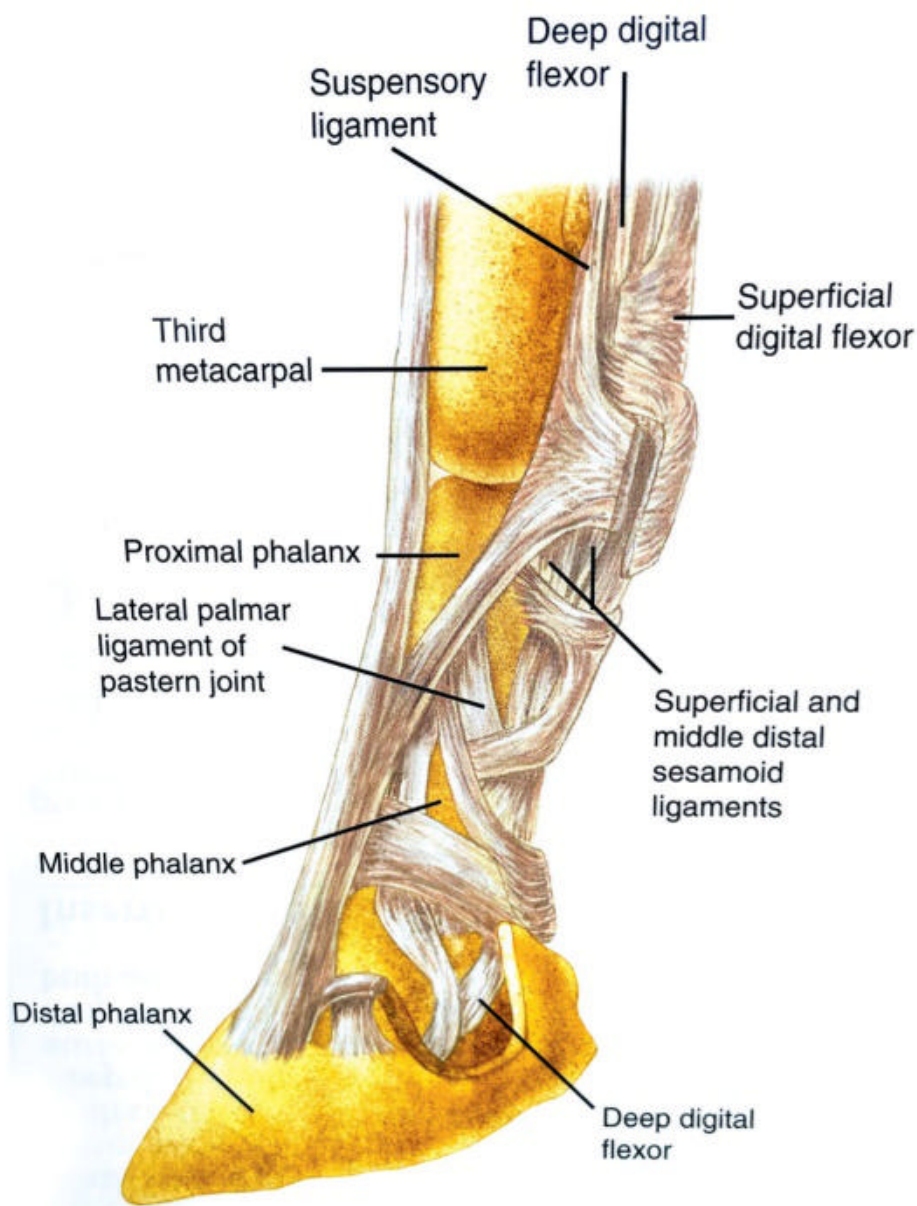
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▲ A lateral view of the inner structures of a horse's lower leg

very long for the farrier or to have the foot cleaned—they don't want to stand on one foot very long.

The lameness that develops gets worse over time. There may be swelling or thickening of the suspensory branches around the fetlock and pastern area and scar tissue develops around those branches. "Owners might mistake this for windpuffs, but windpuffs are associated with the fetlock joint. With DSLD, the suspensory ligament in the fetlock region is affected, outside the joint," Brounts explains.

