

Massage helps in horses' conditioning

CONDITION, CONDITION AND condition your horse some more?

That should be the mantra sung daily by any who ride in competitive events and strenuous trail rides.

A horse left idle in a pasture or stall most of the time, then expected to run and compete, will often pull a muscle or bow a tendon.

No doubt it will spend the next few days in pain resulting from sore muscles.

Is that fair to the horse?

Would a high school track coach allow a youth to compete who hasn't trained and conditioned his or her muscles?

No.

Not only would the likelihood of injuring be high, but the participant wouldn't be competing up to potential — or have the winning edge.

Robert Altman, a nationally certified and licensed massage practitioner for humans and horses in the state of Washington, says he can't emphasize enough the importance of giving your horse, and yourself, regular workouts to keep the muscles in tip-top shape.

I caught up with Robert at the home of **Linda Allen**, where he was giving a lecture to members of Discovery Pony Club.

Robert recently moved to Port Townsend from the East Coast, where he's spent the past 20 years working with horses, riders and trainers who compete in the highest levels of dressage and sport horse events, including at Olympic level.

For many injuries during competition, the primary problem may result from the lack of proper conditioning.

Robert says in all his years of working as a sports therapist with event horses, he's seen firsthand how muscle restriction and soreness has limited the

PENINSULA HORSEPLAY

Karen Griffiths



success and performance of many good horses from novice to Olympic levels.

Though many injuries occur during the heat of competition,

further investigation often reveals that the primary problem can be traced back to when the horse was being conditioned for the job at hand.

He goes on to say that strength and flexibility are the goals of any athletic training program.

In sport horse events, conditioning exercises are designed to build up power for running and jumping while maintaining suppleness for the lateral work of dressage.

Stretching exercises, both under the saddle or from the ground, can only do so much to extract maximum performance from the event horse.

As many human athletes have discovered, introducing massage therapy into their training program gives them the edge they need.

Nature of muscles

Muscles work in pairs. For every movement, as one muscle contracts, an opposite muscle must release to allow the joint to move freely.

To bend an elbow, a bicep must contract while a tricep must release. All movement is performed in this manner.

A muscle is born with a set number of fibers. Although they can never be added to, they can be lost to atrophy.

Atrophy can be caused



KAREN GRIFFITHS/FOR PENINSULA DAILY NEWS

Equine massage therapist Robert Altman discusses various methods and benefits of equine massage therapy with Discovery Pony Club members, from left, Taylor Richard, Aimee Allen, Chelsea Weaver, Rachel Dorsey with the horse Chance, Taylor Balkan and Sydney Balkan.

by lack of nerve impulse through lack of exercise or disease, trauma or the effects of extreme overuse.

The opposite of atrophy is hypertrophy. This is the enlargement of the muscle fibers through exercise.

Hypertrophy is what we are trying to achieve through conditioning.

Easy exercise will not build muscle.

It is only in the last 25 percent of muscle capacity that hypertrophy will occur.

Spasms

Muscle tightening is the natural physiological response to trauma, be it from a blow or some form of overuse.

This will initially show itself as an area sore to pressure or touch, along with a restriction in range of motion.

A muscle spasm will also likely occur. A spasm is defined as a bunch of fibers unable to secure their own release, commonly perceived as a knot of tissue.

As the muscle in question is asked to release to allow movement, additional effort is required to overcome the tightness.

Continued use of this muscle pair will cause increased spasms and pain, eventually leading to the potential for a muscle tear.

Muscle tightening will affect the quality of movement as certain muscles are called upon to compensate for weakness, tightness or soreness in other areas.

It is common to find that a horse that is off in one hind quarter is also tight in the opposite shoulder.

Synchronization suffers

when a horse must overcome the resistance of a tight muscle.

Muscle soreness

Soreness that occurs immediately after exercise and may last several hours is not necessarily cause for concern.

A more comprehensive warm-up and cool-down will help eliminate much of this type of problem.

Delayed onset of soreness — 24 to 48 hours after work — may be an indication of some degree of tearing of muscle fibers.

This type of soreness usually is found when a new exercise is introduced or level of work is increased too quickly.

Muscle soreness that is accompanied by swelling or heat should be brought to the attention of a veteri-

narian.

Soreness that accompanies a weight-bearing lameness indicates a veterinary problem as well.

For more information or to make an appointment, contact Robert at 360-379-6732 or rkaltman@rcn.com.

Events:

■ **Feb. 28, 2 p.m.** Try-outs for Peninsula Junior Rodeo, 1370 Woodcock Road, Port Angeles.

For information, contact Teresa Ballou at 360-928-9691 or teresaballou@q.com.

Karen Griffiths' column, Peninsula Horse Play, appears every other Wednesday.

If you have a horse event, clinic or seminar you would like listed, please e-mail Griffiths at horse-play.kbg@olympus.net at least two weeks in advance. You can also write Griffiths at PDN, P.O. Box 1330, Port Angeles, WA 98362.