



Your horse's back

Tina Watkins

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YOUR HORSE'S BACK

I hear from a lot of clients that they are riding their horse regularly, they are getting lessons and they are putting a lot of love and time into the conditioning of their horse. These same riders are often very surprised and a little frustrated when I come to work on their horse and tell them that their horse is low in muscle tone in the back. A horse's back and core muscles are not always the easiest sets of muscles to target; these are often the last muscles to develop, and of course the first muscle to melt off.

So, how do we most effectively gain tissue in the back? We will discuss some exercises and considerations that will help build our horse's back.

The first place to start is to regularly assess the back and spine structurally. An owner that looks at the back and spine of their horse weekly or a few times a month will get to know what is normal for that horse, and what changes are taking place.

A simple way to assess is to run your flat hands over the back, looking for dips, hills, heat, coolness, hair ruffling, or anything that is asymmetrical from one side to the other. Next, use fingertip pressure to assess the long back tissue. Any horse can flinch with fast or hard strokes, so beware of the pressure applied. With fingertips in the middle of the large back muscle, press in with the pressure needed to push a thumbtack into a corkboard, and run down the length of the horse's back looking to see if he/she drops away from this moderate pressure. Horses, like people, are all unique so will respond to pressure differently. Each horse assessment should be based on every horse individually – comparisons between horses are not a good assessment.

The next easy assessment is the bounce test. Place your flat hand on the top of the spine, starting at the wither and working down to the SI joint (including the SI joint itself), where the spine connects to the pelvis. With a light rhythmic movement, it should be possible to bounce lightly on the spine. Pressure is again important – the goal is to assess reaction to light pressure, not to make a chiropractic adjustment! The spine should feel slightly elastic and 'give' to the bouncing pressure. Any spot that causes the horse to react negatively to the pressure is of note, and no spot should be completely rigid. The wither will feel more firm than the mid- and lower back, but the more times this assessment is done, the easier it will be to determine your horse's normal.

Once the static assessments are done, it is important to assess the horse dynamically, during a ride for example. Perhaps something you noticed during your ride that may have been passed off as a behavioral problem or a lack of ability, may be attributed to back pain. An anecdotal estimate from my practice is that probably 70% of riding horses are functioning with some degree of back pain. Most horses are masters at compensating and coping to get through a ride. It is up to the savvy rider to analyze if the horse is functioning sub-optimally with a sore back.

The problem is that every horse will communicate with their rider about back pain in different ways. Some will over use their neck as a lever to take some weight from the back; some drop the sternum to get away



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from the pressure; some load one leg more than the other to rebalance the back and find relief. The horse is very adept at postural rebalancing to allow the rider to stay in the saddle. The equine back is a large suspensorium that is strung between the pillars of the legs. The body has an immeasurable number of ways to compensate from back pain. This can make it difficult to tell if a horse struggles with back pain. The following list of yes/no questions can help clarify your horse's back muscle situation.

- Does your horse exhibit measurable difference in feel from warm up to the work stage of the ride?
- Does your horse have physical signs of thicker limb, shoulder and hip muscle as compared to the back?
- Does your horse react to the saddle and or girthing?
- Does your horse have a hard time coming on to or staying on the bit?
- Does your horse consistently go to the neck as a lever, feel heavy in the hand, or prefer the forehand?
- Does your horse lean one way or drop a hip or shoulder?
- Does your horse fatigue quickly during collection, or start to act out when the work gets harder?
- Does your horse speed up on the landing side of the fence?
- Does your horse stop, or refuse to do certain exercises?

This list could go on and on depending on the temperament of the horse and the severity of the pain. Many riders may be tempted to excuse the behavior – “he always reacts to having the girth done up, that's just him”, for example; or riders may feel that most of the above questions can be solved by better training and schooling. While these concerns can be true to some extent, it is likely that these issues stem from compensation or pain and may have been extenuated over time.

Many riders reading this article will have some low degree of back pain. It doesn't prevent you from going to work or doing your normal activities, but it does mean you will compensate and use other parts of your body to pick up the slack.

I maintain that horses are communicating with us all the time. We owe it to them to pay attention to their small cues and help them be their best.

Next month we will look at some easy exercises and stretches to help target the equine back.