More Diagnosis

In a horse with DSLD, the suspensory ligament's collagen fibers are disrupted. These fibers are made up of proteins that provide strength and structure to the body's connective tissues. Normally, proteoglycans (large molecules of proteins and carbohydrates) "are very complex molecules that are important for the collagen to assemble properly in the tendon or ligament," Halper says. But "if there is too much [proteoglycan], the tendon is not as strong as it should be. Sometimes the proteoglycans become cartilage." Cartilage is weaker than collagen, and it does not stretch and bend, so as this tissue

accumulates in the tendons and ligaments, these structures become progressively weaker, and the fetlock drops toward the ground.

The problem may appear at different ages in different horses but most commonly becomes obvious between 7 and 13 years old. It rarely starts in horses older than 15.

"It's easy to detect accumulated proteoglycans and damaged collagen fibers with a post-mortem examination, but that won't help the horse," adds Halper. Instead, in addition to getting the horse's medical history, a veterinarian will examine the legs and palpate the tendons and ligaments to detect thickening of the area.

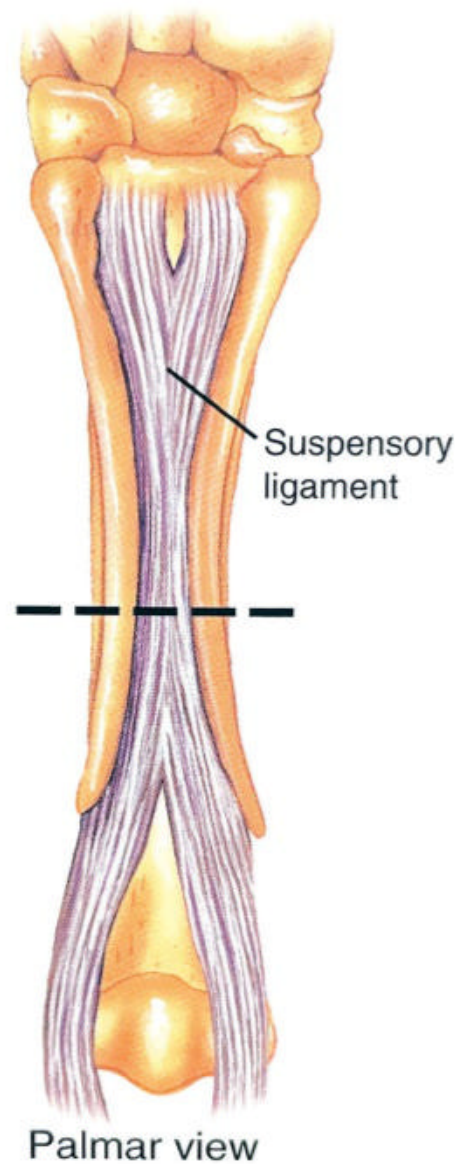
Halper also noted that some horses with DSLD also have changes in the arteries and skin. "I've found that the easiest thing to do is a skin biopsy to see changes in expression of certain genes," she says. "We published a paper last year describing what we found—that these genes are more expressed in horses with DSLD." (See "The Role of Genetics," page 54).

Another method of diagnosis is ultrasound, says Brounts. "Ultrasound of the whole suspensory ligament can help with diagnosis, especially in the fetlock area since that is where we see most of the changes," she says. "If there's a chance the horse may have DSLD, have an ultrasound done. If an injury doesn't heal or a lameness doesn't improve or gets worse over time, then you have an initial exam as a baseline for comparison later."

Environment and Management

Progression of DSLD is unpredictable. "I've had some horses that took 10 years to finally get to an end point, and other horses had to be put down within just one or two years after the disease was diagnosed," Brounts says. "We don't know why DSLD develops quicker in some horses than others,

▶ A palmar, or back, view of the suspensory ligament





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but I think the environment comes into play.” Some of those factors may have more impact on certain horses.

“In the Peruvian Horse, we know heritability of DSLD is approximately 25%,” Brounts says. “This means that 25% of the risk of developing DSLD is genetic and the remaining 75% of the risk is attributed to environmental risks, such as the environment the horse grows up in.”

She adds, “A human example might be a person with risk of getting lung cancer, increasing that risk if they smoke.” There are multiple factors, such as moderate heritability that influence DSLD.

The health management in high-risk horses should be focused on modifying environmental risk factors so the likelihood of DSLD development is minimized in those horses.

