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August 2014

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Improve your riding and confidence

Lisa Ashton reports from the Centaur Biomechanics Conference, UK

One man's vision to bring horse owners and world-class practitioners, physiotherapists, saddlers, psychologists and coaches together resulted in the conference aimed at meeting the needs of the British horse owner. Titled 'Improve Your Riding and Confidence', the conference was the brainchild of Russell Guire, founder of Centaur Biomechanics, a company specialising in horse and rider performance analysis.

Curious by the success of world-renowned sports psychologist Dr Steven Peters (author of 'The Chimp Paradox'), I remember coming away from last year's conference with practical information and the inspiration to get fit with a free rider fitness DVD and the toolkit to manage my 'chimp'..

Remembering this feeling, within minutes of opening my invite to this year's conference, I had joined 70 delegates from as far as New Zealand, Canada and Italy for a two-day conference at Moulton College in Northampton, United Kingdom. Perhaps one of the most friendly and engaging conferences I have attended, Russell and his hard-working team created an open forum for horse owners and riders to think, practice and question the presenters.

Up our game

"Our speakers have been selected to help improve what you do through sharing information," explained Russell, who kicked off day one with an energetic introduction. "What we ask of our horses is at an all-time high, so let's improve our understanding of sports science and up our game to meet the growing demands of equestrian sport."

Understanding your horse

Russell reminded delegates that horses are designed to stay upright and balanced, and it is the rider that causes disruptions. So, how do our saddles, posture and different disciplines influence the horse's mental wellbeing, his 'happiness', safety and soundness? "With almost 60% of the horse's bodyweight carried at the front and gravity pulling down on heavy organs in the middle," explained Russell. "Training with an understanding and respect for the horse is crucial."

Happy, safe and sound

This day and age, riders have many aspects to consider in relation to soundness and performance so, where and how do you access knowledge to enable your horse to be happy, safe and sound? Besides correct training, exercises to maintain soundness, management and maintenance of surfaces, saddles and equipment, who do you have in your team? Russell believes it is crucial to have a strong team - one where everyone talks to each other. "You don't want to be an island!" Russell said.

In discussing what makes a good rider - talent, position, training, commitment, height, willingness to learn and strength - Russell concluded what we do know is that behind every good rider there is a great team. Owners and riders were urged to "get their team in order".

Be proactive

Do you own a smartphone? Use the video recording ability on your phone to regularly capture your horse and share the information with your team - your farrier, veterinarian, physiotherapist, saddler, coach, nutritionist, personal trainer and psychologist, for example.

Your decisions directly influence your horse's soundness and performance so, if your team members do not support, encourage and develop you and your horse, "get them gone", urged Russell.



Photos courtesy of Centaur Biomechanics.

One or two studs?

In a collaborative project looking at the effect screw-on studs have on shod horses, Russell and event rider and coach Lucinda Green, are currently working together to understand how one or two studs affect performance and soundness. Studs are screwed into shoes to assist with grip and, contrary to popular belief, early findings indicate one stud may be safer than two. However, Russell advised that more research is needed. The team will also be looking at football (soccer) research on studded boots for optimal performance.

Quick, easy and effective

In a study that is ongoing, Russell and his colleague Newbound are assessing the mobiliser massage pad on the rider and its effect on the horse's movement. Early results indicate that all 12 riders in the study improved position, with the area of most improvement shown in the thoracic vertebrae region.

Are you sitting straight?

Master saddler Mark Fisher took the stage and focused riders for an hour on the saddle and how it can affect performance. Mr Fisher highlighted the many causes of saddle imbalance - change in shape or condition of the horse, settling of flocking in the panels over time, saddle too wide (tipping forwards), saddle too narrow (tipping backwards), an asymmetric rider (weight or position), saddle slippage to one side, an asymmetric horse (uneven in its gait or shape), saddle slippage to one side and an incorrectly-positioned saddle. Imbalances in the rider also influence saddle fit and, therefore, performance. According to Mr Fisher, crooked riders increase pressure and force under the saddle, restrict the horse's gait and increase gait asymmetry - all factors that contribute to lowering performance.



“Evidence-based knowledge helps to improve our knowledge and understanding, so we can have better horse-human relationships.”



Mounting methods

Using the Pliance Saddle Pressure Mapping System owned by British Equestrian Federation and Master of Saddlers Society, Fisher and Guire studied the pressures endured by horses whilst we mount. They found that the best method for the horse is not placing a foot in the stirrup iron at all, regardless if you have a mounting block, as the pressures exerted from higher up are similar to mounting from the ground. The best way is to be high enough that you can place yourself on without touching the stirrups. Using a stirrup (from a mounting block or the ground) exerts peak pressures on the off side, whilst having a 'leg-up' exerts peak pressure on the near side. Mr Fisher asked the delegates, "If a horse walks off during mounting is he avoiding the discomfort, or is he just un-trained?"

Interestingly, Ken's framework for helping nervous riders was to look at the social relationship of horses and how horses pair bond. I was surprised, however, to hear him raise the subject of dominance-submission in horse-to-horse interactions and apply them to our horse-human relationships. Ken explained this has an effect on riding and handling. "You are either being dominant or submissive." Ken said. "Riding is a dominant activity and your horse is looking to you for leadership. If your horse is 'out in front' and getting no leadership, he will become the dominant partner."

