

Purchase Examination of the Western Show and Performance Horse

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The western show horse is the largest group of performance horses currently being shown in North America today. Breeds such as the American Quarter Horse and the American Paint Horse dominate the total numbers of foals being born and registered annually in the United States. Without doubt veterinarians who are currently performing purchase examinations, no matter the geographical location of their practice will be called upon more in the future to evaluate the western show or performance horse for resale. With these facts in mind it behooves all equine practitioners to become familiar with the wide diversity of performance activities in which this group of horses regularly trains and competes. Author's address: Pioneer Equine Hospital, Inc., 11501 Pioneer Ave, Oakdale, CA 95361. © 1999 AAEP.

1. Introduction

The types of activities the western horse performs can be categorized in many different ways. For purposes of discussion, four groups will be established to give examples of the most popular events in which these horses are currently being shown. The four groups are as follows:

1. Cutting and Reining Horses
2. Team Roping and Steer Wrestling Horses
3. Barrel Racing and Gymkana Horses
4. Western Pleasure and Trail Show Horses

Many practical considerations should be taken into account due to the wide diversity of activities the western performance horse is trained and shown. For example, there are significant variations in conformation and body type depending upon the

performance discipline. Cutting horses who are bred for agility tend to be smaller and not as heavily muscled as the rodeo and roping horses who must incorporate shear power and strength into the equation. Barrel racing horses must have speed and agility to successfully perform, while western pleasure show horses must have a less angular body type to perform at very slow gaits including the jog with little distal limb action. Most cutting, reining, roping, and rodeo horses are not trained to lunge or trot easily in hand, making it difficult to evaluate gaits without the horse being freely lunged in a round-pen or having the horse ridden. Due to the wide range of different levels of stress being placed on the various disciplines of the western performance horse, it is increasingly important that the equine veterinarian familiarize himself or herself with the kinds of activities in which this group of horses perform.

NOTES

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2. Discussion**A. Cutting and Reining Horses**

The cutting and reining horse is subjected to stresses related to training early in its performance career due to major competitions such as futurities. These futurities begin in the 3-year-old. This group of horses begins their training early as 2-year-olds and competes in their first futurities in the summer or fall at 3 years of age. The average cutting horse will spend 60 to 90 days in basic training and proceed to training on cattle immediately after that. They are trained consistently on cattle until the futurities begin the following year. Steady training usually continues throughout their aged event years, which ends at the age of 6, after which most become amateur or "non-pro" horses competing at the weekend shows or are bred. This is the time many are examined for purchase for the novice rider. Many have already trained and competed heavily for over 5 years and had significant stress placed upon them due to this high level of activity.

Cutting and reining horses are often closely bred down single genetic lines to capitalize upon their innate ability to "read a cow" and to perform specific athletic maneuvers such as a hard, deep stop. A perfect example of this line breeding would be the high percentage of cutting and reining horses that has Doc Bar breeding on both sides of the pedigree in at least one generation. Although this may capitalize on many desirable traits, it tends to also increase the incidence of developmental orthopedic disease through genetic predisposition. Young futurity prospects are often examined for purchase prior to or in early stages of training. Particular attention should be given to areas in which osteochondrosis is common in these horses such as hocks and stifles. Radiographs are indicated to rule out developmental lesions that may become a problem in the future. Further consideration should be given to horses that lack musculoskeletal development that is adequate to compete at the intended level for years to come. It is not uncommon for this type of horse to be small and fine boned, which may affect its ability to train and compete over an extended period of time.

Major areas of concern due to the nature of performance of cutting and reining horses are inflammatory or degenerative conditions of the hocks and stifles. In the forelimbs, trauma to the proximal suspensory apparatus as well as common pathology to the distal limbs such as degenerative joint disease or navicular disease should be closely considered. After a thorough physical examination, including an evaluation of soundness and radiographs of the distal forelimbs, hocks and stifles are usually included in the purchase examination.