“Every horse owner who participates in our research fills out a long questionnaire,” Brounts says. “We ask about everything—what the horse eats, what it does for work and how often, the shoeing, any medication and what age it started in

training. These things are important because some of them might make a difference.”

Risk factors may include physical activity and diet, for instance. “Maybe if we know we have a horse with increased risk, we shouldn’t start riding it as a 2- or 3-year-old; maybe we should start at 4 or 5,” Brounts says. “Or we should

change something in their diet; less grain, or less fat or starch. We hope to discover environmental risk factors that we can modify for a horse that is high risk for DSLD. We can then make recommendations, so the environment and manage-

ment becomes more favorable for that horse, and it might have less risk of manifesting DSLD.”

Treatment

For affected horses, treatment needs to focus on easing pain and discomfort and this may vary from horse to horse. “Every horse presents at a different stage. We can’t cure the disease

For affected horses, treatment needs to focus on easing pain and discomfort.

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but can try to slow it down or at least make the horse comfortable. Common treatments include phenylbutazone (bute) or flunixin meglumine (Banamine®) and supportive boots or wraps for the lower legs,” Brounts says.

Some horse owners use methylsulfonylmethane, glucosamine, polysulfated glycosaminoglycan (Adequan®), etc. to try to aid the health of connective tissue. “Special/corrective shoeing to give the limb more support may also help. Other treatments that may help ease pain include laser therapy, shock wave, magnetic therapy, acupuncture, etc.,” she says.

Some owners investigate regenerative medicine like stem cell treatment and platelet-rich plasma. “These therapies can be helpful for tendon and ligament injuries, but DSLD is a progressive degenerative disease. Treatments might delay the inevitable process but are still experimental for horses with DSLD,” Brounts says.

A research group at Louisiana State University looked at the effect of exercise and athletic conditioning. Exercise didn’t

seem to exacerbate the disease and helped horses with comfort. “We’ve learned that not exercising the horse at all is not wise in mild or moderate cases. Research showed that moderate exercise—like 30 minutes three times a week—can be helpful, if it’s not in deep footing or strenuous,” Brounts says.

