

# IS MY HORSE SORE?

by Dusdee Shepperson

I am not sure when the first time was that I started trying to help my own horses get better. Maybe it was growing up with a lot of good cow vets around but not many who were passionate about horses. Somehow I found myself treating a horse for one thing or another. My horses have been my best teachers--although an expensive education at times, they have been well worth it.

Some people are born with an eye or ability to see/feel lameness--some are not--whether having that is a curse or blessing is debatable. I used to drive my team roper husband crazy saying a horse is off on his left hind, right front, etc. He made fun of me for awhile, saying, "you think every horse is off." I got the last laugh, as now he's beside me doing the same thing. Ironically I did not grow up with this mentality. I mainly rode

horses as a colt trainer and helping out ranchers. There were no "my horse doesn't feel right so I can't ride him today," days. You saddled up and rode all day, sometimes many days in a row. I do miss that, because to quote a good friend of mine, it gives them work ethic.

I was in my early twenties before I really embarked on the quest of helping horses feel better to perform better. I had married and we were ranching and trying to barrel race/rope some on the side. I didn't even know what injecting a horse meant--I had no clue you could run a horse on bute or banamine or anything else. I just 'trained' my horses through everything. Now I look back and wish I had the therapy tools with those tough horses, and I wonder how far they could have gone!

*"My advice is not intended in any way to replace your veterinarian, and I am hoping it helps you know when you need to seek your veterinarian and get your horse some help."*

**How do you know when your horse is sore?** There is no simple answer. I have learned that a horse that works well and consistently, does not just say, "I think I will be a jerk today and not listen at all." He has been giving you little signs all along that things were going wrong, and you either didn't see them, feel them or chose to ignore them. I am going to try to cover some of the little signs before they become a big problem.

## *Little signs to look for..... Out of character behavior.*

If you have a horse that is normally pretty good to catch but now he is a little standoffish, maybe crabs at you; that is a pretty good indicator he is not happy. You are brushing him, hit a spot and see his ears flinch--something didn't feel good there. Maybe he turns to bite or kick--a stronger way of saying he doesn't feel right. Pay attention to the very small signs--ears relaxed; eyes soft; lip soft or tight and pouty; tail soft or switching and agitated? I like to pay attention to what they are saying before I ever saddle them.

**1. Moving to saddling:** pay attention as you put your blanket on--is your horse ok or is he already getting agitated. Agitation can happen because a certain lay of blanket irritates them; I have had a horse win an expensive blanket and hated it until it was broke in. Something about the fibers was very uncomfortable--I could feel it was very rough! You can take a brush or curry and get the new feel off of it. If you need to you can use a thin hospital felt under it for awhile.

**2. Saddle fit....**sometimes the saddle fits the rider so the rider loves it, but the horse only tolerates it and slowly begins losing the roundness in their turns, the sharpness in their turns, maybe even refusing to go in or running up the fence. It is essential that you have a saddle that fits both you and your horse if you want to win! There are many saddle makers and companies that offer custom saddle fitting. Thermal imaging is also a fun way to see how the saddle is fitting, and/or

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how you as a rider are sitting on your horse, (you may be surprised). Sometimes a horse that is crabby when you go to cinch them, really just needs a good stretch of their front legs and their posterior pectorals massaged. I also do not tighten the cinch until I am ready to get on. I like it snug enough that they won't have a wreck while I get them ready, but not as tight as during a run. Paying attention to all of these details will help prevent issues once you are in the saddle.

3. I like to lunge my horse a little before I get on. People assume it is because my horse is broncy. In reality, I use this time to watch them move. Are they soft and fluid in both directions with all feet moving equally well? Are they a little short on one stride? How is their attitude? If they are playful and their eye is soft and happy, we know they are ready to go for a ride. If the same horse has his head lower and is not very excited to move out, he is saying something is not right. One of my horses can lope a very small circle around me when he is feeling great. If he is a little sore, he will only trot in that small circle and lope only on a longer line. Pay attention to the small details so they can be addressed now.

4. Bridling your horse--you should still be watching for little signs that your horse is not happy. A horse that is happy to be bridled is not going to be fighting you when you go to put it on. Some of them will even grab the bit playfully--this is a good sign--biting at you is not. When my horse is sore in his poll, he will get very cranky when I go to move the headstall over his ears. I will try to massage his poll to get him by for now and get him adjusted as soon as possible. He lets me know when it feels better by being ok with me sliding the headstall over his ears.

5. Now I will tighten my cinch up, walk them a little more and step on, watching for any behavior out of the ordinary. I had a new saddle I was trying and one of my mares started wanting to buck; luckily I knew her well enough to know that she was telling me that saddle did not feel right. Even after I stepped off and lunged her and backed her a lot on the ground, she was very rough when I tried to lope circles, cross firing and switching her tail a lot and bouncing. When I

went back to her other saddle, she stopped the misbehavior--giving me big flashing neon signs she was not happy with the new saddle.

