

## Understanding Equine Health, Part I—Common Issues And Treatments

by Russ Vento



Let me begin this month's column by saying I'm not a veterinarian or a veterinarian's assistant, and I have never been to veterinary school. My observations are based on my experiences with horses over the past 30 years, and I hope that sharing them will help others better understand their horse's health and physical welfare. Why not just leave all health issues up to my/your/our veterinarian? Because in my opinion, our wealth of knowledge is up to us. If we want to know more about our horses, we can get involved. Yes, we trust our trainers and our veterinarians—but these are our horses and it's our money, and if we want to, we can learn to understand what is going on with them.

These days, there is an unprecedented amount of physical problems that can affect our horses. It's not that there are more things wrong with horses now than before. The reason is that we have the technology to identify more complaints than in years past. X-rays, MRIs, bone scans—all of these and more

alert us to ailments that previously went undetected. With that knowledge has come, or will come, the ability to fix or at least manage conditions that in the past we simply had to live with each day.

So, to get started, here are a few physical conditions that are common in Arabians today.

### Common Equine Health Issues

*Navicular disease* is something which we all grew up being. About 15 years ago, when I purchased Monrovia X, the reaction to navicular was "Oh, God! Don't do anything!" She flunked several pre-purchase exams because of it, and then went around the ring beating all of us who had tried to buy her—and she was never taking a lame step or having any vet bills. When her owner asked if we wanted to buy her, we jumped at it (no vet check, no anything) and took her home for my daughter Skyler. I talked to Dr. John Sparks, and what I learned was that navicular is often the easiest thing to manage with Isoxsuprine and shoeing. Over three years, Monrovia won 12 national championships and reserves for my family. Many other horses have trotted right through their navicular disease to enjoy successful show careers, too.

So, what is navicular, and how does Isoxsuprine help? It is my understanding that navicular disease occurs when the navicular bones break down by getting holes in them. The Isoxoprene works as a vasodilator (it widens blood vessels), so that when a horse takes a stride, it is easier for the blood to go through, and there is no pain.

Isoxsuprine has a lot of other applications as well. We use it in mares, especially older ones, to increase the blood flow in their uterus and make it easier for them to get in foal. Particularly at Scottsdale, where the ground must be prepared for a lot of uses and is pretty hard, we put the show horses on Isoxsuprine for those two weeks just as a protection mechanism. They don't mind eating it, and at \$110 to \$120 a month, it's not expensive.

Another condition that we see frequently is *Cushings disease*. Basically, it is a pituitary tumor or pituitary imbalance. Among its effects are that it can cause a horse to grow long hair, lose weight, drink water excessively, and eat excessively, as if they're always hungry. It also can cause imbalanced equilibrium, and can result in founder. Much is still being learned about Cushings, so that is by no means all. Is it going to kill your horse? Probably not, but the things that come along with it, like founder, can.

One important point to note is that there is Cushings and there is "insulin deficiency," and veterinary medicine is just starting to figure out the difference between the two. If your horse is diagnosed with Cushings, I think it is important to find out whether it is Cushings or insulin deficiency. It is my understanding that to do this, veterinarians do a dexopression test, which is that they give a horse dexamethasone. The process is that you have your horse fast, then feed it, and then before its second meal, draw blood. Diagnosis can be done from the information obtained in the blood test.

I'm not sure what causes Cushings. We used to see it more in older horses, but in recent years it has been found in younger ones as well. It is common in show horses. I'm told that it is hereditary, and with the incidence in show horses, I have to wonder if our high protein diet has any influence. I am sure we'll learn more in the future.

The best news is that in my experience, Cushings is manageable, but the key is to catch it early. There is a treatment called pergolide in liquid, powder, and pill form. One factor to be aware of is that treatment can affect as a stallion's semen; there is a link between the pituitary gland and the testicles and libido.

### Common Treatments And Products

There is an array of treatments and products available for equine ailments. The thing to remember is that some products work on some horses and some on others. It is important that we

consider all aspects of our horse's life when choosing what can be beneficial. (It is amazing what factors influence how a product works on a horse. For instance, I've seen certain supplements be useful in a cold climate and be ineffective or even detrimental in a hot climate. So the message is: About all these things, take the time, talk to people, and educate yourself. Don't just say, "Mr. Smith in Barn C has been injecting all his horses and he's beating me, so I'll do it too." Learn and listen and find out.)

