

# Down on the Farm



## A Few Minor Adjustments

*Chiropractic therapy is a controversial, but increasingly popular, treatment for high-performance horses.*

*Could your racing string benefit?*

by **KAREN BRIGGS**

There was something about the 3-year-old that just wasn't quite right, but Gail, his trainer, couldn't quite put her finger on it. He was sound to all outward appearances and he was galloping willingly enough, but there was something funky about his gait that hadn't been there the previous week.

She motioned his exercise rider to pull him up and bring him over to the fence. "Do you feel something odd going on with him?," she asked, and the rider nodded. "He's not using himself right behind," he confirmed. "It feels like he's hiking higher with his left hip than his right. Have you had him adjusted lately?"

That recommendation was Gail's introduction to the mysterious world of equine chiropractic. Like her, many who seek out a chiropractor for their horses are skeptical of 'alternative' therapies, but have reached a dead-end with conventional veterinary techniques and are looking for answers.

### **What is Chiropractic?**

Equine chiropractic is a therapy which concentrates on manipulating the horse's spine to establish (or, in many cases, re-establish) free, fluid movement, both of the vertebrae themselves and of the various bony joints which are attached to it. There are some 31 vertebrae in the equine spine (seven in the cervical area, a.k.a. the neck, 18 thoracic vertebrae, and six lumbar), and all of them have the potential to become 'stuck', or limited in their range of motion, according to Lori Wolf, DVM, an equine veterinarian and certified chiropractor whose practice operates in the Toronto, Ontario area in the summers, and in Florida in the winter months. When vertebrae become stuck, the surrounding muscles tend to compensate, working harder than they normally would to assist the horse's movement—and eventually, they become tense and sore, sometimes even going into spasm. Nerves, too, may be compromised when the

vertebrae aren't moving freely, causing pain and further limiting the natural range of motion.

An area where the range of motion isn't as it should be is often referred to in chiropractic parlance as a subluxation. Wolf prefers to avoid this term, however, because in medical terms subluxation describes an area where the joint is actually misplaced (for instance, a dislocated shoulder), whereas in chiropractic therapy the joint is merely compromised, not out of place.

"I don't talk about subluxations," she explains. "I just describe each vertebral joint as being like a hinge. It can get stuck anywhere in its range of motion—a little, or a lot. The right type of force can free it up."

Though a horse's spine in total is fairly rigid (it has to be, in order to support a saddle and rider), the individual joints have considerable potential to flex and give—visualize a grand prix jumper soaring over a six-foot oxer, or a saddle bronc twisting and leaping to rid himself of his rider, and you'll see

the tremendous flexibility built into the structure. "The spine is designed to be mobile," says Wolf. "Each vertebral joint has a limited range of motion, but the cumulative effect is greater."

Because the spine is connected to the limbs by nerves, tendons and muscles, a lack of flexibility anywhere along its length can have far-reaching effects. Any of these subtle signs might be a tip-off that your horse could benefit from chiropractic therapy. Watch for:

- resistance to going forward or bending
- short-stridedness
- difficulty with downward transitions (pulling up)
- head tilting
- a sudden or gradual change in attitude
- a pain response when a rider mounts—moving away, hollowing the back, an irritated expression, tail swishing, or even groaning
- a feeling that his gait is not symmetrical—for example, he may feel markedly different depending on which diagonal you post the trot
- unexplained lameness, which may appear to originate in the shoulder or the hip
- resistance to picking up one lead or to change from one lead to the other.

Of course, any of these signs may also have other causes—so it's important to assess the whole horse. A certified chiropractor who is also a veterinarian has an edge in this regard, says Wolf. "Before I treat a horse with chiropractic for the first time, I do a complete work-up," she explains. "I watch him move. I get a history of what sort of work he's been doing lately, or anything unusual that may have happened to him. I check his teeth, ask about his feeding program, and examine the fit of his tack. All of that stuff needs to be addressed before I can decide whether the horse's primary problem is in his spine."

#### **What Triggers Chiropractic Problems?**

How does the spine become stuck in the first place? Sometimes it's the

result of a sudden traumatic event—a fall, getting 'cast' in his stall, slipping on a patch of ice or mud, being kicked by a pasturemate, etc. Unless you're able to watch your animals 24 hours a day, you may not know it when one has had an athletic misadventure of this sort—horses are great compensators and the extent of the problem may not become evident until much later.

Often, however, chiropractic problems are the result of accumulated 'microtraumas'—the everyday stresses and strains of being ridden and trained. One of the most common causes is a poorly fitting saddle, which causes pain and pressure points—this is particularly true of exercise and racing saddles, which concentrate pressure on a very small area behind the withers.

#### **What Should You Expect?**

Though Wolf says she takes at least an hour examining a horse for the first time, the actual chiropractic adjustment may only take 30 minutes. Most chiropractors use a step-stool or some hay bales in order to position themselves above the horse's back. Each vertebral joint is explored for range of motion, a technique which is accomplished by touch and is the result of much practice and training. Where a joint feels stuck, a quick thrust of one or both hands, in a sort of sideways push, is applied to restore normal motion. This should not be painful to the horse, though some animals are a little nervous or tense when being treated for the first time (a reaction that soon passes).

A single application of force is often enough to restore full range of motion, but Wolf notes, "the longer a problem has been there, the longer it will take to sort it out. Longstanding cases may not regain full range of motion immediately.

"Sometimes," she adds, "if a horse is really back-sore, his muscles may be in spasm and I won't be able to adjust him until the muscle problems are first addressed."

Despite this, Wolf emphasizes that the vast majority of horses can be suc-

cessfully treated in one to three sessions. "It's not like human chiropractic, where patients are often treated once a month or once a week," she says. "The equine spine is vastly different than the human spine—it's horizontal, not vertical, so there aren't the same compressive forces.

"Once any acute problems are sorted out, the average performance horse might need to be adjusted about four times a year, at most."

Be cautious, Wolf warns, of any chiropractor who recommends your horse be treated repeatedly, or uses mechanical means, such as a block or wood or a rubber mallet, to manipulate your horse's spine. "Each vertebra is only about the size of a human fist," she explains. "You don't need any more force than what's in your hand to move it. Anyone who uses more than that may potentially injure your horse."

The best way to ensure a safe and positive chiropractic adjustment is to ask your vet or a trusted professional for a referral, and to carefully check the chiropractor's credentials. There are people calling themselves equine chiropractors who have little or no formal training, and their lack of knowledge could place your horses in jeopardy. Make sure the chiropractor who works on your horse is accredited with the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association (AVCA)—only veterinarians and human chiropractors are accepted into the AVCA's extensive 150-hour training course. Those who pass the AVCA's final written and practical exam earn the designation Certified Animal Chiropractor (CAC). You can obtain a list of certified equine chiropractors in your area by contacting the AVCA at (309) 658-2920, fax number (309) 658-2622, and e-mail [AmVetChiro@aol.com](mailto:AmVetChiro@aol.com).

You can also get more information on the AVCA's policies, code of ethics and certification courses, by checking out their website at [www.animalchiropractic.org](http://www.animalchiropractic.org). To search for an AVCA vet in your area, go to [www.avcadoctors.com](http://www.avcadoctors.com).