



Q&A from a Horse Dentist

Grant D. MacKinnon C.Eq.D.

Certified graduate of the Academy of Equine Dentistry &
proud member of the Association of Equine Dental Equilibration

Why is My Horse So High-Headed?

Trainers and owners alike spend countless hours on getting the right “head set”. I find that there are as many different explanations as there are “high-headed” horses. Most explanations are attributed to their horse’s poor attitude, inability or untrainability.

Simply speaking, a horse’s headset is directly related to the pain he experiences while doing what is asked of him. Generally speaking, horses will not do anything that takes more energy (or causes them more pain), if they can get away with expending less energy (and move away from pain). Trainers teach with the understanding that horses move away from pain; therefore it is easy to deduce (with height is the most natural and comfortable position for a horse’s head), as we ask him to perform, he moves away from pain by lifting his head.

So, why is a horse experiencing pain? As a horse’s head comes down his jaw moves forward – if it is uncomfortable – his head will come back up. Upper 6 hooks and lower 11 ramps on the molar tables are the most common cause of having a head set that most of us consider “too high”. Accompanying this scenario will be protuberant upper 10’s and lower 8’s. But how are hooks and ramps created? The most common: for whatever reason, horse owners feel the need to provide food in bunks, above ground level. This method of feeding elevates their head and forces their jaw back, knocking the three points of balance out of alignment. Since they grind small particles of their molars with every chew; an elevated head causes their molars to wear unevenly. This uneven wear pattern develops hooks on the front of the upper molars and ramps on the back of the lower molars, literally locking their jaw out of alignment. A horse suffering with hooks and ramps forces a horse into a tug-of-war with the rider as they try to find and keep a position of comfort; therefore, as speed increases when riding, his head comes up and his nose moves out, in front of him (generally to the level of his feed bunk). A horse is simply unable to comfortably keep his head at wither height.

Tie downs and cavacons have been to many, the answer to a poor attitude, inability or untrainability. However, these devices have been proven to merely force him into doing something that is either mildly or extremely uncomfortable, causing him to tip his nose out, instead of bringing his head up when it hurts to keep it down.

Freedom of movement in a horse’s mouth is foundational to freeing up his movement throughout his body. Remember, all of his actions are compensatory to any point of pain and attributes to a horse’s balance. If you are experiencing any of these undesirable behaviors while riding your horse, have a certified equine

dentist take a look and get the answer “straight from your horse’s mouth.

If you have a question about your horse’s teeth and how they might relate to his health or performance call (306) 266-2060 or e-mail your question to mackequine@sasktel.net.