B. Team Roping and Steer Wrestling Horses

This group of horses represents one of the fastest growing events in western performance horses. With the advent of the United States Team Roping

Association and the current popularity of rodeo events in general, the traditional quarter horse type athlete is very popular. These are larger and more heavily muscled horses that must combine strength, speed, and agility to perform. They have a significant repetitive work load, especially during practice sessions. It is not unusual for an entry level team roper to make 25 or more practice runs in a single session. Good steer wrestling horses may mount several competitors during the rodeo, with the owner of the horse receiving a percentage of the other contestant's winnings. Many older competition roping and rodeo horses that may have lost some speed or have some degree of unsoundness are sold to the more novice riders. These horses can be ideal for that new person in the sport to learn a particular discipline by having that seasoned horse help teach them.

Areas of major concern during the purchase evaluation are as follows. A significant amount of pathology occurs in the distal forelimbs. The larger quarter horse has traditionally had a relatively high incidence of navicular disease due to foot size, straight pastern angulation, and large muscle mass. Significant strides have been made in breeding the more modern type quarter horse with better overall conformation, but attention must be paid to the principals of distal limb conformation and balance. Team roping horses have added stress placed on the distal forelimbs (especially left fore) while turning the steer or positioning the horse to rope the heels. This leads to a relatively high incidence of degenerative arthritis of the distal joints. Another area of major concern is the distal tarsal joints. Bone spavin is common due to body type and the stress of performance. Close attention should be paid to the hindlimb suspensory apparatus including flexor tendons, digital tendon sheath, and branches of the suspensory ligament.

C. Barrel Racing and Gymkana Horses

Barrel racing requires speed and agility over a short course. Typical conformation is of the "sprint horse" type with many of these horses coming from quarter horse tracks. Highly competitive horses that are ready to perform and win are difficult to find and often are purchased at a premium price. Perspective owners want long careers for this type of horse, but this is often difficult to attain due to the stresses of concussion and speed while turning sharply around the barrels. Usually, the arena footing is less than ideal and proper warm-up areas may be nonexistent. Top level barrel racing horses, as all competitive rodeo type horses, may spend an entire year on the road with little or no rest periods. Gymkana horses typically receive the same type of performance stresses and injuries but are usually not campaigned as hard.

The purchase evaluation of the "barrel horse" should include, if possible, an accurate history of past performance careers. Horses that have raced

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should be evaluated for prior racing injuries possibly involving areas such as the carpus, suspensory apparatus, or forelimb fetlocks. Foot size, conformation, and balance are important due to the concussion placed on these athletes. Hocks should be evaluated for distal tarsitis. Significant stress is placed on the hindlimbs while propelling the horse around the barrel at a high rate of speed. Rear fetlocks are often traumatized for the same reasons mentioned above. Radiographs of the distal forelimbs (including ankles), hocks, selected views of distal hindlimbs, and often carpi are frequently taken and appropriate.

D. Western Pleasure and Trail Show Horses

The western pleasure horse is often difficult to accurately evaluate for purchase for a variety of reasons. Quarter horses are being specifically bred for this event with different body types and conformation than other breed disciplines. The modern western pleasure horse in our area tends to be taller, has less muscle mass in shoulders and hip regions, and tends to have steeper angles to shoulder and pastern than the typical quarter horse type. Foals often are

fast growing and without careful attention to nutrition and exercise can have a relatively high incidence of development orthopedic disease. Training begins young with some competition as 2-year-olds. Training includes the development of significantly slow gaits in the jog and lope. This way of going makes the purchase examination difficult to the untrained eye and is best evaluated while ridden or on the lunge line.

Due to conformation the distal forelimbs should be carefully evaluated. Chronic lower back pain is not uncommon due to the excessively slow gaits while being ridden. As mentioned before, hocks and stifles should be evaluated in young show prospects for developmental orthopedic disease including juvenile degenerative joint disease of the distal tarsal joints.

3. Conclusion

The western show and performance horse is presented for purchase evaluation with a broad range of conformation types, athletic abilities, and owner expectations that present an interesting challenge to the equine practitioner.