

Soundness means more than "not lame"

You often hear someone talk about a horse being "sound of wind and limb". It is an expression from the past used to describe a healthy horse without injuries or maladies that would make him unsuitable for "use" by a human.

When you plan to purchase a certain horse, it is wise to have a Veterinarian inspect the horse to see how healthy he is. The Vet will need to know your plans for the horse because a blemish on a leg that would cause no issues in performance would be a fault on a horse competing in Halter or Conformation classes. An elderly, babysitter horse for the small children would not need the same level of stamina nor leg soundness that a jumper or barrel horse would require.

Your Vet will give you a reasonable assessment of the condition of the equine, but can never guarantee that, two weeks down the road, he won't step in a hole or react to being ridden too hard. Once we have a decent degree of health and soundness to work with, it becomes our responsibility to preserve it!

Physical conditioning for a horse is very similar to conditioning of a human athlete. Plenty of slow work with lots of stretching and a variety of tasks will build the body without stressing it. Recognizing that horses' leg bones are not mature until age 4 and their spines do not calcify until age 6 will help you moderate the demands put upon them. The 2 year old equine, often required to carry a rider, is the equivalent of a 7 year old human child. It becomes obvious to most that working the very young horse is directly related to early breakdown of bone and tissue.



Every horse can have a day of extra exercise – they run too hard in turn out; you get caught in a storm on the trail and have to hurry home; your youngster gets spooked in schooling and runs a bit. When this happens, you can circumvent lameness or soreness by walking the horse “cool”. This is necessary especially before he drinks or eats because a hot horse drinking cool water can “founder” – the ultimate lameness.

Legs that have been stressed or injured need cold therapy to minimize bruising and inflammation. There are ice boots for horses and a bag of frozen peas works very well, but, you don't want to ice an area too long because it can cause tissue damage. Cold water streaming from a hose is one of the best healers of leg issues that do not have open wounds. We make sure the water is not wasted by hosing legs beside a tree or bush.

At the first sign of lameness, we look at the hooves immediately. Often, a horse that is suddenly three legged lame has an abscess in the hoof that he won't put weight upon. If there is no swelling or heat in the leg (signs of injury), the “foundation” of the hooves is a likely source. A horse bears heaps of weight upon 4 slender legs that are actually “digits”, each correlating to one of our fingers!

Heat felt in the hoof can mean an abscess, embedded object or the dreaded founder. A Veterinarian is needed.

The problem with inflammation inside the hoof is that its structure is like plywood or an onion. There are laminae in layers that surround the small bones of the foot. Swelling from stress, metabolic changes or injury will force the layers to separate and the hoof wall will pull away from the bone inside. The pain can be intolerable for the horse. If you ever feel a pounding pulse in the lower leg and heat in the hoof, call the Vet, it is an emergency.

The equine body is constantly working to balance itself and injuries to bone will cause a restructuring of minerals to surround and strengthen the injury. Weight is kept off of an injured leg (pain is useful this way) so that it can rest and heal. Inflammation can even act as a natural “splint” to support an area of injury.

Medications to relieve pain and swelling are useful because we must be humane, but if we use them so we can hurry the horse back into service, we will cause more damage in the long term. It is often a matter of what the horse represents to us. At our Sanctuary, each horse is a friend and comfort is our focus, on all levels. If an individual is on pain relievers, we are MORE cautious with them because they might not feel damage that is happening with the pain masked.

Soundness is sometimes a matter of perspective. I had our mare, Clementine turned out today for exercise. She is “over in the knees”, has had a skull fracture in her way past, came to us with a hoof split open up to her leg (that has healed!). If she stands around in her pen all the time, she gets stiff and sore. When leading her across the stable yard to turn out, it might appear that she is too sore to move much, but when she gets to move around (even gallop) in the bigger area, she improves.

A different horse might get much worse after exercise. Generally, old, set, “chronic” disorders can improve with movement; while acute, just happened injuries need rest and more rest. It is always an individual thing. Every horse is different just as every person is unique.