

Therapy for Thoroughbreds

Complementary therapies that address a horse's comfort and well-being can pay off in better performance

Perhaps Shakespeare said it best: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

The Thoroughbred world, in particular, has been slow to accept the idea that "alternative," or "complementary" therapies might be more than just hocus-pocus. But increasingly, trainers and owners are opening up to the idea that conventional veterinary medicine may not be the only way of dealing with the complex health issues of today's equine athletes. Modalities such as chiropractic, acupuncture, homeopathy, and herbal treatments, may hold answers for conditions with which the veterinary community has had little or no success.

Horsepeople aren't the only ones interested. So are an increasing number of veterinarians, who have become frustrated with a school of thought that treats the symptoms and manages the causes, often with invasive medications. Some are gravitating toward a more holistic view—one that emphasizes the wellness of the whole horse, physical, emotional, and mental.

"Complementary therapies take the whole horse into consideration," said Dr. John Harthorn, who maintains a private practice in Avelia, Pa., and works almost exclusively on racing Thoroughbreds and Standardbreds. "I try to establish a state of balance in each horse I treat. When a horse is unbalanced externally, it compromises his ability to move forward and be athletic, and it also expresses itself internally, most notably through the liver and the lungs. When one facet is out of balance, things tend to snowball, health-wise. And when that happens, horses start to run cheaper and cheaper because they can't use themselves to their full potential.

"That's where I come in. Acupuncture and chiropractic are preventative medicine. If I can routinely check a horse before an imbalance gets to the point of compromising performance, I can save a trainer a lot of money in the long run."

Dr. Maurice Casey is another veteri-



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narian who sees the value in complementary therapies. From his base in Marshall, Va., he has been treating Thoroughbreds at Charles Town since 1995, after beginning his career as a farrier and then earning his veterinary degree in 1984. One of his clients, steeplechase trainer Richard Valentine, won the 2009 Maryland Hunt Cup with 12-year-old gelding Michele Marieschi.

“I was the original ‘Doubting Thomas’ when it came to acupuncture,” he said. “But I had too many cases of subtle lameness that didn’t block out and wouldn’t respond to conventional veterinary techniques. I was looking for something that was more effective than just prescribing bute and banamine, and tapping joints.”

Casey became certified as a veterinary acupuncturist in 1994 through the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society. Now, he combines allopathic (conventional) veterinary techniques with acupuncture, chiropractic, and Chinese herbal therapies to treat his increasing roster of clients.

“When I first started working at Charles Town in 1995, no one would let me touch



Acupuncture and chiropractic can work together to improve a horse's well-being



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a horse,” he said. “Now, I’m chasing my tail. But there are still a lot of misconceptions about complementary therapies. People either reject it outright, or think it’s the second coming. In reality, it’s just another arrow in our quiver, another tool we can use to keep our horses in optimum shape.”

SEEING THE WHOLE HORSE

Allopathic veterinary medicine, Casey points out, tends to focus on lameness issues. “An allopathic vet will tend to zero in on an issue below the stifle and the elbow, but he usually doesn’t address what may be going on in the neck, the hips, the spine, the sacrum, nearly as well.”

In some cases, a racehorse may suffer from a lameness issue that forces him to protect the sore leg and move in a compensatory way—which inevitably creates issues in other areas of his body. But it’s just as likely for a horse to develop an issue in his jaw, neck, withers, or spine, which then manifests itself in gait changes that are interpreted as lameness. Your veterinarian can treat the most obvious symptoms, but if the root cause isn’t located and dealt with, the problem will become chronic. Casey refers to it as finding the “mother mushroom.”