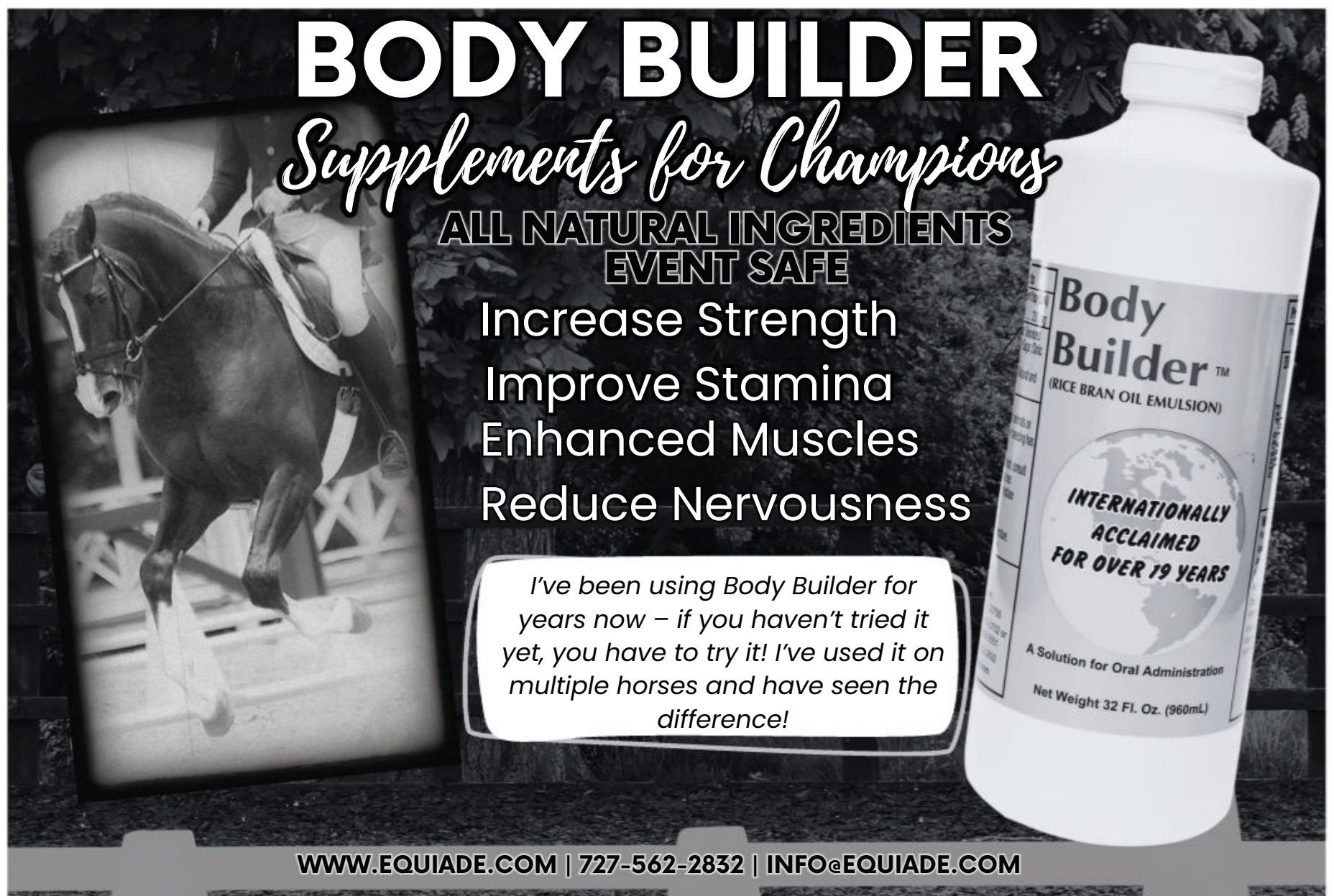
The Future

“Once a horse is no longer comfortable and in a lot of pain, a tough decision must be made,” Brounts says. “This point may be different for each owner. Some make that decision sooner than others. This is a personal

decision; the horse is part of the family and saying goodbye can be a process rather than an instant decision.” Information about DSLD may help an owner make an informed decision.

There is no cure; DSLD is a progressive degeneration and decline. “The only way we can prevent it is if we can find some changes with various tests,” explains Halper. “Then we won’t breed those horses.” **PEI**

Once a horse is no longer comfortable and in a lot of pain, a tough decision must be made.



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Aslan on the day after his repossession from his adopter.

Re-Rescued: Aslan's Story

One special gelding learns about three different types of love during his rescue journey.

BY CRYSTEL DENTON

PHOTO COURTESY OF RANGER'S LEGACY

The spring air was charged with energy, and that made the red roan gelding nervous about getting in the unfamiliar trailer. Aslan wasn't sure he wanted to leave the place he had lived happily for the last few years.

Aslan had everything he needed at the boarding stable and didn't want to leave his friends or his owner. She took great care of him, but his owner had to move out of the country and couldn't take him with her. Although the usually optimistic gelding didn't quite understand what that meant, he could feel the sadness in her voice when she spoke.

Aslan's owner reached out and softly touched Aslan's face as she laid her cheek where his halter rested. He could feel her tears as they slid down her face and landed on his muzzle. Then, she turned and walked away. Now where would he go? Who would take care of him? Would the ladies loading him on the trailer make sure he was safe? Aslan took a deep breath,

lowered his head slightly, and quietly walked into the trailer.

A few months later, while Aslan was living at the rescue, a new, older lady came to visit him. She was nice, gentle, and Aslan liked her. Although he was well cared for at the rescue, he heard volunteers talk about adoption. He wasn't sure what that meant, but he had a feeling he would be leaving again. Only this time, he wasn't worried. When the time came for him to walk onto the trailer again, Aslan was ready.

At first, Aslan was happy in his new place. He arrived at the boarding stable and quickly made friends with the other horses. His new owner came twice a day every day to feed and water him. Sometimes she would take him for walks and groom him. She would talk to him, tell him how much she loved him, and sometimes let him play in the round pen.

Several times, people from the rescue came to see him as well. They would talk to him, walk him around in his

stall, and take pictures. They always said how good he looked and checked to make sure he had water and had been fed. Sometimes he would hear them say they were going to call and check in with his owner.

