

## **Bargain Hunting for your Horse's Health?**

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In tough economic times we all are searching for ways to save money. It is no secret that keeping horses is a luxury, and there is a significant cost for their daily care, let alone the unexpected expenses. A bargain is defined as goods or services offered for sale for less money than usual or expected. If we get something at a discounted price, we like to think we came out ahead. Sometimes we can say we *struck a bargain*, but quite often, as the saying goes, *you get what you pay for*.

In my travels, I often find horse owners who have fallen on hard times, as well as owners who did not plan well when they got that “free” horse, who had a moment of weakness at an auction, who did not understand the real needs of a horse, or who didn't know anything about owning a horse. This article covers some of the basics of keeping a horse. These are essential needs, which, if understood and correctly applied, could save many horses from the disorders that so often sideline them, cripple them and sometimes bring them to an untimely end. Attending to these needs will go a long way to avoiding expensive vet bills down the road.

In a whole-horse approach to care, species-appropriate health needs to be nurtured in all the parts that make up the whole individual. If we look at the wild and feral horses that still exist throughout the world, we can learn and better understand what keeps them healthy without the interference of humans. The more we know about how these horses thrive in nature and apply it to our care for domesticated horses, the greater their chances will be for health in captivity. Here's what I see as the basics of good care as it relates to the horse—from the horse's perspective (as opposed to ours).

- Most important: YOU. A proactive, discerning caregiver who is willing to sacrifice time, money and resources, and who has a desire to learn what makes a truly healthy horse.
- A CLEAN environment for the horse to live in that supports its innate needs as a species: room to run at speed, at liberty, with herd mates, and the freedom to do this as much as possible—ideally 24/7. No stalls or confinement to small paddocks starting from birth. Far too many horses live in stalls where their only movement is in a soft, indoor facility with tack and a rider attached. These horses never get to develop natural muscle tone at liberty, and then we wonder why they have breakdowns and injuries. Too often use exceeds the horse's ability because of a lack of conditioning at liberty.
- A diet that respects a horse's need to have forage available free choice, defined as hay and pasture. Supplementation only when it is needed—you would be surprised at how very little they do need beyond forage. (See my articles, *Problems With Feeding Practices* and *Hay Is For Horses; Going Against The Grain* for more in-depth information on diet.)

- Hoof care provided by a knowledgeable professional who practices whole-horse hoof care. There's a horse attached to those hooves! Hoof care must be REGULAR (every 4–6 weeks for the average horse) unless your horse lives and moves in an environment where it can wear them naturally. This does happen in domestication, but unfortunately it is the rare exception. The reason we have to provide hoofcare service is because our horsekeeping practices do not allow the necessary amount of movement for horses to self-maintain. Don't pass the buck onto your farrier or trimmer to be the only one to care for your horse's feet— we only see your horse every 4–6 weeks. Know what a healthy hoof is and what it is not. Be knowledgeable about basic hoof anatomy. I am amazed at how many horses develop thrush to the point of pain and lameness, and the owner, and even some veterinarians, had no clue. Look for the causes of problems instead of covering them up. If you are chasing thrush constantly, you have a bigger problem than thrush. Ask questions.
- Regularly scheduled dental care. As far as I am concerned, this is the most important service we *must* provide for our horses every 6–12 months or as recommended by a certified equine dentist. Choose a dentist who understands the balance in the horse's mouth starting with the incisors (the teeth you see behind your horse's lips). Everything starts in the mouth, and it is much more than just the ability to grind food. It's about movement. This is why I recommend Natural Balance Dentistry as it is taught by The Advanced Whole Horse Dentistry Learning Center (link below). Why do horses need to have their teeth floated in the first place? As with the hooves, the teeth do not wear at the rate of eruption because for much of the year our horses are eating the processed feed that we provide, so they do not use their teeth as Nature intended. As a result, the teeth become long and often imbalanced. Remember everything starts with the mouth. If the jaw cannot move freely forward, backward and side to side, neither can the body without compensation. Often this compensation is subtle until we start asking the horse to do something it physically cannot do without pain because of a dental malocclusion, or worse yet, improper dentistry. The horses try to tell us with changed behavior, but all we can see is a behavior problem. They try to tell us with lameness issues, and we try shoeing packages, joint injections and supplements to get back movement that was lost.

If the only thing you learn from reading this article is the basics of a balanced mouth, it will spare you and your horse from countless miseries of TMJ pain and the domino effect it causes. Don't bargain hunt with dentistry and don't put it off because there doesn't seem to be a problem. Why wait for one? Dental care is often only needed once each year, so be wise and save for it. Keep your horse healthy and his mouth balanced with regular dental care provided by a professional equine dentist. And stay away from Power Floating! In my experience this procedure has been detrimental to every horse who has had it done. Once the teeth are damaged you cannot replace

them. (I am currently working with Wendy Bryant, EqDT on an article entitled, *The Dangers of Power Floating*)

Since most horse owners have horses for riding, there are several considerations that make for a long and healthy horse-rider relationship.

