

The “5 T’s”

The old saying “no hoof no horse” certainly has merit. As a full time farrier I see a lot of hooves of all shapes and sizes. Some people who contact me have a chronically lame horse with no where else to turn. Others just want a balanced trim. How I go about helping each horse is different than most traditional farriers. Several factors affect how the horse stands, moves and heals himself, and should be addressed by any equine professional.

It was Dr. Judith Shoemaker that coined the phrase “the 5-T’s”. While attending The School Of Integrative Hoof Care in south-eastern PA, I listened to her lectures and watched her treatments on different horses. Watching her work and studying her material has changed the way I trim a foot. So what are the 5-T’s? They are the five most important ways that we can help, or hinder our equine friends.

1-Teeth

2-Toes

3-Tack

4-Training

5-Turnout

Provided the horse is fed an appropriate diet these factors all influence the health of the horses mind and body. Here is the run-down:

Teeth

Dentistry is probably the most important management practice we can provide for our animals. Properly done it can prolong life, improve performance, balance body functions, prevent disease and improve the quality of life more than any other care we give them. Conversely, poorly done dentistry and mouth problems can cause more pain, lameness and neurologic imbalance than any other injury, illness or poor management practice!

The stomatognathic system is a complex chain that involves the skull, jaw, hyoid, upper cervical vertebrae, sternum, dentoalveolar and temporomandibular (TMJ) joints. The skeletal/dural/spinal connection, through mechanical and neurological means is constantly affecting the spinal chord and therefore the entire body. The constant movement of the jaw and it’s connections- in eating, breathing and gaing- acts as a gyroscopic balancing mechanism for the whole system. Dental abnormalities can create major faults in this system and manifest as dysfunction *anywhere* else in the body.

One of the main priorities of the horses nervous system is to maintain balance. 90% of the input to the brain comes from mechanoreceptors, stretch receptors and

joint receptors all over their body and feet. ! *80% of that 90% comes from C-2 forward!* So as you can see, dentistry and farriery are of ultimate importance in establishing the neurological balance necessary for function and healing, as the feet and the teeth are the interface of the nervous system with gravity. A quote from Dr. Shoemaker;

“Just a good broodmare float is an oxymoron. All horses deserve complete dental care. A veterinary degree does not denote expertise in dentistry. The training currently available does not always address the profound neurologic significance of dental interventions, and many currently accepted procedures are simplistic and not compatible with total body function and long term success. So with equine dentistry we should strive to play chess instead of checkers.”

Toes

A properly balanced balanced foot is what we are going for. One that functions as nature intended is our goal. While the wild horse model is a good place to start, there is plenty of new research that shows us new ways to look at and map out the foot in order to start restoring balance. Environmental factors also play a large role in how fast a certain foot can return to proper shape.

The trim we apply is to help the foot have full, natural function in all parts. Now, we all know that our horses can't really live in a truly natural habitat, but proper trimming helps the foot work as natural as possible. Each foot is treated as an individual. There is no “pasture trim.”

As you just read about equine dentistry, their feet also have a profound affect on the entire horse's body. Heel-first landings and feet in motion is important stuff, but I prioritize *posture* when I trim. The horse stands in an eating, sleeping or neutral posture 23 hours per day. So if he is standing around in poor posture then how will he feel at the end of the day? Poor posture also distorts their feet. Ever see a club foot or one with a high-low? The cause of the hoof distortion is uneven posture. The cause of the uneven posture is un-even neurological input in front of the TMJ. His teeth! There are lots of other hoof distortion situations caused my the *Goat-On-A-Rock* posture but one thing is for sure, you can't trim out the club foot. You have to fix their teeth first!

Because the *feet and the teeth* are so important to the horse's central computer, one of my main trim goals is *even* neurological input. 50/50 base of support under the center of rotation gives us just that. So while my job is to just trim their feet, I address the “5-T's” because they are so important to the soundness of your horse. The feet and the teeth- who knew?

