HIND LIMB LAMENESS: WHAT ABOUT THE FOOT ?

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The foot and especially the navicular region is a typical localization for front limb lameness. However, foot lameness and navicular syndrome do also occur quite commonly in the hind limbs. To our opinion, an important number of these cases remain undiagnosed for several reasons.

First, vets have always been instructed that foot lameness is essentially a front limb issue whereas hind limb lameness typically originates from the hock and stifle region. For this reason, a lot of vets don't include the foot in their short list of possible localizations for hind limb lameness and therefore almost never block a hind foot. Furthermore, some of the horses with a hind foot lameness present with a misleading positive flexion; i.e. a flexion that suggests a hock or stifle problem but that becomes negative after blocking the foot and is thus directly associated with the foot lameness.

Second, foot lameness in a hind limb may be bilateral, often quite symmetric, or may present in horses that have also (bilateral) front foot lameness. Typically, these horses present with a vaguer history: the rider has the impression that the horse is stiff, that it may have pain and tries to compensate whilst sometimes horses even become reluctant to work and compete. Empirically, a lot of these horses get diagnosed with back problems and receive multimodal treatments instead of an in-depth lameness exam with blocks and ridden evaluation to confirm the relevance of the lameness that has been blocked. Furthermore, unravelling multiple limb lameness has an inherent learning curve and is difficult because the lameness you detect is the result of the pain in that limb, the contralateral lameness and eventually a so called 'compensatory lameness' (i.e. hind limb lameness influences front limbs symmetry and vice versa).

Third, in horses with an obvious front foot lameness that are also not correct in the hind limbs, the hind limb lameness is very often looked at as being 'secondary', hence irrelevant to explore immediately further. However, it might be possible that a lot of the front foot problems we see gradually develop in our sport horses result from overload of the front limbs in horses that do not fully engage the hindquarters because of (subtle) hind limb problems.

In a nutshell, the characteristics of typical hind foot lameness are:

- No relevant abnormalities during inspection and palpation (sometimes horses react when tapping halfway the frog).
- The lameness is accentuated on a circle on the hard surface with the affected limb at the inside of the circle.
- The lameness can be unilateral, bilateral (symmetric) and/or combined with a front foot lameness.
- There might be a (mildly) positive flexion associated with the foot lameness (see above),
- The lameness blocks to a distal digital nerve block.
- Radiographs of the affected foot / feet do not reveal relevant abnormalities.
- A significant number of the cases turn out to be navicular region problems because of a positive navicular bursa block and/or successful navicular bursa treatment.

During the lecture, several cases of hind limb foot lameness will be presented in a way to get familiar with the lameness patterns and to share ideas about symptoms, diagnosis and treatment.