

is REHABILITATION required?

Many physical or behavioral issues can be avoided if we simply pay attention and listen to what our horses are trying to tell us.

By Jochen Schleese, CMS, CSFT, CEE

This horse is standing with his hind legs splayed and out of body alignment, indicating that the animal is in pain even when motionless.



Recently, I was called out by the owner of a horse who said she was having difficulties with him under saddle. I was supposed to perform one of my 80-point diagnostic evaluations on site, and determine the possible cause for some of his issues.

I was shocked when the groom brought out a beautiful, but somehow incredibly sad-looking horse. I have rarely encountered such a picture of absolute dejection. With some probing, I learned that the owner rode her horse maybe twice a month. It was the trainer who rode for the most part – with his own saddle, used for pretty much every horse he trained. This saddle was clearly too narrow in the gullet channel, and was constantly pressing on the horse's spinal vertebral processes and causing nerve damage.

The saddle was also much too long for this horse's saddle support area, and lay on his back about 1½" behind the 18th thoracic vertebra. As I watched the groom ride, the saddle began sliding forward on the shoulder during the walk – which at best affected the horse's freedom of movement, and at worst could cause chipping at the cartilaginous cap.


Getting to the bottom of things

What really saddened me was that this horse was being sold because he was "difficult to handle for the owner" and just "too much horse". Too much horse? He was simply reacting in a way that would lessen or eliminate the pain.

In many years of experience as both a rider and a saddlemaker and fitter, I have discovered that for the most part, a horse will

always try to indicate to us that something is amiss before "bad behavior" becomes the norm. Horses cannot speak, so we need to learn to read their signals. Unfortunately, many riders are too inexperienced and the trainers too "self-absorbed" to listen.

Defensive actions from the horse are often his last resort, but these behaviors are often considered simple stubbornness or contrariness, and are punished. The horse really has no chance, and resigns himself to the reality of the situation. If horses could react with tears or by voicing their discomfort, they might get more empathy from their riders. These difficulties in cross-species communication often result in owners getting rid of horses because they are manifesting "unpredictable behavior"; there is no consideration that the cause could actually be our fault and have nothing to do with the horse's character.

In this sad but relatively common situation, a number of unfortunate factors came together: an absolutely inappropriate saddle that wasn't fitted to this horse nor even made for this horse; poor training methodology; and insufficient empathy and knowledge from both the trainer and the owner. Education and cooperation between owners, trainers, veterinarians, farriers and other equine professionals is critical if something is to change. 



Jochen Schleese is a Certified Master Saddler who graduated from Passier and came to Canada as Official Saddler at the 1986 World Dressage Championships. He registered the trade of saddlery in North America in 1990. Jochen's lifelong study of equine development, saddle design, the bio-mechanics of horse and rider in motion, and the effects of ill-fitting saddles, led to the establishment of Saddlefit 4 Life in 2005 (saddlefit4life.com), a global network of equine professionals dedicated to protecting horse and rider from long term damage.