One day, Aslan's owner came with some friends and loaded him up in a trailer. He could feel the anxiety in the air and she seemed to be in a hurry. Aslan wasn't sure why, but he felt nervous. When the trailer stopped and they asked him to unload, Aslan could feel the uncertainty and fear from the other animals on the new property.

Once off the trailer, Aslan walked him past whining puppies in a small cage, bleating goats in cramped pens, and chickens scratching at the ground looking for feed. He almost stepped on a small, skinny, kitten that ran across his path. Then, his owner put him in the smallest pen he had ever been in—he barely had room to turn around.

Although he would rather have



TOP LEFT: Aslan on the day after his repossession from his adopter. TOP RIGHT AND LEFT: Aslan 10 days after being returned to the rescue.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RANGER'S LEGACY

stayed at the boarding stable, Aslan stayed optimistic. He nickered with anticipation when his owner filled his small water bowl and put his feeder in the pen with him. He hadn't been fed yet that morning and he was very hungry. Aslan waited for her to come back with his breakfast for hours. Finally, when the day started to fade into night, his owner came back with a small amount of hay for him, much less than his regular portion.

It seemed like days passed before he ate again, and his water bowl was empty, but at least his owner would tell him how much she loved him each time she saw him. He hadn't seen anyone from the rescue in a long time.

On August 12, 2023, one of the rescue workers came to see him. She seemed upset and took pictures of him. Aslan was hoping that she brought food with her and he nickered in anticipation. She did not offer him any food, but she promised to come back for him.

The next morning, both the rescue ladies showed up with a trailer. Eventually, a man in uniform showed up, too. He spoke with the rescue workers and Aslan's owner and then came to see Aslan. The man asked the Aslan's owner when she had fed him last. She said she hadn't fed anyone yet that morning. The man in uniform looked around and asked her where the feed was for the animals. She could not show him any feed on her property at all.

It seemed like hours as everyone talked about him, but eventually, the rescue workers came and loaded him in the trailer. As the trailer moved down the road, all he could think about was how hungry he was and if there would be food for him soon.

When the trailer stopped again and he stepped out, he realized he was back at the rescue, a place he knew he would always get the food, water, and care he needed. Aslan knew that he was safe again. ★



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Hoof Abscesses

How to identify and manage a common condition that often seems to appear out of nowhere

What It Is

A hoof abscess is a painful infection that occurs when bacteria make their way into the sensitive tissue of the foot, causing a pocket of pus to form and pressure to build within the relatively rigid hoof capsule.

Cause

Bacteria normally present in a horse's environment or on the surface of the hoof gain access to the sensitive structures within through a variety of routes, which include:

- a puncture wound
- a sole bruise
- a corn (a specific type of bruise that occurs at the back of the sole in the angle between the hoof wall and bars)
- a nail prick from a recent shoeing
- an injured or diseased white line (the soft, fibrous inner layer of the hoof wall).

What's at Stake

Prompt diagnosis and treatment of a mild abscess will relieve a horse's pain and restore soundness so he's able to return to work in a few days to a week. Deep infections require a more extensive course of care and can take weeks to months to heal. Left untreated, a hoof abscess can alter the way the hoof grows or lead to laminitis or an infection and deterioration of bone that will have a lifelong effect.

Signs

Not all hoof abscesses are exactly alike, but the most common signs include:

- pain and lameness, appearing gradually or suddenly and ranging from mild to so severe that a horse may be reluctant to bear weight on the affected limb; it may look like he has broken a leg
- swelling, perhaps involving the heel bulbs, coronary band and/or pastern and extending to as high as the knee or hock
- heat, detectable by touch, in the hoof wall or limb
- increased digital pulse, which can be felt near the pastern
- a foreign object—a nail, screw, shard of glass, stone, etc.—embedded in the sole. Don't remove any item you may find. Give your vet the chance to evaluate the location, depth and angle to determine the extent of damage and infection within the hoof and ensure that the entire object is removed so it won't cause any more trouble.
- tracts in the sole or coronary band draining gray or black pus
- foul odor emanating from the hoof.

Diagnosis

A veterinarian will look at the horse's history and recent activity and do a lameness evaluation. She'll clean and examine the foot, then use hoof testers to apply pressure to various points on the sole to identify any sensitive spot that could point to the site of the infection. A radiograph may be necessary to reveal the exact location and



SANDRA OLIYNYK

▲ To drain this abscess, the vet used a hoof knife to pare it out through the sole.

extent, which will show up as a dark area on the image.