- Horses are not fully mature until all their permanent teeth have erupted and have contact (occlusion). For average horses it is 6–6 1/2 years, for drafts and warmbloods, it may be 8 years. Most of the bones in the horse's body have growth plates that close during these years of development, with the last ones to close located at the base of the neck, which is where true collection begins. Riding and competing before a horse is mature invites a host of bone and joint issues into their life. So why do we ride them before this? Just ponder that question for a while. I think you can answer it yourself.
- Check your saddle fit. Does your saddle allow the horse to move freely under it? If you don't know you need to find out. Many lameness issues and spinal problems have their genesis in ill-fitting saddles. Your horse will tell you. Back pain, tenderness to the brush, girthy, bucking and rearing, muscle wasting and white patches on the withers, shoulders and spine, are all indicators of saddle-fit issues. Know the signs, so you can remedy the real problem without a prescription!

Oh, and then there's the bit. In my 40 years of riding horses, there is not one horse that did not do better without a bit. Please visit veterinarian Dr. Robert Cook's website for the best education on the effects of using a bit verses a bitless counterpart ([link below](#)).

- Now we are back to YOU, the rider. What back, neck, knee, or hip injuries have you had in the course of your life that cause YOU to be imbalanced? Everything that is imbalanced about you will show up in your horse. So many people have no idea how much of an impact this makes on their horse. Both the saddle and the rider are the major cause for sore backs and hoof issues in horses. Chiropractic is quickly becoming more common for animals, horses especially. If you are going to ride, and ride often, you owe it to your horse to have a chiropractic exam and/or adjustment for both of you, and possibly acupuncture and massage as well, as often as needed.
- One more thing about YOU. This may be a hard pill for many to swallow, but rider fitness is a major issue. I was a trail guide in the 1970s and guided hundreds of people through the trails at Temple Hills in Jefferson Valley, NY. An overweight/unfit person was rare, and we always had 1 horse who could get the job done, but he didn't have to do it every ride or even every day. Forty years have now gone by and I have never seen so many "out-of-shape" people, many of them middle-aged horse owners who trail ride long hours, show and/or compete. We simply invite injury to ourselves and our horses when we are not fit!

I attended a clinic some years ago, and the clinician was going to help 3 young riders with problems they were having with their horses. The second participant was, to put it plainly, obese. Her problem was that her horse would not lope for her. I was thinking to myself, "This is a no brainer."

The clinician should have been discerning enough to preview the participants before they brought their horses into the arena. So, here he is, on the spot to help this young girl lope with her horse in the presence of all who attended. His reputation was on the line. With his help on the ground, the horse engaged into a lope. As they circled the arena, the rhythm of the obese girl bouncing in the saddle began to lag, so she was coming back down into the saddle as the horse was striding forward. All her weight hit the cantle of the saddle with each stride with a jolt to his spine until the horse could not take it anymore. He planted all 4 feet into the soft arena dirt, ejected his rider over his head and into the wall of the building, freeing himself from this misery. She turned out to be OK, but this could have been a different story, and unfortunately, for some it is. And what about the horse? How many are blamed for bad behavior when they were just trying to communicate from their perspective! Just because a horse is able to carry a human, it is unreasonable to expect them to perform with an unfit rider on their back, and for the most part, many of the horses today are unfit as well. Be honest with yourself and get fit for your own health AND your horse's health. Your horse will thank you!

As horse owners, we need to "*keep our side of the bargain*," a saying that means we will carry out the promises we've made as part of an agreement. In this case we are talking about the agreement between you and your horse. When Star steps off the trailer and into your care, you are making an agreement to provide for his every need, and as you read through the list here you will see that these needs are essential to the whole horse—body, mind and spirit. Horse ownership is a serious commitment to the welfare of another being. We need to understand and listen to our horse, and correctly identify and remedy the real causes of the issues that send far too many of them to sales, auctions, rescues, and euthanasia. Educate yourself so you can make informed choices. Find the best team of practitioners to help you keep your horse well, and don't be afraid to "*drive a hard bargain*" with the care you put your dollars into. You have the right to expect the best and should demand accountability when it falls short. Remember, in your quest to save a few dollars, you may find out that what you thought was a good deal actually turned out to be "*more than you bargained for*."

Links for further study:

Advanced Whole Horse Dentistry: <http://www.advancedwholehosedentistry.com/>

Dr. Deb Bennett: [www.equinestudies.org/ranger\\_2008/ranger\\_piece\\_2008\\_pdf1.pdf](http://www.equinestudies.org/ranger_2008/ranger_piece_2008_pdf1.pdf)

Native Hoof Articles: <http://www.nativehoof.com/articles>

Andy Beck: <http://www.equine-behavior.com/>

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