

Understanding lameness and its impact on the performance and welfare of the horse. How can the horse owner recognize the lameness, relate it to the horse's performance problems and consider the well-being of the horse?

***Dr. Terry Swanson** is partner and president at the Littleton Large Animal Clinic in Colorado. He is an FEI qualified veterinarian in eventing, jumping, dressage and reining, and was Colorado Veterinary Medical Association Veterinarian of the Year in 1998. He was also named to the International Farriers Hall of Fame in 2005. In 2009, Dr. Swanson authored the popular Western Horseman book, *Understanding Lameness*.*

The definition of lames as written by the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) is: abnormality of gait caused by pain or mechanical abnormalities. This means the horse is limping and the degree of lameness or limping varies from barely detectable to unable to move.

AAEP has also written a classification of lameness based on the severity, Grade 1 to Grade 5. Here is the definition for the classifications:

Grade 1: Your horse's lameness is difficult to observe; it isn't consistently apparent, even when the horse carries weight or works on an incline or hard surface.

Grade 2: Your horse's lameness is difficult to observe when he moves at a walk or trot in a straight line. However, the lameness is consistently apparent when he carries weight, circles and /or works on an incline or hard surface.

Grade 3: At this stage, your horse's lameness is always observable at a trot.

Grade 4: Your horse is obviously lame. He nods his head, shortens his stride and/or moves with obvious pain.

Grade 5: your horse doesn't want to move-or isn't able to do so. He bears no weight on his affected leg.

I would like to talk about lameness affecting the performance of a working horse or a horse in training. While managing performance horses, most of the time we are dealing with Grade 1 to Grade 2 lameness and occasionally a Grade 3 lameness. The Grade 3 lameness is usually seen following an obvious injury. These are the horses that are not performing to their ability because of the lameness or become acutely lame during work. In general Grade 4 and Grade 5 lameness are the result of accidents and there is not any doubt that they cannot to continue work.

The rider or trainer needs to continually be aware of changes in a horse's way of going, the horse's ability to perform or changes in the horse's attitude. These things can be indications of lameness before there is noticeable limping obvious lameness. Of course these same changes can be related directly to training, resistance to training or lack of ability to perform as needed, not always lameness.

When reviewing a horse's history with an owner, often there is indication of behavioral changes before there is an obvious lameness. In contrast there are situations in which the horse has training problems because he has not been properly prepared to do the job, lead changes are a good example of this complexity. The horse may not be able to take a lead or hold the lead behind. This could be because of a lameness or soreness, but it could also be because he has not been properly prepared to take and hold the correct lead. When assessing a horse with a problem all these things need to be taken into consideration. The veterinarian, trainer and or owner need to work as a team to assess the horse.

For cases with more subtle lameness, it can be helpful to try the horse while administering daily anti inflammatory medications such as phenylbutazone (Bute) or firocoxib(Equioxx). If there is a lameness problem as opposed to a training problem, most horses will be better while on the medication. This can be important information.

A real important point to remember is that if a horse is having some lameness problem it is in his and the owners best interest to investigate the problem and begin an immediate management plan. This is to assure the longevity of the horse's performance career and the well being of the horse.

Change in attitude, a young horse may just be bored and become resistant, however a trained horse which enjoys his work should not all of a sudden become resistant. Be alert for these changes. Other significant changes: a horse which begins having trouble with turning, a horse that is not stopping correctly, a horse that cannot lope comfortably in a consistent circle, a rope horse that cannot log or pull a steer, a dressage horse that begins having trouble with lateral movements or any horse that has trouble with steady head placement. Any of these concerns can be physical problems or training problems and the rider and veterinarian need to work together to understand each horse's situation. Another consideration for these training problems is dentistry. Be sure your horses working in performance have had their teeth properly prepared.

It is important for the horseman to recognize when the horse is lame. Knowing exactly what is the cause or specific injury can be difficult to figure out, but knowing something is not "right" or the horse is "off" is the critical issue. At that point working with his veterinarian is the first step to resolution.

Recognizing a limp is a matter of experience and observation. A horseman needs to have an eye and feel for the horse that is moving in a smooth rhythmical manner. Change from this pattern is an indication of lameness. Observing or riding the horse at a trot will best demonstrate the lameness. At the trot each leg supports the body weight independently during a part of the stride. For the front leg, the head, neck and shoulder of the affected leg rises, when that leg is loading or loaded. The amount of altered head, neck and shoulder motion will be related to the degree of lameness. For most cases the lameness will show more with the affected leg on the inside of the circle, however there are enough exceptions to this rule that the observer needs to watch closely as to which side is rising as the legs bear weight. For the rear leg the head goes down as the affected rear leg is loading or loaded. This takes some practice to be watching the horse's head and neck at the same time you are observing the rear legs. With the rear leg, the hip area of the affected leg will often rise higher than the opposite leg as it bears weight. As with the front leg often the affected leg is on the inside of the circle, but the outside rear leg could also be the affected leg depending on the cause of the lameness. For either the front leg or rear leg, the affected leg will often have a shortened anterior stride or in other words it doesn't reach forward as far as the controlateral leg.

For an experienced rider it may be easier to feel the lameness in the saddle and determine which leg is lame. The main clues for the front leg is the rising of the head neck and shoulder as the leg becomes weight bearing, reluctance to move freely in the direction of the affected leg and the feeling the horse is not reaching as far with that leg. Regarding the rear leg, the rider will usually notice the affected rear quarter rising higher bumping the saddle on that side and as with the front leg there may be reluctance or gait roughness turning towards the affected side. The evaluation of your horse will be most helpful if you can do the movement on a smooth, relative flat and firm surface. This applies to in hand or under saddle. It will be easier for the horse to move in a consistent manner on a smooth surface and the harder surface will cause the horse to show more lameness than a soft surface. Again there are exceptions.

Once the affected leg is identified, it should be closely examined. Feeling the whole length and all the way around it, looking for specific areas of soreness, swelling, small wounds or heat. Using the opposite limb for specific comparison is helpful. Pay particular attention to the hoof and especially the bottom for evidence of a foreign body or puncture wound. It is important to use a hoof pick and clean out the sulci of the frog as well as the sole area. Also specifically evaluate all joints and the flexor tendons below the knee to the foot. If there are not clear signs as to which leg is involved or what part of the leg is involved be sure to examine all four legs as mentioned above.

Once you have completed your exam contact your veterinarian and relate as much information as you can about the lameness. This will allow your veterinarian to make some preliminary judgments about your horse's lameness and he will be better informed to give you first aid information for management of the problem and make an informed decision on the necessity of a veterinary examination.

It is very important to identify the cause of the lameness so it can be adequately managed for healing. For some lameness, a short rest with anti-inflammatory medications could be all that is needed, depending upon the work load, some horses could continue with a certain level of work, but the important thing is to identify the cases that further work or exercise could significantly compromise the future soundness and welfare of that individual horse.