Q&A from a Horse Dentist

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Teeth or Training

In last months issue, I had the opportunity to highlight a horse trainer that looks to horse dentistry as an elimination effort, to increase his training effectiveness. As a result, I received a number of additional questions, specifically from the training/teeth perspective. Collectively, the answer to each inquiry comes down to this statement: proper balance in the horse's mouth facilitates training to Nth degree.

By definition, facilitation means: simplify the process, or to make something easier to do. Horse dentistry works effectively in conjunction with training, to make training time and its efforts, more productive. Let me explain.

Most of us don't start our own colts anymore. Why? Because, between juggling a full time job and family related responsibilities, there are very few of us that have the time and opportunity to ride enough ourselves. If you are one of the fortunate few, God bless you, but for the admitted moral majority, we rely on professional trainers to put the "handle" on, for us.

Professional horse trainers have spent hundreds, sometimes thousands of hours in the saddle providing them with incredible timing, balance and feel. Some seem to share a connection with the horses they ride like a doe to her fawn when she senses the presence of a wild cat. Through their remarkable ability to communicate to their partners, horse trainers seem to be able to get a horse to dance with the most subtle indication.

Training today has extended their services far beyond just “getting the buck out of them”. Most professional trainers excel not only in the training arena but competitively perform in the show ring. Many provide their client with an opportunity to put more of a “handle” on their horse, campaign their finished work for their client, then teach the novice how to ride what they’ve trained. The full meal deal, indeed.

With a basic understanding of the transitional history of horse training established, the answer to how dentistry impacts the horse training industry, is quite simply that, *the horse owner’s receipt of, maximum value for every training dollar spent.*

1. ***Head set is directly correlated to teeth.*** Upper hooks and lower ramps cause horses to elevate their head, nose out, stiffen their neck and be unable to hold that “ideal show frame” for any length of time. From the saddle, a professional horse trainer with impeccable feel, has the ability to notice a horse’s muscles stiffen at the moment he cues a horse to “frame up”. As a horse dentist, I can tell you from the bleachers, when a horse is suffering as a result of a protuberance, when I observe the neck stiffen, a tail swish or structurally compensate in order to adhere to the trainer’s request <u>at the moment the horse is cued</u> to do so. ***The key:*** *anticipatory response observed at the moment the horse is cued*.

   Equine dental studies confirm, through the bio-mechanics of a horse’s mouth, that if a horse suffers from upper hooks and lower ramps, he will structurally have difficulty collecting. And if he does collect, he will be unable to comfortably maintain the collection since the hooks in the front and the ramps in the back of his molar table prevent the horse from freely sliding his jaw forward; experience consistently confirms the protuberance upon examination. I have consistently found, immediately after the protuberance has been removed (correctly balanced), the horse is able to collect when cued and does so <u>without</u> stiffening his neck, swishing his tail or compensating structurally as he complies to the trainer’s request.

   Depending on the horse’s pain tolerance and willingness to try, horse trainers have the ability to get a horse that *unknowingly* suffers from hooks and ramps to successfully complete said maneuver. I must say at this time, dentistry does not replace training. What dentistry does do, is make the training time, more productive.

   Instead of expecting a trainer, or rather, paying him to work to “get past” the issues; they can spend their time productively, putting the “handle” on the horse while it is in training. For emphasis sake, I’ll say again, equine dentistry does not replace the need for training, through proper balance, it eliminates that which inhibits clear communication and allows the horse the opportunity to understand what it is that the trainer is trying to get across to them.

2. ***Difficulty turning one way than the other.*** It has been said by one popular and internationally renown horse trainer that there is no such thing as a left handed horse, there are just left handed riders. However, in the equine dental field, teeth are the number one reason why horses prefer to turn one way over the other. Again, observation at a distance of a horse, that braces when asked to turn one direction, and comfortably turns the other; tells me that the horse is suffering from a wedge. Imbalanced incisors or front teeth make it comfortable to turn one way and uncomfortable or even painful to turn in the other direction.

   Equine sport specialists have studied the bio-mechanics of a horse while undergoing every conceivable activity. It is a fact, that a horse can gape it’s mouth at a walk or a trot, but when it transitions into a lope or a canter, his jaw comes together. Equine dentistry deduces that teeth dictate a horse’s preference due to the comfort by which he feels when in movement. Equine dental specialists are required to understand the bio-mechanics of the mouth under all conditions and performance demands, by knowing that horses learn through pressure/release and live in a world of subtly, it is therefore easy to comprehend how the slightest wedge can impair a sensitive horse’s ability to turn one way over the other.

