Reining

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As the sport of reining becomes more popular, veterinarians should become familiar with terminology, National Reining Horse Association rules and regulations, and problems unique to the reining horse. This enables them to communicate better with clients and treat patients in this discipline. Author's address: 11318 E. 91st St. S, Broken Arrow, OK 74012. © 1997 AAEP.

"To rein a horse is not only to guide him, but also to control his every movement. The best reined horse should be willingly guided or controlled with little or no apparent resistance and dictated to completely. Any movement on his own must be considered a lack of control. All deviations from the exact written pattern must be considered a lack of or temporary loss of control; and, therefore, a fault that must be marked down according to severity of deviation. After deducting all faults set here within, against execution of the pattern and the horse’s overall performance, credit should be given for smoothness, finesse, attitude, quickness and authority of performing various maneuvers, while using controlled speed which raises the difficulty level and makes him more exciting and pleasing to watch to an audience."

This paragraph was written when the National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) was founded in 1966 to describe the standard by which a reining should be judged. The author, Mr. Jim Willoughby, did such a perfect job that this paragraph has remained unchanged throughout the evolution of the NRHA.

The NRHA is the governing body of the sport of reining responsible for enforcing the standard of competition, promoting the sport, and educating its members and the general public about the proper performance of the reining horse in the show arena. The NRHA boasts over 7400 members and has licensed over 14,000 horses. Any horse is eligible for NRHA competition, but the majority are stock horse breeds with American Quarter Horses predominating.

Reining horses have earning power. The Open Futurity pays $100,000 to the winner and over $970,000 to other show contestants. In 1996, the NRHA approved 230 shows and paid out more than 2.1 million dollars. The NRHA has also recently honored the first rider to win over $1,000,000 in NRHA competitions.

Reining began as a western judged event designed to show the athletic ability of a ranch-type horse in the confines of a show pen. Horses are required to run one of ten approved patterns. Each pattern requires a horse to run large fast circles, small slow circles, spin in both directions, come to a sliding stop, roll back, and back up. Horses are scored from zero to infinity, with 70 denoting an average performance. All riders are trying to score a perfect 80.

Competition is divided into various categories according to the horse and rider’s level of expertise. There is an open division for professionals and a nonprofessional division for the rest of us. These...
divisions are further subdivided into categories based on the rider’s earnings. There are other subdivisions based on the horse’s earnings. The net effect of this system is that a level playing field is ensured at all levels of competition. The varied levels of competition plus the excellent judging system used by the NRHA make reining one of the most popular and fastest growing sports in the equine world.

The video portion of this presentation demonstrates horses performing approved NRHA patterns as well as freestyle reining competition set to music. This is a relatively new and very popular addition to the NRHA shows, as evidenced by the response to the NRHA demonstrations at the Atlanta Olympic Games.

The equine practitioner is being presented with an increasing number of reining horses to be evaluated for purchase exams, lameness, and so on. It is very important that these veterinarians become aware of what is involved in this sport in terms of special shoeing, physical demands placed on the horse, conformation types that seem to excel in this sport, and the like. These horses are in training almost continuously for 2 years prior to the Futurity, which occurs in December of their 3-year-old year. This schedule does not allow for a lot of down time from illness or injury. The best way to learn about ideal reining horse conformation is to study successful reining horses. Most are between 14 and 15 hands tall with structurally correct feet and limbs. Significant conformation defects, such as calf knees, cow hocks, and sickle hocks, predispose to lameness problems and should be avoided when choosing a prospect. The medical problems seen in reining horses are not dissimilar to those seen in any equine athlete. The individual trainer’s training program often dictates the type of problems seen. Some trainers produce large numbers of bowed tendons, whereas others have never had a bowed tendon come out of their program. These horses are allowed to compete in protective gear, and most wear sports medicine boots, bell boots, and often skid boots to protect the plantar surface of the rear fetlocks when doing sliding stops.

Reining horses are trimmed and shod in a conventional manner in front but are shod unlike any other horse behind. The reining horse is shod with wide-web sliding plates behind. These shoes vary from 1 1/2 in. to 3/4 in. (1.9–3.8 cm) in width. They have extended heels or trailers of various lengths with no fullering. The nail heads are countersunk, with the bottom of the shoe polished to a smooth finish to facilitate the trademark sliding stop of the reining horse.

Hopefully this presentation will serve as an introduction to the sport of reining, which has been described as the most fun you can have on horseback. I would encourage all AAEP members to watch some NRHA events, buy or borrow some reining horse tapes, and, if the opportunity presents itself, ride one of these most exciting, gifted athletes.

Further Reading

National Reining Horse Association, 448 Main St., Suite 204, Coshocton, OH 43812; 614-623-0055, telephone and 614-623-8013, fax.