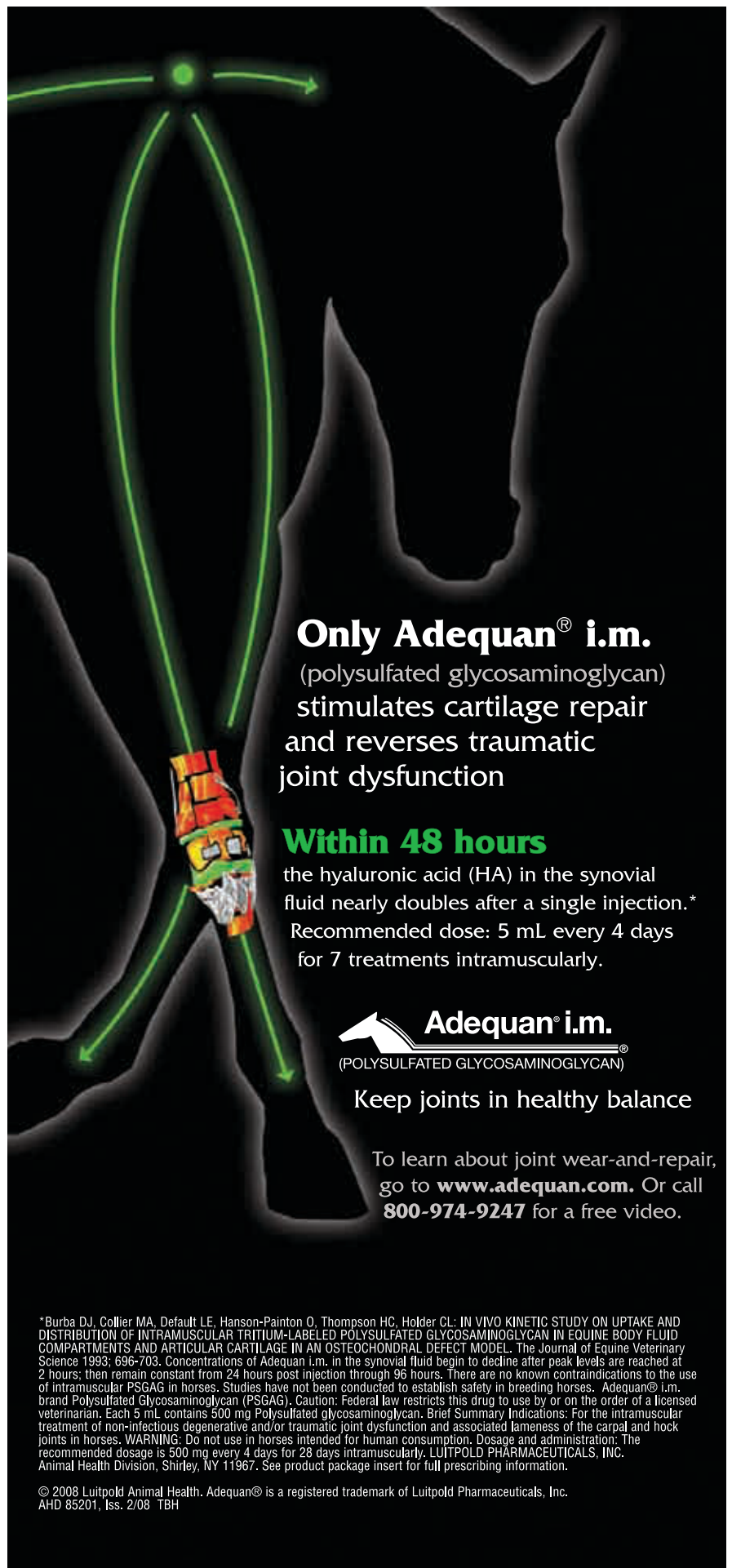
“I tell clients, ‘I work for the horse,’ ” he said. “When I first approach an animal, I tell the trainer not to tell me what’s wrong. Instead, I say, ‘let me check him out first.’ I assess the whole horse from head to tail, hands-on, palpating acupuncture points for a pain response—and when I share my conclusions, the trainer almost always says, ‘Yep, that’s what he’s doing, all right.’ By doing a whole-body assessment first, I let the horse tell me what he needs.