6. I like to warm up my horses by asking them to move their body. I will ask my horse to flex his head both directions at a standstill and flexing the poll. Some of my horses are softer than others and some are stiffer. Know what is normal with your horse so that you are in tune with them when an issue arises. It is good to ask them to move their feet and ask for the bend with motion. Ideally your horse is equally soft and fluid in both directions with and without movement. I also like to counter arc them both directions, telling you if you have a soreness issue starting. Any place that there is a catch is a place that during a run could turn into a much bigger issue.

7. How is your horse acting during your warm up routine? Is he prancing and dancing and not focused? First ask yourself if you are calm and focused--is he feeding off of your emotions? It is very common to see horses that are rattled during their warm up, hot in the alley or refusing at the gate. It is very hard by the time they are at that stage, to know if it is a behavioral, training or pain issue. If they have passed all the previous stages with flying colors, then I would have them evaluated for lameness or pain issues. Sometimes it can be a simple adjustment, acupuncture treatment, or alter-native therapy and they will be happy to perform again. Other times it may require more rigorous veterinary care and diagnosis.

*“My horse was great to warm up, calm in the alley, but flew by the first barrel and ran up the fence. I rode him straight out of the arena over to the veterinarian who does chiropractic and acupuncture and he/she said there is nothing wrong with him. I am so frustrated.”*

This is where I feel there is a chasm between alternative therapists and veterinarians and I am trying to help bridge it with the many veterinarians that I work with.

I once stood with two very excellent veterinarians. The three of us were evaluating my futurity colt for a lameness issue and trying to pinpoint it. As I watched him move, I saw an issue in the shoulder and diagonal hip. The two veterinarians said, "it's up high." Thinking we are on the same page, I said, "that is what I thought too--right shoulder to left hip". They both look at me like I just stepped off of planet Mars and said, "no, up high", like suspensory. We all got a chuckle out of it, because that is the difference in our training--we still laugh about it.

I am not afraid to keep seeking an answer if I know my horse has a problem and I can't find it. I use many alternative therapies in conjunction with veterinary medicine as needed. If you know

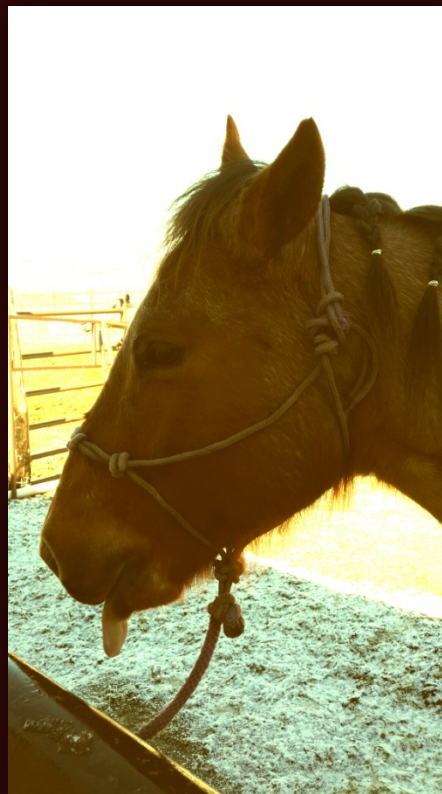
that your training and foundation are solid and your horse's behavior has changed, it is time to start seeking answers and get to the bottom of the issue before it becomes too difficult to fix. It is really much easier to know on a finished, solid performance horse, than it is to know on a young futurity colt. A young colt can one day be a rock star and the next day want to look at the butterfly fluttering by the third barrel. It is when a bad behavior is repeated that you should begin to worry your colt is sore and needs evaluation.

*"I hope that by paying attention to the subtle signs you will be able to do a lot of prevention with your performance horse and in so doing, you and your horse will have many happy rides!"*

*Dusdee*



In the photo on the left, note how the horse has an expression of poor attitude--his ears are flat, his lower lip is puckered and his eye is tight and not trusting. This is not the time to saddle him and step on. Going over him to see if he is in pain before he is even saddled is the smart/safe thing to do.



This photo was taken about 30 minutes later, after I had spent some time going over him and massaging some knots out of his muscles. Notice how his eye is now large and soft, his ears are up and listening to me and he is releasing endorphins, licking his lips and his bottom lip is no longer puckered. Now, I would be ready to saddle him.

Dusdee Shepperson is an avid barrel racer and trainer, an occasional team roper and a passionate equine therapist who has been doing alternative therapies for over 15 years. She constantly seeks to learn more and improve ways to help horses and riders feel and perform at their best. Dusdee is an authorized distributor for THEraPlate. She can be reached on Facebook at The Electric Horse & Rider, or visit her website at Lost Wells Stables.