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**OUT OF CONTROL**

Thoroughbreds need to have their “heads in the game” to be successful on the racetrack, and calming nervous horses to sharpen their abilities requires just the right preparation

# Calming the nervous horse

Management strategies include increased turnout, varying exercise activities, and balanced nutrition

by **Kenneth L. Marcella D.V.M.**

IT is not enough simply to be athletic, and conditioning can only take you so far. At the elite levels of sports, nearly all competitors are superb ath-

letes, and the training and conditioning they receive do not differ that much.

We all have seen great, muscular, wonderfully moving, athletic horses that did not manage to fulfill their po-

tential. What then makes one athlete succeed and one falter? Often it is the mental aspect of sport. The successful competitor is the one who handles pressure better, reacts optimally despite distractions, and delivers a performance that positively reflects its months of training and preparation. Horses that are nervous, excitable, hormonal, or otherwise unfocused cannot compete at their best, and their performances reflect these personality or behavioral problems. These horses do not “have their heads in the game,” to borrow a phrase from human sports psychologists, and they have lost before they begin.

Consequently, attempts to calm nervous horses and to sharpen focus and concentration in equine athletes have become as much a part of preparing for events as any other aspect of training. A skittish or nervous horse trains poorly and may learn or progress slowly. Such horses may shy away from competition and fail to reach potential.

Hyperexcitable horses may have tremendous energy but can have trouble utilizing that energy for performance and may wash out or use up that drive before they can direct it toward useful work. Aggressive horses likewise waste energy and can be distractions to barn, training, and race situations. Moody mares or mares with excessive estrus behavior also can disrupt a training environment and work and perform inconsistently.

Veterinarians routinely are consulted about various drugs and medications that may be used to calm

*Some horses have personalities that are not suited to the rigorous demands of competition. The genetics in these individuals make them susceptible to gastrointestinal irritation due to stress, ulcers, colic, and poor digestion.*

genes—essentially predetermined to be aggressive or calm based on genetic aspects of the sire and dam? Many horse owners and breeders agree with this view, citing known bloodlines that tend to produce intensely competitive, aggressive, or calm horses from generation to generation.

Or is the horse a product of how it is raised, handled, and trained? A good number of horsemen and trainers agree with this view as well. The truth is likely a mixture of the two.

Some horses have personalities that are not suited to the rigorous demands of competition. The genetics in these individuals make them susceptible to gastrointestinal irritation due to stress, ulcers, colic, and poor digestion. Other horses thrive under the same conditions because their genetics are better suited to such stresses, and as with some humans in certain professions, they may not even perceive any stress at all. These horses will tolerate trailering, will continue to eat well and stay energized at shows, and will perform to their abilities. Identifying individuals that do well in competition situations and then breeding to utilize those genetic benefits is a useful strategy for improving equine athletic performance.

nervous horses or to focus other excitable horses on the task at hand. Literally hundreds of products are available through tack stores or veterinary-supply catalogs, and their various names seem to promise it all—Calm and Cool, SmartCalm, Mare Magic, Ex Stress, B-Kalm.

Trainers and owners may have a difficult task sorting through all these options, and it may be advisable to take a look at the science behind these calming products and exactly what may be making horses nervous, excitable, and unfocused.

**Nature or nurture**

Two main factors determine equine behavior: genetics and management. These are the nature and nurture components that have been debated in psychological circles for centuries. Is a horse a product of its

**Management factors**

Management is the other main factor influencing equine behavior, and this can include all aspects of the horse’s environment, such as nutrition, turnout, exercise, rest, socialization, and sleep. Poor management

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## TIME ALONE

*Management of just the right amount of turnout time is a critical part of influencing a horse's behavior and possibly calming the nervous horse*

practices in any of these areas can predispose a horse to excitable, nervous, or unfocused behavior.

Nutrition often is blamed for the nervous horse, and it is an incorrect assumption that sweet feed, molasses, corn, or protein actually make horses more excitable. Excess protein can cause an increase in blood nitrogen levels, which, in theory, can alter the levels of certain metabolic hormones and thyroid hormone and possibly affect excitability. But according to statistics published in *American Horse Rider*, protein would have to be fed in excess of 150% of the horse's requirements to have any effect on behavior and attitude.