Treatment

Draining the abscess is priority one. Some will break on their own through the coronary band or sole. But that can take time—which means prolonged pain for the horse as the infection continues to grow. Instead, your vet likely will initiate drainage by using a hoof knife to pare out the abscess through the sole. That way, gravity can aid in clearing the pus. She'll pack the sole to protect against infection and allow for continued drainage. Products containing iodine, chlorhexidine or ichthammol are commonly used. Then she'll apply a bandage and often additional protection, such as a hoof boot or treatment plate secured to a shoe. Based on the horse's need, she may recommend a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medication for pain. In some cases, an antibiotic may also be prescribed. The bandage will need to be changed daily until the drainage stops, the exit hole is dry and the

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horse shows no sign of lameness.

In cases where the location and depth of an abscess make it difficult to drain, soaking the hoof first in a mixture of warm water, Epsom salts and povidone iodine or other antiseptic solution may help to draw the infection closer to the sole for treatment. Some veterinarians may recommend soaking as part of follow-up care. But it's important to avoid oversoaking, which can weaken and harm the hoof.

and hazard-free as possible.

- Clean hooves daily and examine them closely for signs of injury or trouble brewing, such as bruises and wounds.
- Schedule regular farrier visits to maintain good hoof condition, especially if a horse is genetically predisposed to poor hoof conformation or quality.
- Be mindful of the effects of weather on hooves. Footing that transforms from dry to wet or wet to dry, often with the change of season, can soften

A horse requires additional veterinary care if he is still experiencing pain two days after treatment.

Be on the Lookout

Most hoof abscesses resolve without complication. But a horse requires additional veterinary care if he

- is still experiencing pain two days after treatment
- has lost his appetite
- is noticeably shifting his weight or lying down more than usual.

Additional signs of trouble include:

- drainage that persists more than 48 hours after treatment
- proud flesh that grows out of the drain hole.

Prevention

To reduce the chances of your horse developing a hoof abscess:

- Keep his environment as sanitary, dry

the hoof or make it brittle, increasing susceptibility to injury and infection.