*Chiropractic.* When is a chiropractor helpful for your horse? One good example would be a horse that is sound and doing its job one day, and then all of a sudden is grumpy, doesn't want to work, is heavy on one side, or gives the appearance of being lame, etc. There can be many reasons for this—like, suppose you put it in the trailer, hauled it down the road, and (we have all had this experience) some dingbat pulled in front of you and you had to slam on the brakes or swerve real fast. The horse was tied in the trailer, and it wrenched its back or neck. Using a chiropractor in moderation can readjust the horse, and a lot of these simple issues can go away.

Unfortunately, we don't have great chiropractors everywhere, and using a *good* chiropractor is important. I have seen instances with not-so-good chiropractors that horrified me. I saw one take a horse's head, bend the head to its tail, and gave it a big shove. That was followed by a loud cracking sound. So, I can't overemphasize how important it is to listen to your horse and judge the chiropractor on how he or she treats the horse. If your horse really isn't liking it, it is probably not the right thing for that horse. There are a lot of different adjustments that are less aggressive. Your horse will tell you if a treatment is something that is going to work for it or not.

In my opinion, it is also important to use chiropractic services in moderation. Think about what you would choose for yourself; once a week might be good. At least, don't try it every day, because it can be a little exhausting. It is a relief, yes, but horses need a little time recover. If

you are planning on showing the horse, you might want to allow 24 hours or so for it to recover its energy before putting it back to work. I'm told that when a chiropractor finishes a session with a horse, that horse often will take a deep breath and "mouth." That's what I always look for when a practitioner is adjusting a back or a neck, or wherever. I'm looking for a response from the horse's mouth that it got some relief from the treatment.

*Acupuncture.* Acupuncture, as we all know, originated in China and has been around forever. It is especially helpful in back problems, and is used widely in the show horse industry. Good examples of aches for which acupuncture is especially helpful are, say, when a horse has been cast in a stall or is sore after a trailer ride.

The process is that the acupuncturist finds the pressure points of a horse's body and puts in a needle with a little B12 (you can use different products, but I think B12 works the fastest). Immediately, you will see a release of the tense muscles. Saddle your horse, and go show it. Sometimes the relief can last for weeks. It's a great tool and a quick fix, but a healthy quick fix.

*Sports Medicine.* Like anything else, sports medicine in moderation is great. A lot of times, though, we need to perform the sports medicine on the owners more than the horses! They think they need it to get the horses in the ring or to train on a daily basis.

One of the most common issues we see in performance horses is inflammation of the joint, and one of the most widely-used treatments is to inject the joint. Before we do that, however, we should check to make sure that is what the situation requires. It is possible that the real culprit behind a horse's rough action is, for instance, an imbalanced shoe. Bad shoeing can affect everything; if the shoe is a quarter of an inch off, it can affect the horse's back or its hock or stifle. Everything starts with shoeing—a balanced horse is a happy horse. So, to determine if your horse has a valid joint problem, flex the joint and hold it up for two minutes. Then have your horse trot. If it doesn't return to a normal gait in six steps, then that joint is bugging it.

One of the best-known treatments is, as mentioned, the injection of hyaluronic acid to get rid of inflammation. Typically, the relief lasts from two to six months, and it is not used more than every three months. It is not a quick fix, but it does help stressed joints. However, something to remember is that if you inject the joint and a week later the horse is having a serious problem, then it's time to have an x-ray or an MRI, because the treatment is not holding. Your horse has a more serious problem.

The most common joint needling injection is the hocks. The hocks hold all the horse's weight. This is true even for western horses; people forget and think that because western horses are going slow, there is no pressure on those hocks or joints, but there is. We're asking that horse to get its hind end underneath it and go at a collected, slow gait; so, there is just as much pressure on the hocks as when we push an English horse up from its hind end, and then ask it for speed.

I am a firm believer in Legend® and Adequan® on a monthly basis. At a national horse show, it doesn't hurt to give a horse its regular Adequan®, and then give it two doses of Legend® within that week or 10-day period of the show. Legend® and Adequan® both help with the joints, and Legend® helps with the suspensories as well.

Next month, we'll take a look at some new treatments and products that may be useful—or necessary—for your horse in the future. More importantly, we'll look into the best treatment of all: a preventative maintenance program!

For anyone who would like to email questions, topics, or comments, I can be reached at [info@battagliafarms.com](mailto:info@battagliafarms.com). I'd love to hear from you.

*Russell Vento Jr. has been involved in the Arabian industry for 25 years, and since 1989 has been a partner in Battaglia Farms. He was honored twice with APAHA Amateur Horseman Awards. To date, he has owned or shown 30 U.S., Canadian and National Show Horse national champions, and he now enjoys watching his daughter Skyler win on many of the horses with whom he was successful. He has been a Large R USAE/AHA judge since 1996.*