

Talk to me, I'm listening

Up close and personal with our competition horses with the help of Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine. Dr. Marco Testa tells us about it

Today more than ever before, we need to understand the horse as a whole in order to come to grips with the problems – both physical and psychological – that a poor or ill-conceived approach to training or day-to-day management can cause during competition. This is important not only at the ethological level, or in other words, in understanding the horse by studying how he behaves in his natural environment, but also from the veterinary standpoint, where it is increasingly necessary to understand the physical and psychic reasons (always correlated with each other) underlying certain of the problems that affect the horse. This is why 'putting ourselves in the horse's shoes', and trying to understand his needs by listening to the messages he sends us – often much clearer than you might think – is the key to building a solid relationship rooted in mutual trust. A healthy horse who is happy in our company will also be an excellent team mate in any competition. Let's try to listen to what our horses have to tell us. We'll discover things that will surprise us and give us a whole new outlook. To do so, though, we have to make an effort to be open minded and empathetic. Here are a few examples of what our horses are trying to say to us, things we're usually not able to see or feel on our own... Once we've read these phrases and applied them to our own horses, we'll find that they, too, have a lot to say... and a lot of surprises in store...

BOX: STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

C. C., dressage horse, relaxes and bursts out: *"The stress of getting through all the tests gets me in the pit of the stomach and I can't extend my legs properly any more..."*

R.B., reiner, abandons his usual self-confidence for a moment and admits: *"I've always loved sliding stops, but lately every time I do it, I get this shooting pain that starts halfway up my croup and runs all the way down to my hock..."*

J.G., sprinter, tells us: *"1400 meters is a terrible distance for me, towards the end I'm winded and feel all tied in knots..."*

G. S., show jumper, says: “After the third obstacle, a dull pain hits me in the loins, and there’s just no way I can cover the ground between the jumps. I try as hard as I can to go on, but the pain is just too much for me...”

T. M., trotter, disconsolately says: “As soon as I go into a curve, I’m like a boat listing over to the side; I can’t keep on course any more and drift to the outboard side...”

T.M. continues: “It’s useless having that sulky shaft pressing against my flank, it doesn’t help with the pain in my hip...”

L. N. S., show jumper, vents her frustration: “I just can’t be steady, one day my concentration’s great and everything goes wonderfully; the next day I’d just like to run away and not have to do anything at all...”

V.G., racehorse, wants to see the vet again and says: “This is the third time they’ve treated my fore tendons, but couldn’t they also pay some attention to my aching back...?”

G. D., galloper, declares: “For me, soft ground is bad news, particularly for the stifle joint: I can’t seem to push...”

M. I., show jumper, admits for the first time: “I panic for nothing and then I feel I can’t breath... I don’t understand it... I start coughing and can’t stop, and my whole rib cage seizes up. I’ve never been allergic to anything, but lately even the air seems to bother me.”

D. G., dressage horse, confesses: “I can’t keep up this level of training and competition any more, I’m losing confidence in myself, my back isn’t as supple as it used to be, my neck is stiff ... I feel like I’m my own prisoner...”

D. D., dressage horse, says gloomily: “On my home turf, everything’s fantastic, I’m the best, but as soon as I get into an event I can’t move a single step...”

T.S., eventer, is nearly at her wits’ end as she whinnies: “I need to make my rider understand than I’m not something she can pour all her frustrations, anxiety and fears into...”

T.P., pony school, sounds a bit discouraged: “I have a burning sensation running all over my body, and I get hives for no reason at all that often itch, and then they burst. I don’t know, I probably ought to do some sort of a cure, get the poisons out of my system... and worry less...”

G. S., racehorse, is fed up with being misunderstood: “It’s not true that I’ve lost my will to win, or that I’m sad, or maybe need vitamins or something to get me back into shape... my hocks hurt like the dickens, and the pain goes all the way to my tail, nothing to do with being depressed..!”

D.A., steeplechaser, comes up looking terrible and grumbles: “It’s not enough having a continual pain in my neck vertebrae, and a headache that radiates out towards my temples, but my rider also has to go and ram that horrible bit into my mouth...”

G. J., show jumper, is practically screaming as he says: “The bell is a nightmare for me: from that moment on, I know that the pain is going to be unbearable...”

