

Horse's lameness inspires owner to learn therapeutic technique

By Bobbi Jackson

Two years I joined the club of those unfortunate horse owners who spend their night's cold hosing, wrapping, poulticing or sweating, and cold hosing again. After January, my Connemara/Thoroughbred cross, re-injured his right foreleg for the second time in as many years I discovered how precarious the path from lameness to soundness can be.

Using ultrasound, January had been diagnosed with a tear in his superficial digital tendon. With the help of my veterinarian, blacksmith and other equine practitioners, we spent many months trying to heal a significant connective tissue injury. I began the first nine weeks of hand walking. At that time a second ultrasound confirmed enough progress to proceed to the next phase of rehab, 10 weeks of walking on flat solid ground with a rider atop. This phase puts light stress on the injury site.

After those 10 weeks and a third ultrasound, the veterinarian gave the okay to begin trot work. I was instructed to add five minutes of trot work every two weeks until we reached 35 minutes. At that point we could begin canter and lateral work. We also turned January out in a small round pen under very watchful eyes. Each day he improved and we thought we had this injury under control.

The Best Laid Plans

There is just something about the best laid plans. Despite faithfully adhering to this regime, the day after the first 15 minutes of trot work, he was again lame. Ultrasound showed a new tear originating at the edge of the original injury. Frustrated, we decided to perform a Platelet Rich Plasma (PRP) treatment and start over with the recuperation regime. PRP treatment stimulates the body's natural healing process through injection of its own growth factors into injured areas. New collagen is produced at the site of the injection and is incorporated directly into existing cartilage and ligaments, making them thicker, stronger and more elastic. When you inject PRP, it creates scaffolding for new collagen to form along in the damaged tendon or ligament so that tissue heals in a more accelerated, restorative and healthy state. This time the leg healed without a hitch and January was back to work a few months later.

An Anatomy Lesson

Connective tissue is a web-like gel that surrounds all the horse's tissues including bones, muscles and organs. Every muscle is wrapped in a slippery envelope of connective tissue that comes together to form the tendon that at-



Bobbi Jackson and January

taches muscle to ligament and bone to bone. Its purpose is to allow bone and muscle to glide by each other easily. The whole body is held together, yet each part has its own independent range of movement. Together, the body cohesively works as a whole.

If this lubricative sleeve gets too tight or thickens from injury or misuse, it becomes fibrous and glue-like and can't loosen on its own. This shortens the muscle, preventing it from stretching out fully and reduces flexibility of the joints. Movement in that area of the body and elsewhere is affected as other muscles try to compensate. It can even lead to injuries, like the one my horse had. Connective tissue adhesions can come from injury, strain, stress, surgery, inflammation, kicks, poorly fitted saddles, and even moving with an unbalanced rider atop. They're the body's attempt to create balance by shortening up where the body is unbalanced.

Life's Coincidences

Sometimes a coincidence comes along and changes a well planned path. While my horse was healing, I was seeing a chiropractor for myself. He suggested I might benefit from massage therapy. The massage practitioner I saw was also a certified Rolfer and she and I began discussing Structural Integration (SI). The SI series is an individualized series of 10 sequential sessions that restructures the body. It can resolve pain and discomfort as it breaks up adhesions of the connective tissue that our bodies develop over time.

An SI series can reduce chronic tensions, improve posture and make movement easier. This sounded like a good way to help my own body regain flexibility so I began the SI series for myself.

During the series my practitioner worked on my connective tissue to release, realign and balance my whole body. I continually got better and I couldn't help thinking about my horse, January. I imagined how much he could benefit from a SI series that would systematically balance his structure

and improve his functional movement. All of a sudden it clicked! Adhesions were likely the problem. January had a trauma, the injury to his tendon. Tendons are made of connective tissue. When tissue heals, adhesions form because the tissue fibers do not heal in the uniform pattern of uninjured tissue. Adhesions most likely had formed around the original injury site leading to restricted movement and now this re-injury.