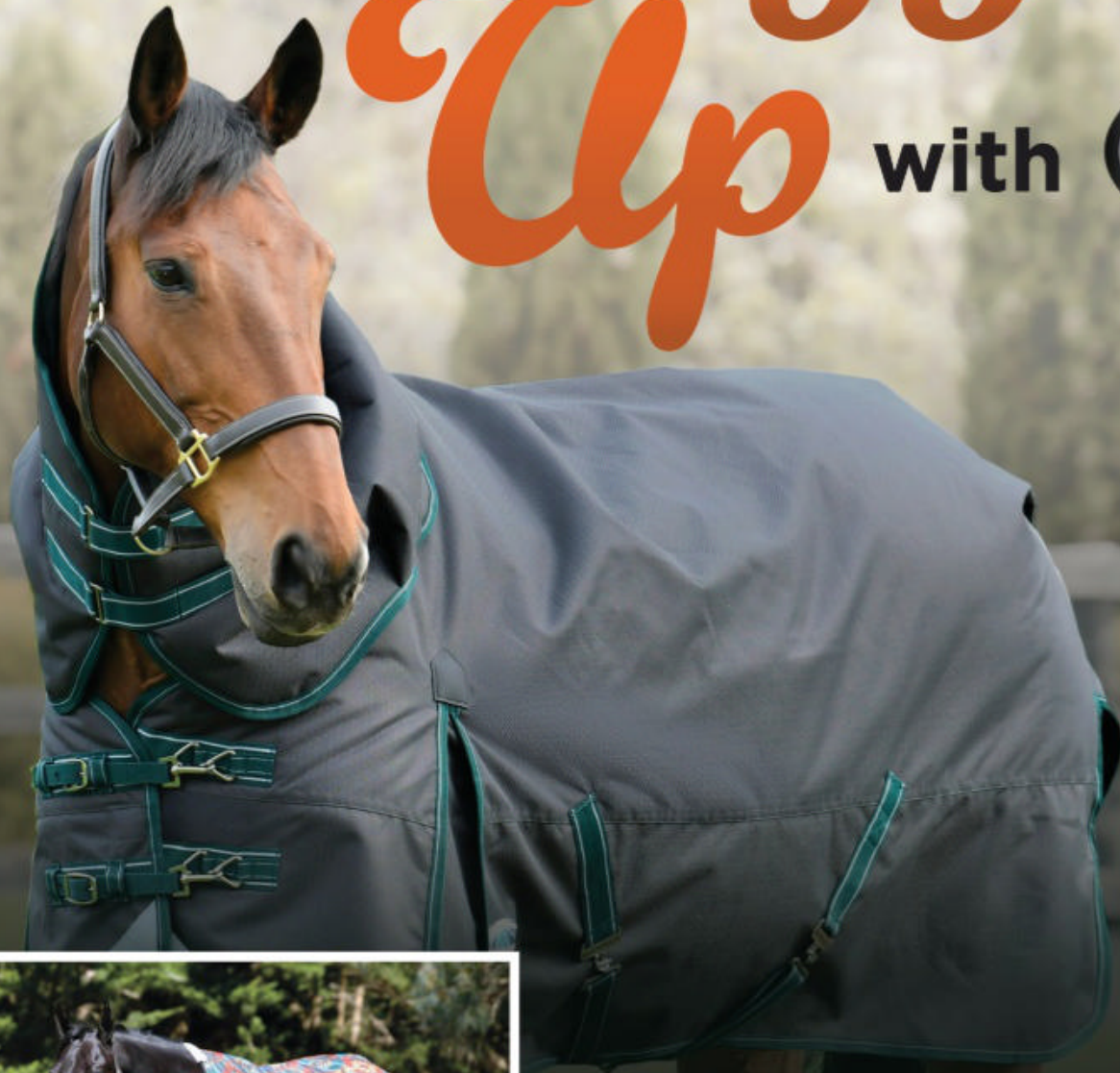
- Consider applying a hoof dressing or hardener to improve and protect hoof condition. Your vet and farrier can advise on product selection based on your horse's specific situation.
- Evaluate your horse's feed to ensure it is providing adequate nutrition. A supplement may be beneficial. Your veterinarian can offer insights on choosing one with ingredients most likely to benefit your horse.
- Look for an underlying cause if a horse seems especially susceptible to hoof abscesses. For example, pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction can weaken the immune system, increasing vulnerability to infection. 🐾

COURTESY JULIE BULLOCK



Practical Horseman thanks Julie Bullock, DVM, for her technical assistance in the preparation of this article. A 1989 graduate of the Virginia–Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine in Blacksburg, Virginia, Dr. Bullock has an extensive background in sporthorses and a special interest in equine podiatry and lameness. A four-star FEI veterinarian in endurance, she is also an endurance rider and the huntsman with the Glenmore Hunt Club in Staunton, Virginia.

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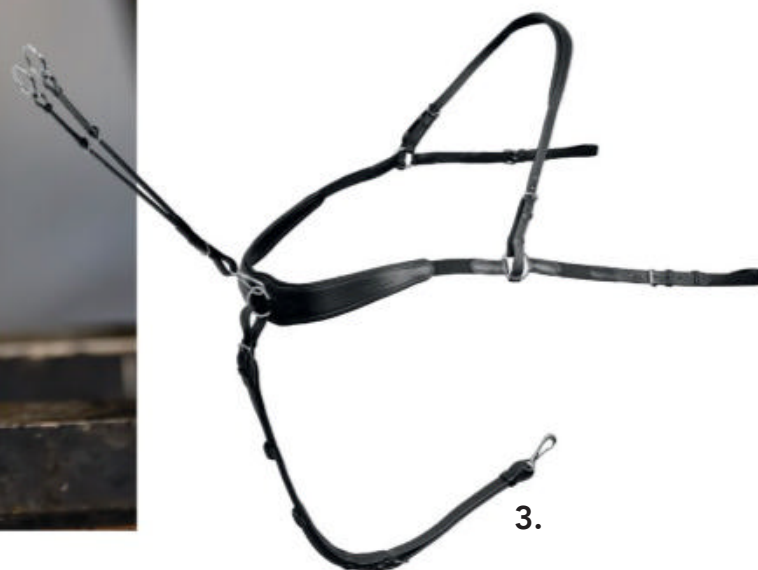


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Susanne von Dietze is a leader in equestrian biomechanics. A physiotherapist, licensed Trainer A instructor and judge for dressage and show jumping, she gives lectures and seminars throughout the world, including at the prestigious German Riding Academy in Warendorf.

