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*A Tradition of Leadership and Excellence in Equine Medicine*

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**Body soreness and back pain in performance horses**  
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One of the most common complaints of the performance horse industry is body soreness and/or back pain. Where does it come from? How can it be treated?

In the author's opinion, back-related problems are 95% secondary to, or a reflection of something that is not working properly in the horse's limbs. However, 5% of these problems are primary problems or directly affect the horse's back, like history of direct trauma (flipping back, improper saddle-fitting.)

Let me illustrate the horses that fit into the 95% group: Let's say that you took a bad step and twisted your right ankle. Your ankle hurts when you walk but there is no apparent heat or swelling. Because your right ankle hurts, you start putting more weight on your left leg, obviously assuming an abnormal position with your back. After a day or two the left calf muscle on your good leg (left) and your back starts to hurt. You decide to take care of the back pain that is killing you. There are two common choices. If you believe in traditional medicine you will probably take either painkillers or muscle relaxers, or both, before consulting with your physician. However, if you believe in alternative medicine you most likely will get a good massage, acupuncture, a chiropractic adjustment or a combination of the three. After the treatment (traditional or alternative) your back feels great but your ankle is still painful and you are walking the same way (no back pain.) After a few days your back starts hurting and there we go again with the vicious cycle.

The primary problem is the twisted ankle. The secondary problem is a sore left calf muscle and back pain. Let's suppose the ankle problem is resolved. You are going to walk normally, the distribution of weight will be even, your posture will be normal, therefore your back pain and left calf soreness will go away. Treating the primary problem will save yourself some money by not buying painkillers and anti-ulcer medication if you choose the traditional self-formulated therapy. If, however, you choose the alternative therapy, which by the way is pretty popular these days, you will probably save even more money (weekly treatments for three weeks), which is probably the average recovery time for a twisted ankle with rest.

You might wonder why we are talking about people and not about horses. Horses compensate in the same way as people do. Most of the joint, bone and soft tissue problems in the horse's legs make the horse distribute his weight differently, not only overloading structures not designed to carry such loads, but forcing the horse to use muscles that are not designed to support such stress, therefore getting body sore. Do not wait until your horse is limping to treat the problem. It's always less expensive to treat soreness than it is to treat lameness. Alternative therapies DO NOT treat primary problems, although they decrease the pain associated with secondary problems.

Ask your veterinarian about early detection of soundness problems.