

Lameness in the Sport Horse

By Lindsay Brock/Jump Media

Part 1: My horse feels off, but why?

Most riders across varying disciplines have experienced the uneasy and tense feeling of worry when a once promising and successful horse is not quite right. Equine athletes are just that; athletes susceptible to soreness, lameness, and even injury as a result of rigorous competition and preparation. For sport horses competing in show jumping, eventing, and dressage disciplines in particular, the expectations are high and certain injuries become an ever-looming possibility.

This article is the first exploration into the most common lameness problems in sport horses as part of a three-part series in cooperation with the world-renowned veterinarians of Palm Beach Equine Clinic (PBEC), based in Wellington, FL. Dr. Ryan Lukens, who originally hails from Lebanon, OH, is a 2012 graduate of The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine. With a specific interest in sports medicine and sport horse lameness, Dr. Lukens will help us to pinpoint what lameness issues most commonly affect sport horses and why.

Subtle Lameness

For Dr. Lukens and any veterinarian endeavoring to solve a lameness problem, the most common issues are not always easily detected, making sport horse injuries tricky from both a diagnostic and treatment perspective.

“The most common lameness issues that we see in sport horses are not easily detected by spectators; they are subtle,” said Dr. Lukens, who is a fourth-generation veterinarian. “Riders may come to us saying that their horse ‘feels weak behind’ or is ‘heavy on the bit’ or ‘not smooth in the changes’ and it is up to us to find out why.”

While riders may be the first to sense a problem, the most obvious sign of lameness in sport horses presents as decrease in performance. When jumpers start pulling rails, or dressage and event horses begin receiving lower scores, all signs point toward a problem.

“Horses have an enormous ability to compensate for pain,” continued Lukens of a horse’s natural ability to offset a problem in order to seek comfort. “A small amount of pain may not make a horse unsound, but it can cause the horse to use its body in a slightly different way for weeks or even months without a drop in performance. This altered movement

can eventually lead to an injury of compensation and negatively affect training and competition.”

On the flip side, some injuries arise suddenly and present a serious and obvious threat to a horse’s soundness and performance. According to Dr. Lukens, one of the most common is the dreaded solar (foot) abscess. While severe in its arrival, an abscess is also easily diagnosed with the help of a veterinarian and relatively quick to treat, making a return to normal work and competition a regular outcome for many horses.

What Does It Mean?

For the lameness issue that is not so cut and dry as an abscess, one must look deeper than general soundness. At the first sign of a problem, a comprehensive clinical examination at rest by a veterinarian is essential. Despite certain symptoms that may point to a potential problem, it is important for a horse to be assessed as a whole first. Following an initial exam, the presenting lameness or problem will likely begin to reveal a possible cause.

“Historically, the most common lameness in any discipline is a problem in the front feet,” said Dr. Lukens, who joined the team at PBEC in 2012 to specialize in sports medicine (this is a bit repetitive from the opening paragraph, not sure it’s needed. “Problems often include joint or bursa inflammation, bruising, or straining of ligaments and tendons.”

Jumpers undergo stress on their front legs on the landing side of a fence, as well as torque placed on joints when making quick, tight turns. As a result, many commonly sustain injuries that include the thoracic back (spine), inflammation of the accessory ligament of the deep digital flexor tendon in the forelimb, deep digital flexor tendonitis within the forelimb hoof capsule, and inflammation of the suspensory ligament in the forelimb.

While jumper injuries are common in the forelimbs, Dr. Lukens, explains that dressage injuries are also commonly isolated to the hind limbs. Dressage requires an uphill way of going, placing more stress on the musculoskeletal system of a horse’s hind end, resulting in inflammation (or tearing) of the top of the suspensory ligament, suspensory branch injuries, degenerative joint disease of the hock, inflammation of the digital flexor tendon sheath, and sacroiliac joint, back, and neck



Wolfi and Ryan Lukens Photo courtesy of PBEC



Exam by Jump Media



Flexion by Jump Media

stress.

Finally, eventers commonly sustain suspensory and tendon damage, as well as blunt force trauma injuries due to the demanding nature of their sport. The varied terrain, the footing changes, and the demands are high within eventing. Most often, horses will present with inflammation of a suspensory ligament, an injury to a suspensory branch, inflammation to a superficial digital flexor tendon, stifle trauma, as well as back and sacroiliac joint region pain.

Prevention

“I would say the majority of competition horse lameness is the result of repetitive micro-trauma,” said Dr. Lukens. “The horse is a complicated athlete whose nervous system needs to work in sync with its musculoskeletal system. This athlete needs to have practiced precise, repeatable movements with subtle cues from its rider while adapting to changes in its environment.”

To help horses who are regularly competing at any level, Dr. Lukens recommends several tips to ease the effects of trauma and lower the risk of lameness, including the implementation of proper nutrition, a smart training schedule with rest and recovery, and routine veterinary maintenance.

“I enjoy deciphering lameness,” said Dr. Lukens, who is currently pursuing a certificate in Veterinary Medical

Manipulation to further his experience in pinpointing lameness. “It is exciting to be able to fix a subtle change in gait before it affects scores at competition. In the end, what I want to offer my clients is the option to keep their horses in the ring and competing happily.”

Coming Up...

This series continues in the January/February 2018 issue of *Competitive Equestrian* with a discussion of the most common diagnostic tests and standard treatments of lameness in sport horses with Dr. Kathleen Timmins. The three-part series will conclude with an outline of the best rehabilitation for sport horses and an outlook on the typical prognosis with Dr. Samantha Miles and Dr. Richard Wheeler. Stay tuned for more from the veterinarians at PBEC!

About Palm Beach Equine Clinic:

The veterinarians and staff of PBEC are respected throughout the industry for their advanced level of care and steadfast commitment to horses and owners. With 28 skilled veterinarians on staff, including three board-certified surgeons, internal medicine specialists, and one of very few board-certified equine radiologists in the country, PBEC leads the way in new, innovative diagnostic imaging and treatments. Palm Beach Equine Clinic provides experience, knowledge, availability, and the very best care for its clients. To find out more, please visit www.equineclinic.com or call 561-793-1599. “Like” them on Facebook to follow along on what happens in Wellington and more, and get news from their Twitter!