The notion that the horse must respect the leadership of the human is outdated and at odds with current understanding of horse ethology. Dominance is not a personality trait, it focuses around drive or its reduction, and varies depending on the resource to defend. Research shows even the most 'dominant' horse is only 'dominant' for 70% of the time.

As equitation scientists, we now know that horses are only 'dominant' for a specific resource or drive, such as food, water, sex and play, and that, like in dogs, social interactions are fluid. As Lauren Fraser from Good Horsemanship so eloquently puts it: "Your horse is not dominant, nor is he likely to try to be dominant in your relationship. Not unless you and he are deciding who is going to win the rights to breed that mare in the pasture. However,

“If the horse pins his ears because he is in pain and it causes the approaching human with the halter to retreat, the behaviour of ear pinning will likely happen again.

What are you telling your horse?

Equine Behaviour consultant Ken Scott stepped up to replace Michael Peace, who sadly was unable to attend for family reasons. Ken, a neurolinguistic programmer (NLP) Master Practitioner, started his equestrian career working with nervous riders, and later trained and qualified with Dr Debbie Marsden as an equine behaviour consultant. He now spends his time assessing a rider's confidence and offering treatments, such as hypnosis, to overcome nerves and past experiences.

it is easy to label a horse's behaviour as dominant and try to address it based on that simple label. It's hard to understand the complexities of a horse's social life and how horses learn."

Education, education, education

Furthermore, the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviour has published their position statement on the use of dominance theory in the behaviour modification of animals: "When your horse performs a behaviour, such as barging, rearing, kicking, swishing his tail or pinning back his ears, he is not trying to dominate you. If any behaviours are reinforced, the behaviour is likely to happen again. This is just the nature of learning. We humans learn the same. Horses don't dominate people; horses learn what works, or what doesn't, in their efforts to get what they want or need," explained Lauren Fraser.

Yes, I was disappointed to hear a qualified equine behaviour consultant say that being dominant in your relationship would improve you and your horse's confidence. It all comes back to education. Learning the laws of behaviour and how horses learn (independent of a training method) explains a horse's individual behaviour, and offers riders (including nervous riders) an evidence-based 'toolkit' that can be used to change and improve behaviour safely, ethically and effectively.

Through the judge's eye

Later in the day, Judy Harvey, a BHS Fellow and FEI dressage judge, shared her 'system' of aids and explained how several different systems had evolved. According to Judy, the French and German systems have their roots in the Cavalry, whilst the Spanish Riding School system was adopted by the BHS and taught throughout the United Kingdom in the 1960's and 1970's.

"From this background of three different systems," Judy said, "the world of FEI competition dressage evolved. Training systems are varied and many naturally talented riders, and trainers react from instinct when training their horses and have vague systems. Because they don't have to think about what, why or when they do things". Judy went on to explain that her system is based on how your horse understands, while she rode a young horse and an advanced horse.

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Technology and dressage

Diana Fisher and Jonathan Boswell both rode advanced horses for Judy to coach and further demonstrate her system. After that, it was our turn to become the judges. Armed with the British Dressage Medium 75 test, I remember thinking: "These movements come fast and furious!" Later, we shared our scores in a fun and interactive opportunity to discuss with Judy, an experienced FEI judge, her views and opinions for each test.

Marks and comments were justified and, after reviewing the videos, Judy considered lowering or increasing marks. This got me thinking why the latest advances in technology are being applied in rugby and tennis successfully, but are not transferring to dressage. Is change just too great and too uncomfortable for a sport entrenched in tradition?

What did I learn?

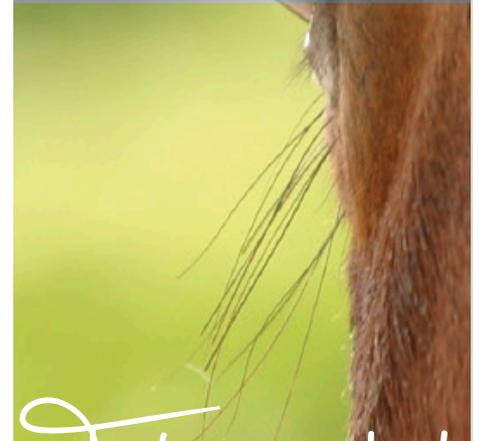
As day one of the conference closed and I started the drive back to Staffordshire, I pondered on what I had learned.

The highlights were being able to review my own training and coaching practices, and having the opportunity to assess my own riding and coaching philosophy - one that embraces evidence-based knowledge and places the horse at the centre of everything I do.

Speaking, listening and engaging with international delegates reminded me of the importance of making knowledge accessible and transferable. The anticipation and expectation of what was to come and what had been, mixed with plenty of cakes and coffee, provided a 'safe and happy' environment for delegates. As I listened in the breaks to horse owners and riders talking, I started to ask myself which would be more important to the horse? The opportunity for owners to share and discuss experiences with like-minded others or the knowledge gained in fun and interactive formats? This conference successfully achieved both. Credit is due. The warmth and efficiency of the Centaur Biomechanics team, who thrived off every interactive opportunity, helped more horse owners understand their role, skills and responsibilities in achieving optimal equitation.

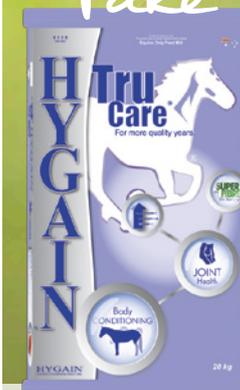


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