“Acupuncture doesn’t fix everything, and it doesn’t diagnose everything, but it sure puts you in the right corner. And it helps me answer a crucial question. It’s not, ‘where is he lame,’ but ‘*why* is he lame.’ ”

Acupuncture also has the advantage of being diagnostic without the introduction of nerve-blocking drugs that can test positive.


Harthorn, whose practice is now 100% “complementary,” has been using acupuncture to treat racehorses for three decades. His experience tells him that acupuncture points are essential to making a diagnosis. “It’s an excellent, hands-on diagnostic technique,” he said. “I look for ‘pain points,’ acupuncture points that, when palpated, give me an acute reaction. Often they are the ‘ting’ points, the ones at the beginnings and ends of the acupuncture energy meridians in the coronet band.

“Energy tends to flow in the horse from the left front quadrant, to the right hind,



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the left hind, and then the right front in a figure-eight pattern," Harthorn explained.

With racehorses, who go to the left much more than they go to the right, the lameness pattern tends to manifest itself in the diagonal pair of left front and right hind. Harthorn finds that soreness in the left front tends to contribute to problems in the right hind while Casey's take is slightly different.

"When a horse is galloping on the left lead, his right hind reaches farther be-

hind him and also farther under his body (than the left hind)," he said. "This tends to torque the sacroiliac ligament high up in the hindquarters. I call it the Great Imitator: The horse is having a problem with the sacroiliac, which sends pain shooting down the right hind leg. That kind of lameness could look like it's in the hock or the stifle. And it can contribute to problems in the left front."

That's just one example of how taking the whole horse into account can be more beneficial than zeroing in on the most obvious symptoms. "I almost always find that the spine is involved," Harthorn said.

"Everything relates to that spine. It's the center of compensation for everything else."

Said Casey, "From nose to tail, a horse's spine has to be like a Slinky toy. It needs to move. If it's blocked somewhere, the horse can't function."

That's why both practitioners find a combination of acupuncture and chiropractic to be most useful in "unsticking" stuck, or subluxated, vertebrae.

RESTORING FREE MOVEMENT

Chiropractic, which addresses the range of motion between the horse's vertebrae from skull to tail by means of manual manipulations called adjustments, can be useful for a wide range of problems that do not always manifest themselves as noticeable back soreness. When a horse's vertebral mobility is compromised, the result can also be limited limb mobility, muscle soreness, unevenness of gait, or just a case of "attitude."

Subluxated vertebrae can also pinch nerves, causing intense pain—and the signs are sometimes subtle. Chiropractic adjustment restores mobility to the vertebral joints, allowing the horse to move more freely.

"I always check the spine to see if it's loose and flexible," Harthorn said. "Most of the time, it's not. If the spine can't bend to the left or to the right, it also can't bend in the middle, which means the horse can't get his hind end underneath him for propulsion. Injecting the hocks and the stifles and so on, is useless in that case.

"If you adjust a horse chiropractically, you can eliminate those secondary problems, so that the primary problem becomes obvious."

Harthorn has particular success in beginning with a manual thrust to the atlas/axis joint just behind the horse's ears. In many cases, when that point becomes unstuck, the horse instantly becomes more relaxed, and often yawns in response, he says.

The jaw is another common trouble spot, according to 23-year-old Molly Hannum, whose father Doug Hannum has been the United States Equestrian Team's equine sports therapist for the past two decades. Molly, who gallops for trainer Graham Motion at Maryland's Fair Hill Training Center, grew up treating high-performance equine athletes and has now focused her own equine therapy practice on racehorses. She noted, "When a horse's jaw is out of alignment, it can upset his whole equilibrium, not to mention making him almost impossible to steer. Chiropractic adjustment can help release that and it often has a beneficial chain reaction down the body."

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ture can work synergistically to improve a horse's comfort and well-being. But while chiropractic seems a tangible therapy, even to the uninitiated, acupuncture still carries with it an air of the mysterious, given that it is based on the idea that equine (and human) health is based on the flow of energy, or *qi*, along invisible pathways in the body.