   Over they years, I hear repeatedly, that the last time a particular horse’s teeth with a slight wedge was examined by another practitioner, “that their incisors could wait until next year”. I can’t imagine being asked to chew exclusively on one side of my mouth for a year. And, to a horse, that would mean

continually grinding away small partials of tooth surface on one side, and not the other – creating an even greater imbalance and severity of wedge. Suffice it to say, the training would result, in kind.

3. ***"Bumping" on the bit,*** is a training cue designed to ask a horse to lower his head and collect into a frame. If your horse has wolf teeth, hooks, ramps or sharp edges, "bumping" would merely cause pain and confusion, oppose to getting the desired response. Most horses today enter training somewhere between a 1½ and 3 years old. And yet, for the first 5 years of a young horse's life they are shedding baby teeth and getting permanent teeth. In respect to training, horses that are feeling the development of permanents, pushing off the deciduous teeth, go through training trying, to figure out if they should be responding from the pain they feel from the tooth transitions or the training cues provided by the trainer. Equine dentistry makes it their business to understand the tooth transition process, then confirm the baby teeth have been shed at the proper ages, as well as remove sharp edges and protuberances, in order for young horses to freely to listen to the clear cues provided.

4. ***Stopping (or not).*** In order for a horse to maintain his headset throughout the "halt" they must be able to slide their jaw forward. Any protuberance throughout the molar table will cause a horse to be compensatory with his headset (head up, nose out). The head locks into the position his teeth are in; head up, nose out tells me, he suffers from hooks and ramps or protuberances.

   The jaw of a horse slides forward when we "frame up", stop or back up. The jaw of a horse slides forward and to the side when asked to turn, spin, roll back or complete a flying lead change. Anything that prevents the full and fluid movement of the jaw forward and backward and side to side will cause a horse to throw their headset, stiffen with anticipation or compensate throughout the body.

   To confirm the jaw movement referred to in this article, do the following exercise. Stand or sit straight, shoulders relaxed. Gently close your teeth together and slowly tilt your head back as far as you can then slowly tuck your chin to your chest. While doing so, be aware of the amount of movement your jaw undergoes. Since a horse's jaw line is considerably longer than ours, the movement is exponential.

Education is the key to one's success. As you learn how dentistry affects the effectiveness of a horse trainer you can come to realize why most of the horse trainers I work for, encourage their clients to have their horse's teeth maintained and properly balanced. A good horse trainer is worth their time and money. Most have a waiting list as long as your arm. Realizing dentistry's benefits, most now require a horse to be properly balanced prior to starting training.

With an ever changing industry comes the precaution: these and other problems associated with teeth are easily fixed and problems are easily solved with proper and regular dental maintenance. However, be knowledgeable of the benefits but wary of those who make promises without the education and experience to back it up. I routinely witness the devastating results of poor equine dentistry:

- TABLE ANGLES THAT HAVE BEEN FLATTENED, leaving a horse unable to grind his food;
- THE FIRST FEW MOLARS GROUND AWAY WHILE THE BACK FEW MOLARS ARE LEFT UNTOUCHED, again leaving the horse unable to chew his food properly but the uneven tooth reduction causes the soft tissue of the cheeks to uncontrollable slip between the chewing surface;
- MOLARS GROUND AWAY AND INCISORS LEFT UNTOUCHED, lifting the chewing surface further apart and leaving the horse unable to chew;
- ONE SIDE OF THE MOLAR TABLES GROUND AWAY AT A DIFFERENT LEVEL THAN THE OTHER SIDE, leaving the horse with the inability to chew on the lower molar table causing one sided chewing.

The result, *the horse suffers at the hand of ignorance and the owners pay the price.* Sometimes a greater price than they realize. I've been witness to some horrific work. One such case, a young stud had his jaw bone fractured by someone who did not have the education to realize the critical nature of knowing how to handle a young horse's soft skeletal structure. They opened the speculum too wide and too long on a horse, too young. His jaw shifted to the side (scissor action) and knitted together permanently into place more than an inch away from straight.

I've unfortunately seen the result of adult teeth being pulled thinking they were baby teeth, worse yet, I saw the skeletal remains of a horse that someone tried to remove a canine tooth thinking it was a wolf tooth and since it is the most, well rooted tooth in the horse's mouth, they broke his jaw bone while doing so.

Remember, all undesirable actions are compensatory to some point of pain and attributes to a horse's balance and ability to perform. If you are experiencing undesirable behaviors while riding your horse, have a certified equine dentist take a look, to 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 1-306-747-2724, 1-403-936-5394, 1-208-420-2701 or e-mail mackequine@sasktel.net.