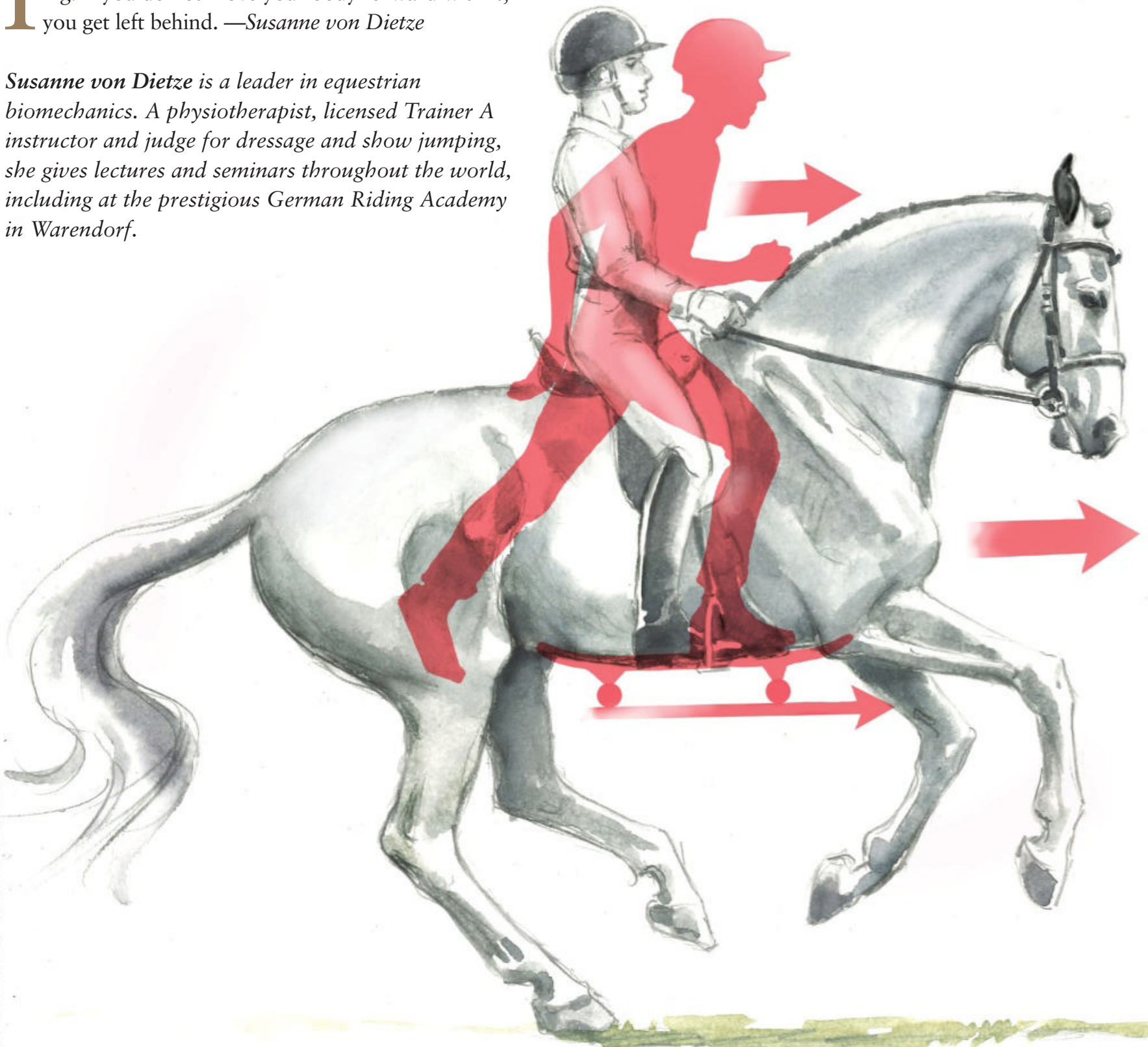


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