What generally makes a horse hyperactive is not any of the particular feeds associated with detrimental behavior, but the fact that the owner or trainer simply feeds far too much of these feeds. Overfeeding corn, protein, or even oats can lead to abnormal behavior, so a good balanced ration is the best management for all horses.

Reduced turnout is an unfortunate fact of life for most competition horses. Either their inherent value and the risk of injury or the demands of travel and competition serve to drastically reduce or altogether eliminate the time spent free at pasture for most elite equine athletes.

One of the leading holistic practitioners in this country, Joyce Harman, D.V.M., of the Harmany Equine Clinic in Washington, Virginia, said lack of turnout time is a significant factor in the behavior of nervous horses.

"The horse evolved as a free-ranging animal with a need for social interaction, continual grazing, and an ability to burn off excess energy with bouts of running and pasture play," she said.

Harman pointed out that modern management practices have greatly reduced this free time, and show horses have even less of it, with often little more than training sessions and small paddock turnout.

"Some people consider a 20- to 30-minute ride to be work, and a half-hour session once a day is simply not enough for a horse from a mental or physical standpoint," she said.

If horses are given more exercise,



Denise Sterflanus photos

that activity must be variable types of exercise that do not continually stress one area of the horse's body. Combining various activities with flat, speed work allows the horse more exercise time, reduces excess energy, and helps the equine athlete focus because the horse does not become stale or bored with routine exercise.

## Calming potions

Many products used to calm nervous horses have nutritional value. These products generally contain high levels of B vitamins, magnesium, chromium, calcium, and certain amino acids, such as thiamine and tryptophan. Some research evidence exists for the calming effects of all these substances, but the actual degree of calming and the exact mode of action for many of them are just not known.

Magnesium oxide often is given orally, and magnesium sulfate sometimes is combined with thiamine and injected intravenously. Magnesium helps modulate or control the electrical potential across cell membranes, thereby reducing excitability or nervousness.

Thiamine is important in the utilization of fats, carbohydrates, and proteins and in the production of cellular energy. High-grain diets have

a higher thiamine requirement, and deficiencies of this amino acid can result in excessive irritability, weakness, and incoordination.

B vitamins help with stabilization of cell membranes and the production and utilization of certain neurotransmitters (the substances that transfer electrical impulses and information along nerves and between cells in the brain).

Tryptophan is another amino acid that is involved with neurotransmitter function. A look at most of the calming products for use in horses will have some combination of these substances.

## Herbal solutions

Herbal remedies are another method of treating the nervous or excitable horse that have become more accepted and more popular. Because there are many herbs available and because they tend to work synergistically or in harmony with each other, owners and trainers need to work with their veterinarians to determine the exact herbs, amounts, and combinations that will be effective for a particular horse. Some fine tuning of these substances will be necessary as you and your horse progress, Harman said.

Most herbal preparations will include valerian root, raspberry leaf, hops, chamomile, St. John's wort, dandelion, goldenrod, marigold, Chaste Tree berries, and rosemary.

Marty Smith, D.V.M., of Drs. Foster & Smith in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, feels that herbal remedies can have a significantly beneficial effect on some nervous horses.

"We cannot emphasize strongly enough that calming herbs are in no way a substitute for correct diet and proper training," Smith said. "Calming aids do not replace good horsemanship but can be a wonderful ally in many cases."

Most herbal preparations contain at least one or more of the following items: chamomile, vervain, valerian, devil's claw, passion flower, kava kava, and hops. Owners and trainers must be cautious when using these products and are encouraged to check with the jurisdictions in which they race to assure their legality before using them.

Attention to management factors that do have a good basis in science may help owners, trainers, and nervous horses. While there is no quick fix or magic product that can be given easily to quiet excitable horses or to make them attentive and calm athletes, owners, trainers, and veterinarians should be working toward more turnout, better and more consistent exercise, good diets low in carbohydrates and high in balanced protein, and all other factors that behaviorally can calm a nervous horse. ★



## REMEDIES

*Many products, including those that contain high levels of vitamins and minerals, are available to horsemen, although the actual degree they help calm a horse is not entirely known*



Kenneth L. Marcella, D.V.M., is a practicing veterinarian in Canton, Georgia.

## Have a question for a veterinarian?

We invite you to submit questions relating to your horse's health, care, and training for consideration as a topic for the THOROUGHBRED TIMES Veterinary Topics column. If you need an immediate answer or have an emergency, contact your local veterinarian. Please send your question to:

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