I knew my horse would benefit from structural integration. All I had to do was find someone to do it. I was very concerned that January might injure himself again. I approached my Rolfer to see if she might come to work with him but she had only been trained to work with humans. I tried to find an equine structural integration practitioner in the area but no one new anyone doing such work.

Another Injury

One day after a ride, we noticed swelling on January's leg. The Veterinarian confirmed that now he'd torn his check ligament. Well meaning friends tried to convince me that due to my horse's age, I should just give up rehab and allow him to retire. My friends thought his injury was age related but if you knew my horse, you'd know he's not ready to retire. The Connemara in him had other ideas!

Now, instead of feeling frustrated, I knew there was a way to help my horse because I just had the structural integration series myself and knew absolutely that I felt and moved significantly better. We performed a PRP treatment again and went back to the rehab regime as the injury would need time to heal before any structural integration work could begin.

I was convinced that structural integration would help my horse and many others. Surprising even myself, I took a big leap and enrolled in the one year SI program at the Equine Natural Movement School in Washington State to learn the Equine Natural Movement series.

Releasing Holding Patterns

The Equine Natural Movement series is a five-session series performed over a few months so the horse can integrate the shifts in his body into his movement. After gaining background information on the horse and then watching for patterns in movement, the practitioner feels for holding patterns or tension during a hands-on "body scan." This gives the info needed to form an individualized plan for each horse's sessions.

During sessions the practitioner's hands gently work over tissue feeling for restrictions. The work goes progressively deeper



EQUINE NATURAL MOVEMENT therapy is helping January, a Connemara/Thoroughbred cross. Here his owner Bobbi Jackson applies the technique she was inspired to learn because of his issues.

as the horse's tissue allows. Sessions generally take between 90 minutes and 2 hours with consideration to the horse's temperament and condition. Horses are able to continue training throughout the series.

The Equine Natural Movement series is a different yet complementary approach to improving horses with massage, Chiropractic or Acupuncture. Changes brought about by this work can enhance these other types of bodywork and allow them to have greater effect since the horse is no longer struggling with bound-up tissue and structural imbalances. It's often the kind of work that can move a horse beyond plateaus in training and showing.

Once freedom of movement and balance return, other therapies may be better able to achieve greater results. During a series, clients often see immediate improvements in the horses' movement and attitude. Structural integration is designed to bring about profound changes in a horse's structure that is fairly permanent.

Continued progress is often seen in the months following a series.

So far, the horses I have worked with throughout my training have benefited from SI. As for January, he has continually improved while receiving this work and even benefits from his chiropractic adjustments are lasting longer. January's Chiropractor told me that it was his opinion that since I began using the Equine Natural Movement's methods of SI with January, he has been able to be more effective in his adjustments of him because January's tissue are now more responsive.

Bobbi Jackson has a degree in animal science from Pennsylvania State University (PSU) and worked as a research assistant in the animal science departments of PSU and at McGill University in Canada. Jackson is an Equine Natural Movement practitioner practicing in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Montreal. She offers free 20 minute horse assessments. She can be reached at 908-230-0716 or EquineEnhancedMovement@gmail.com.

Work To Ride polo team wins regional championship

PHILADELPHIA, Pa. — The Work to Ride polo team became the first all African American team to win a Regional Inter-scholastic Polo Tournament last month.

Last year the team was narrowly eliminated in the semi-finals of the high school tournament but on March 13 the Cowtown/Work to Ride team beat the Baltimore Polo Club 24-17 to win the finals.

Team member, Kareem Rosser earned MVP honors.

Riders in the Work To Ride program have to earn their right to ride with the non-profit group, based at Chamounix Equestrian Center in Philadelphia.

Donations to Work To Ride can be sent to 98 Chamounix Drive, Philadelphia, Pa. 19131.

Call 215-877-4419 or see worktoride.net for details.