

FITNESS

By Rick Wolfe DVM

This subject may not seem directly related to veterinary medicine, but it truly is. Performance horses are athletes. Fitness may not be of major concern for pleasure horses that are used only occasionally for trail riding, etc. For performance horses however, fitness is very important, especially for highly competitive events such as racing, rodeo events, cutting, team penning, or any activity whereby a horse has to give an all out effort.

In our practice we see many injured horses whose problems can be traced back at least in part to “unfitness.” For example, a barrel horse that has been ridden very little or not at all for a few weeks is loaded up on Friday and competes once or twice over the weekend. We get the call on Monday morning that the horse is unsound and needs our attention.

When a horse is unfit the muscles, tendons, and ligaments are more easily fatigued. As this horse is in full performance the joints can over extend, the tendons and ligaments over stretch potentially causing a variety of injuries including fractures, bone chips, cartilage tearing or erosion, etc. The muscles are simply not “strong” enough to “hold” the structures in their proper position during an all out effort by the horse. We all know that this principle applies to human athletes. The football coach that drills his team in the summer without pads or other equipment is actually helping his team members avoid injury. The respiratory tract is also affected by fitness. Horses are much more likely to “bleed” (another subject) post exercise when they are not fit and made to perform anyway. The list goes on, fitness is important for a performance horse.

Now comes the big question: How do I GET my horse fit and how do I know when my horse IS fit?? Generally, the younger the horse, the more training or exercise the horse needs to get fit. For a 3 year old barrel horse for example, 2 or 3 months of daily riding would be required to get this horse fit. When we say riding we are NOT talking about barrel racing, we mean other activities such as trail, gallops, figure eight’s, etc. (I’m a veterinarian not a horse trainer). An older horse that has been in the barrel racing business for a long time would not need as much training. From being around performance horses and their trainers going on 3 decades now I can say that this fitness issue CAN be tough to measure. One of the hardest jobs a racehorse trainer has is to train a horse to peak fitness without OVER training. Over training obviously can cause more harm than good. It can be a fine line. The more experience a sharp horse handler has, the easier it becomes to “read” the fitness level of the horses in their charge. For the less experienced horseman I highly recommend consulting with a more experienced person in the area of fitness. The same morning I wrote this article a well known and very experienced barrel horse trainer, Merrill O’neal from Ruston, La. happened to stop by the clinic. Upon proof reading this article for me she added: Over drilling a barrel horse on barrels is not only unhealthy in terms of leading to unsoundness but it also sours a horse to the task at hand and is totally counterproductive. I totally agree, high caliber performance horses have a certain number of runs or all out performances in them. Merrill related a recent incident whereby a person bought a very talented barrel horse one weekend, ran the horse twice in competition the same day, hauled the same horse home and drilled him over and over on barrels that evening! If this type of training continues,

this horse will likely become unsound as well as develop a negative attitude toward the task at hand.

Many of these performance horses are extremely valuable. Keeping these horses fit when they are in competition can make a profound impact on their long term soundness and their ability to stay on top of their game.