A Chinese system of medicine with a history going back more than 3,000 years, acupuncture does require that practitioners develop a different mindset than that required by traditional "Western" medicine. But extensive research has demonstrated that there is a measurable effect from the stimulation of acupuncture points, which are aligned along 14 paired energy "meridians" throughout the body and are said to influence certain internal organs (which may or may not be aligned along those meridians). The focus is on bringing all of the horse's systems into balance.

Not only does acupuncture stimulate the release of endorphins, it can also decrease muscle spasms, increase blood cortisol levels and white blood cell populations, according to practitioners of the art. Those who have tried to apply allopathic science to this ancient Chinese technique note that an acupuncture point is a small,



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dense collection of tiny blood vessels, fine nerve endings, and mast cells, with decreased electrical resistance. Some liken it to a “breaker” in an electrical system—or in some cases, a dimmer switch.

The bladder meridian, which runs from the head right to the hind heels along each side of the spine, could be described as the “fuse-box” for the horse’s energy system. It contains some of the most important and frequently treated acupuncture points in the horse, and “blockages” are common (particularly in horses that bear weight on their backs, because the saddle places inappropriate pressure here). The gall bladder meridian is another common treatment site in horses. And blocked points on the lung meridian, which runs down the inside of the front leg, may be responsible for some cases of undiagnosed front-end lameness.

There are several ways to stimulate acupuncture points. Traditional acupuncture involves the insertion of slender needles, but points can also be stimulated with cold lasers, magnets, ultrasound, moxibustion (when a Chinese herb is applied to one end of the needle and burned, applying heat to the site), or electrical current (usually attached to two associated needles, and particularly good for repairing nerve damage).

For more lasting stimulation of a point, a practitioner may inject fluid (usually vitamin B12) through a 25 gauge hypodermic needle, or may even implant something permanent—tiny gold or stainless steel beads, or staples (popularly used in the



LEE THOMAS

There are several ways to stimulate acupuncture points to release endorphins

ears of dressage horses to modify their temperaments).

Using acupuncture can vastly change a practitioner’s perspective on how horses injure themselves and how they compensate for those injuries, Casey said. “Once I started doing acupuncture, I found that 80% of the lamenesses I diagnosed in racehorses were in the hind end, whereas before I was using it, I thought 80% of them were in the front end.

“If you fix the hind end issues, the front end ones often go away.”


FOCUS ON RACEHORSES

Racehorses do have some specific issues not common to other types of performance

horses, Harthorn said.

“Splints are the 100% most common problem on the track,” he maintained. “And they’re not always obvious. Often they’re blind splints. Most Western practitioners don’t check for them, or don’t know how to. They produce a sharp, stinging pain, so the horse tries to get his front end up off the ground. His stride becomes shorter and he has to pump harder, and his spine becomes the center of the compensation. The harder the racetrack, the worse they become. It’s not just physical pain, either—because horses anticipate the pain they’ll feel when they’re galloping, it creates emotional turmoil too.


“Treat the splint, and these things are



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easily resolved.”

Unresolved pain can also contribute to a problem with which almost every trainer is familiar: bleeding from the lungs. According to Harthorn, “I was once asked to treat a little trotting filly at The Meadows who was bleeding and couldn’t finish her miles. As it turns out, this filly had two acutely hot splints on both front legs. I worked on her to resolve the splints, and the next time she raced, she finished strong and had no breathing problems whatsoever.

“It’s chronic pain that often results in bleeding problems. I think of it as a stress phenomenon—bleeding is the body’s way of saying ‘I can’t take any more.’ It does have a hereditary component, but it can be controlled. Basically it’s an indicator of an imbalance, and I usually only have to treat it once.”

Another hot spot is the liver. “Racehorses tend to have more liver issues than other horses,” Harthorn said. “The liver is the filter for the blood and all the toxic substances that go through the horse’s body. It’s a mental and emotional sump pump as well as a blood cleaner. Between the amount of pharmaceuticals many racehorses are exposed to, and the lack of turnout, which is very stressful, the liver can sometimes become overwhelmed. Horses with liver issues can benefit from chelation, often called detoxification therapy, which I do with Chinese herbs specifically prescribed for it. It cleans out the blood vessels, improves circulation, and restores functionality to the liver. A horse with breathing problems or general body soreness can often benefit from this.”

