

What is Lameness?

In this first of a series on lameness in horses, we start with a definition of lameness and why it is important to recognize the signs of lameness.

By Mark R. Baus, DVM

Lameness is a term used to refer to any number of conditions where the horse fails to travel in a regular and sound manner on all four limbs.

Lameness has a different meaning for each horse owner. Although it can represent a source of pain that is short-lived and insignificant, many horse people have the impression that lameness is a permanent and debilitating condition. The fact is that lameness in horses is quite common and as regrettable as it is, most horses are coping with a source of musculoskeletal pain at any moment in time. Although colic is the most common cause of death in horses, lameness is the most common reason for retirement. In fact, lameness is so common in horses that it can be assumed any horse is experiencing lameness at any point in time.

Lameness is worrisome for many reasons. First and foremost, the pain from lameness can significantly affect a horse's wellbeing. Depending on the cause of lameness, the pain can affect them even if they are not in work. It is not uncommon for horses to develop gastric ulcers in response to coping with chronic lameness conditions. Nobody wants to think of their horse being in pain so it becomes important to know when a source of lameness is affecting your horse's health.

Lameness needs to be identified not only to address pain but because the pain affects your horse's athletic ability. Based on a sound training program, your horse's performance should improve throughout time. So if his performance degrades, it is very possible that lameness is at the root of that performance issue.

Another reason to identify and treat a source of lameness

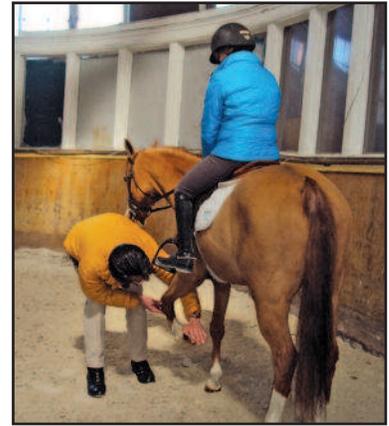
is to avoid related problems caused by a longstanding

lameness. It is well known that a chronic lameness of a hind limb can cause inflammation in the sacroiliac joint of the pelvis. It is also known that low grade lameness of a front limb can exacerbate lameness in the opposite hind limb. Many lameness conditions can create problems in the dorsal spines of the back.

Since they are voiceless, how do horses tell us they are in pain? How does a rider determine if his horse is lame? If there is no swelling in the limbs and he is doing his job, how could the horse be lame? Obviously a veterinarian's role is important to answer these fundamental questions but your horse is likely providing you with the clues you need to determine if there is a problem.

Assuming there is no obvious lameness such as head bobbing, what are some signs that your horse is experiencing musculoskeletal pain that needs attention?

- Stumbling in front or behind.
- Difficulties with lead changes, especially lead changes in one direction more than the other.
- If a horse was easily adjustable between fences but is now adding strides, a soundness problem is likely.
- Kicking out when making lead changes is a common response to many back and pelvis problems.
- Refusing to jump.
- Spur marks that are more prominent on one side than the other.
- Excessive wear of the hind toes.



About Mark R. Baus, DVM

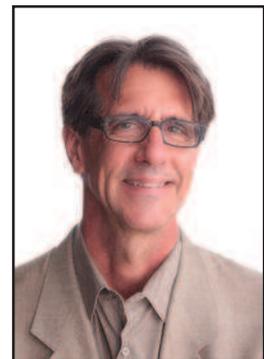
Dr. Baus is the son and grandson of large animal veterinarians in South Dakota. Although this experience shaped his decision to become a veterinarian, the desire and inspiration to provide care exclusively to horses occurred during veterinary school. Upon graduation from Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine in 1981, Dr. Baus joined a veterinary practice in Fairfield, Connecticut with Drs. Howard Raven and Rick Mitchell.

Dr. Baus and Dr. Mitchell founded Fairfield Equine Associates in 1989 where Dr. Baus worked until he started Grand Prix Equine in 2009. He has provided care to horses in the same region and for many of the same clients for over thirty years. The Fairfield and Westchester county region has a long tradition of supporting the show horse industry. Many of the finest horses, riders and trainers in the country have started their careers in this region and Dr. Baus has had the privilege to work on many of those great horses and with many great trainers and riders.

In addition to memberships in the American Veterinary Medical

Association and American Association of Equine Practitioners, Dr. Baus is on the veterinary committee for the United States Equestrian Federation and the Horse and Rider Advocates Committee for the United States Hunter Jumper Association. He is the moderator for the English Sport Horse rounds with the AAEP and is a past member of the AAEP Ethics Committee.

In his off time, Dr. Baus teaches a course in life skills at a local prison. He also enjoys auto racing as a fan and a driver. Ω



- Lands after jumping on one canter lead no matter what direction he is turning.
- Responding to added leg pressure with resistance.

There are many other indicators of a soundness problem but it is safe to say that if your horse is suddenly not performing as he has in the past, musculoskeletal pain may be at the root of the problem.

If your horse is experiencing a significant loss of performance, it is time to call your veterinarian. It is important that you provide your veterinarian with an accurate and concise history. If your veterinarian is like me, a lengthy history will lose my attention in about 3 minutes. It is important that we know approximately when the signs were noticed. Was the onset gradual or sudden? Have you tried any medication or therapy for the problem?

From there, your veterinarian will perform the necessary examination to determine the cause of lameness and recommend the most effective solution. I would also suggest that you schedule routine soundness exams for your horse to uncover issues that are unnoticed or emerging. In addition to discovering a subtle lameness, your veterinarian will notice if fluid is developing in a joint or if there is sensitivity to a vital tendon or ligament.

Now that we understand that lameness is a common yet manageable aspect of the sport horse, we will explore the fundamental differences between front and hind limb lameness conditions in our next column. Ω



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