

HORSING AROUND BY TRIANA ELAN

SEARCH

Dealing with Lameness

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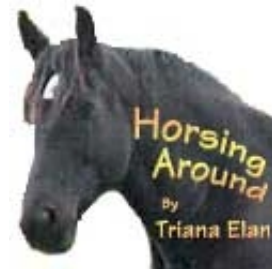
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Okay, so your horse is limping. That's a sign of lameness. Perhaps your horse isn't limping, but its head bobs up and down at the trot. That's also lameness.



There are many things that can cause lameness, and we as horse owners must be diligent. The old saying, "No hoof, no horse" is absolutely true. Here is a short list of contributors to lameness, then we'll launch into the adventure I had at Pilchuck Veterinary Hospital on July 19th and what I learned.

Here are a few possible causes of lameness:

- Improper trimming or shoeing
- A rock stuck in the hoof (this is especially awful: if a small rock gets stuck in the white line of the hoof and works its way up, it can cause a "blowout," which is an abscess in the hoof, usually near the coronary band. This is very painful for the horse)
- Shin splints (usually from excessive pressure on the lower front legs, from jumping or from street riding), a concussive injury.
- Inflammation of joints
- Arthritis

And now I will share my experience with you. Two years ago I obtained a beautiful Percheron mare named Star, who is the one you click onto to get to my article. Standing 17.5 hands high and weighing close to a ton, she is regal, quiet, intelligent, gentle...and lame.

Star has had a horrible history at the hands of humans. At a young age, she experienced trauma to her knees and shoulder joints due to a cruel trainer. Mind you, I've never spoken to these people and don't know who they are, but Star's body tells the whole story.

When I got Star, I was fully aware of her lameness. My heart was bigger than my good sense. One look into her eyes and I agreed to take her on and give her a good retirement.

Star has bone chips and arthritis in her knees (likely from falling on a hard surface, and very likely from the improper use of a "Running W" training device for harness horses which is meant to discourage a horse from bolting while under harness. In Star's case it's likely that it was used to deliberately trip her, causing her to fall to her knees).

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She also has a deformed left shoulder joint due to early trauma. She just turned sixteen, which is middle-aged for a draft horse that is well cared for, but an age of rapid degeneration for a horse that has been mistreated or injured earlier in life.

Of late she's developed lameness in her left hind leg, which causes enormous problems when she tries to get up from laying down. I couldn't stand to watch her suffer, so on July 19th (Friday), Karin Becker and I loaded Star into the trailer and took her to Pilchuck Veterinary Hospital in Snohomish.

We were greeted by Dr. Joanne Fehr (pronounced "fair"), a kind, knowledgeable England born equine surgeon as well as other staff members.

Since I'd called ahead, Dr. Fehr ordered special equipment for a draft horse, since they don't see too many of them there. I was impressed immediately with the quality of the facility, which has undergone a recent expansion including an equine surgery, stable area, examination sections, radiology, recovery rooms, and ICU sections. Wow.

Dr. Fehr and her intern assistant went right to work on the assessment of Star's hind leg. She wanted to rule out the worst-case scenarios first. It was hard work for everyone including Star, who had to continually walk and trot so that her gait could be assessed. A horse's movement tells a vet everything. So for about three hours it was walk, jog, poke, prod, walk, trot, pivot this way and that, and in between we went inside to the examination room where Star's nerves were blocked at specific points in specific leg joints, front and back. The purpose of this was to pinpoint exactly where the problem was coming from. If she was not in pain, what would her gait be like? And was the hind leg problem in the hock area (hind knee), or in the hip, or in the pelvic region? Had she thrown her back out? Was it a neurological problem (which would have been horrible)?

There were no less than five people at any given time helping with Star. Gentle, soft voices, lots of time spent, calmness, a critical eye scrutinizing every movement, lots of encouragement for my poor mare who was so good and brave and cooperative, occupied a total of four hours.

The end result: It is not a neurological problem, which is good. It is not a problem in the hock, which is too bad because it would have been easier to treat. It is most likely arthritis or a possible problem in the sacral area of the spine.

So why, you might ask, didn't Dr. Fehr just do an x-ray and get it over with? Two reasons. One is that in order to x-ray a hip joint on a horse, the horse must be under full anesthetic and turned over on its back. Two: An x-ray would not give an accurate history of the problem.

Star's prognosis: Keep her comfortable and use my own good sense and determine what is fair for her. If she's happy, eating well and moving about without further degeneration, fine. But at some point, we will have to make the decision to end her misery. Thankfully, that's not yet.

To be honest, the night before we took Star to Pilchuck, I called a friend and burst into tears. I was so afraid that I'd have to "do the right thing" and come back with an empty horse trailer. I was scared that they'd say, "This horse has to be put down." I was afraid that this beautiful creature would trust me enough to get into a trailer where she would go to her death. And even though animals don't have the conscious issues with death that we do, it's an agonizing decision to have to make.

I highly recommend Pilchuck for just about anything. They deal with animals large and small. For horses, they have the largest board-certified team of equine surgeons in Western Washington. It's about a one-hour drive from Anacortes.

They also have alternative care for horses, such as chiropractic and acupuncture, plus equine dentistry. I spoke with the entire staff that was there, and they are super people. Friendly, warm, compassionate and professional. Makes me wish I was a horse. I hope that human medical care professionals go there to learn how to be!

I can't say enough good things about this facility, other than they will be THE facility for Island Star Equestrian Center. They are fully aware of different economic circumstances, they will spend the time for a diagnosis rather than pull out their sophisticated machines and charge you a fortune in order to save time. They fully understood that we are a non-profit, fledgling equestrian center with a heart and a teeny tiny bank account and were willing to work with us.

Check out their web site! And I'll keep you updated on Star's progress. She's a special soul who has been through hell in her life yet remains gentle and good and willing to trust again. What an honor that she came to me.

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