Tack

Properly fitting tack should be a no-brainer but sometimes things sneak up on us. Occasionally the horse physiology changes, the saddle wears a bit or maybe it never fit in the first place. Either way if something is jabbing him in the shoulder or back then he won't move properly. You might put your equine chiropractor on speed-dial! Your horse will be much happier with a professionally fitted saddle. Money well spent.

Other tack issues include but aren't limited to side-reigns, tie-downs, martingales, large leverage bits etc. These shortcut gimmicks don't allow the horse to move in the proper directions and will ultimately affect his soundness. Tack used makes a bigger difference than most people think. It goes hand in hand with the;

Training

There are as many training methods out there as there are horses it seems. Many of which work well and many of which don't. Sometimes it's a touchy subject to talk about when a bad training method gets in the way of the horse's soundness, but a necessary one none-the-less. Many of my customers have heard me say that I try not to discuss three things - Politics Religion and Training methods! I work for all kinds of people that utilize all kinds of training methods. I don't like to offend anyone so I try not to single anybody out. Simply put, any method used that considers the horse first, moves and bends him in the proper way and builds the ring of muscles is fine by me.

Horses are not 4-wheel drive they are rear-wheel drive. They should be taught to use their hindquarters properly, whether you're talking about English or Western. If your trainer says you need a bigger bit that may be a red flag. I've seen too many "western pleasure" horses with front foot (and whole body) lameness because they were trained "on the forehand", never taught to drive from behind. Some English trainers are guilty of that as well. Also, starting horses under saddle (and shoeing them) at too early of an age sets them up for a lifetime of lameness. Two year-olds people! Really?

Quick story. This is a biting story that falls into the Tack and Training category;

I was at this barn with a few other people watching a very accomplished equine dentist perform a high-performance, neurological float on a horse. He was explaining the function of the horse's mouth while he worked and things were going pretty well. Then someone asked about bit-seats. A bit seat is where the dentist deliberately removes part of the 6's (rostral molars) from occlusion to make room for a piece of metal. The room got quiet and I exchanged a quick, one eyebrow up glance with the dentist and he said this; "Ma'am, if you have the bit that far up in the horse's mouth then you should be riding 4-wheelers!" Needless to say that was uncomfortable.. But he was exactly right. Bad tack and training methods directly affects the soundness of our horses, not to mention their happiness.

Turnout

Last but not least our horses need outside time. Most people know that their horses are happier when they get turned out. 24 hour turnout is idea, but most situations don't allow for that. Some boarding barns do their best to get the horses turned out as much as possible, some don't. Some show barns turn out, some don't. Horses just aren't comfortable unless they can see the horizon line. Being able to look around for possible predators is very natural, and has kept the horse alive for 55 million years. Although there aren't many lions killing horses these days, the equine instincts are deeply imbedded. When you go into those barns with "up to 1 hour turnout", you can feel the stress. Stall vices are plentiful, as well as the strong ammonia smell. Very unhealthy.

Contact with the ground stimulates the foot and keeps the blood flowing. Movement is key, and horses that are outside move more than ones in the stall. Unless your horse has a broken leg then stall rest is seldom beneficial. The lame horse recovers faster if he can move about. After all, if you hurt your knee, would the physical therapist tell you to sit in a small closet and do nothing? I think not. There are some pretty neat things you can do to your pasture that get your horse to move more. Track systems and pasture paradise are two great examples, but if you use your imagination, the possibilities are endless. Adding gravel and other locally available materials also help keep your horses feet tough.

In conclusion, Dr. Shoemaker's 5-T's are very important to get right. If you try to make improvements in those areas you will see results. I have done so with my own horses, and they are much happier and very sound. As a hoof care provider I travel around providing hoof rehab and maintenance. Educating customers about the 5-T's helps the horses live and move better, and makes them very happy. That's what we are after- happy horses!