The link between physical and emotional trauma in horses is also obvious to Harthorn when he treats horses with equine protozoal myelitis (EPM), a chronic neurological disease endemic in some parts of the United States. Horses who have contracted EPM can demonstrate a spectrum of neurologic symptoms from very mild to severe. “Sometimes EPM just manifests itself in fillies as what I call ‘bitchy mare’ syndrome,” Harthorn said. “There’s nothing else really wrong that you can put your finger on, but the mare just isn’t happy about anything.”

On closer examination, many EPM-positive horses “have backs as stiff as a board. If a horse can’t flex his hind end to find the racetrack, he can’t extend his stride. So I find that when I adjust these horses, especially at the atlas/axis, it often helps a great deal. Because EPM is so difficult to get rid of, however, these horses usually need on-going maintenance to keep them comfortable.”

Finally, there’s tying-up, the scourge of many a speedy filly and more than a few colts. Hannum finds that an electromag-



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netic blanket, such as the ones manufactured by Respond, can provide a valuable muscle-loosening effect before and after training. "I use the magnetic blanket on any horse who tends to be a little tight along her topline," she said. "It stimulates blood flow and warms up the muscles."

"The Respond blankets do have several settings," she notes, "and I tend not to use the more intense settings on these tie-up-prone fillies because they seem to get really ticklish about it."

Horses that tie up also benefit from a massage technique Hannum employs, called myofascial release. "The myofascia is the stringy connective tissue between the skin and the muscles," she explained. "When it tightens up, it contributes to muscle tightening. It's hard to explain the exact technique, but I use my knuckles to massage the horse, mostly along the girth line from the withers down, and up between the front legs, in order to stimulate the myofascia to release."

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

Although complementary therapies are gaining much more acceptance at the track in recent years, Casey says he's still frustrated by the frequency with which he is called in only after a problem has been ongoing for some time, and often only after a veterinarian with an allopathic approach has failed to resolve it.

"One of the unfortunate things is that trainers still don't think in terms of preventative maintenance. The stakes horses and the allowance horses may get a cer-



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tain amount of routine preventative care, but the claimers—and Charles Town is primarily a claiming track—only tend to get attention when there's a problem. And really, they're the ones who are usually most in need of help."

Harthorn agreed, "A lot of the time I'm called in as the last resort, after conventional medicine has failed to solve the problem. I wish they'd call me first. I might be able to save them a pile of money."

"After all, if chiropractic and acupuncture can eliminate the issue, then you end up using fewer drugs on the horse and spend less time injecting joints, and that can save you in the long run."

"If I were given the opportunity to maintain the young horses from Day One, they'd have fewer problems and last longer. But that almost never happens, because people only call when the horse is in crisis. And then I'm expected to suddenly work a miracle on a horse who has been allowed to become so unbalanced that he's crippled."

Though both Harthorn and Casey have been able to pull more than a few rabbits


out of their respective hats over the years, it's still an uphill battle getting some trainers to accept the realities of complementary modalities. "I'm constantly trying to explain that most of these injuries are chronic and repetitive," Casey said. "You have to address the root of it so the horse won't keep compounding the problem."

He also notes, "The hardest thing is to get trainers to give the horse a day off after treatment."

"The thing I love about the racetrack is the results are pretty black and white," says Casey. "A trainer's livelihood is based solely on his win/loss percentage. What I provide has to make that horse run better."

Hannum remarked, "The racing industry is finally coming around to these modalities. They've definitely been slower to accept it than the performance horse industry, but they're really started to appreciate the benefits now."

Casey summed up, "In the long run, these therapies make the horse more comfortable, happier, and sounder, so he runs better. And it costs less in medications, with no risk of a positive test." □



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