THE FOUR DIAGNOSTIC METHODS

You don’t need to be a psychic or animal psychologist to listen to these and many other comments that our competition horses make. Basically, all it takes is a different approach, a ‘holistic’ approach that takes the living being as a whole into consideration.

The term 'holistic', in fact, means 'whole', and refers to a way of looking at living beings in their entirety, and how they relate to their internal and external environment. Holistic medicine considers the individual in his or her biological, psychological, rational and spiritual unity. Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM), which is rooted in this holistic approach, can provide us with the key to understanding and solving many problems which manifest themselves chiefly at the physical level, but often have sources that are much more deeply seated in the animal. In past centuries, TCVM developed a method, 'Si-Zhen', for pin-pointing the course of a disease. Si-Zhen, usually translated as 'Four Methods of Diagnosis' or 'Four Stage Diagnosis', enables us to obtain a great deal of clinical data that help us make an accurate assessment of the disease. The principle underlying Si-Zhen is that of examining the Exterior to determine the condition of the Interior of the body. This is based on the ability to understand that the animal body, as an organic entity, can have pathological changes of the inner organs that may affect the entire body, or become apparent only on the surface: like our friend T.P., the overworked horse from the pony school, who has hives and itchy skin. These signs of disease are directly linked with having to put up with a monotonous job – the 'frustration of boredom' – which is the direct cause of a real problem of liver metabolism and the resulting skin eruptions. Si-Zhen consists of four different stages: Observing, Listening/Smelling, Interrogation and Palpation. The first two are particularly interesting and helpful for anyone who wants to gain this type of understanding, while Interrogation and Palpation are more in the realm of the veterinarian who practices TCVM.

→ Observing

Observing means noting any changes in the humor, or in other words, the 'Shen', of our animal. Shen, the key to understanding changes, is considered as an individual soul, a conscience almost, one of the Three Treasures of the Individual, the component that makes the subject 'person'-'animal'. The animal's Spirit-Humor-Shen is directly connected with the outer signs of the body's vitality. Whether Shen is present or absent can be observed in the eyes, in the ears, in reactivity to external stimuli. The state of the 'Shen' is very important for the prognosis of a disease. We look, for example, at the tongue. Evaluating the tongue is one of the pillars of diagnosis, the basis not only for recognizing the origin of the disorder, but also the course it can be expected to take. We consider its color, brightness, dampness and shape. We then examine the characteristics of our horse's body. We look at its coat: a dull, dry coat can indicate anemia. We look at changes in the animal's tastes or in how much it eats and drink; many horses with gastritis tend to be extremely voracious, or to prefer fresh grass to grain, because the animal is trying to do whatever it can to placate the 'Stomach fire'.

→ Listening/Smelling

Our horse's voice, its breathing, whether or not it coughs, will all change according to its state of health. Neighing at a slightly lower pitch than usual, together with a lusterless coat and a low 'Shen' clearly point to a state of weakness. And when we add the information gained from looking at the animal's tongue and palpation, we quickly reach an accurate, thorough diagnosis. For G. S. the racehorse,

the outermost sensation is one of a general weakness, exhaustion, but after other evaluations we find that the horse's Shen, the Spirit, is good: the exhaustion is to be regarded as the expression of a long-neglected chronic arthritis that, restricting the old warrior's performance in the arena, gradually depleted all of his energy. The smell of the horse's breath, scybala (hard, round feces) or urine can help us, without ever touching the animal, paint a fairly clear picture that we can use as a starting point for further investigation. L. N. S. the show jumper, with her ups and downs caused by unbalanced hormone cycles, will often have changes in her urine's characteristics.

The emotions (joy, anger, fear, apprehension, worry, sadness...) are part of our daily lives and those of our horses. If they are not excessive, they can be the spice of life, as they make it more intense and interesting. Strong, prolonged emotions, however, can alter the body's internal organs and start a process that will slowly but inevitably lead to manifest disease.

→ Interrogation and Palpation

As we mentioned earlier, while the first two diagnostic methods (Observing and Listening/Smelling) are particularly interesting and helpful for anyone who wants to gain this type of understanding, Interrogation and Palpation are more in the realm of the veterinarian who practices TCVM. Both interrogation – or anamnesis – and palpating the various acupuncture points call for a knowledge of the basics of Chinese Medicine, and thus for special training. To conclude, we can say at this point that it is up to us, whether we are ordinary owners, expert horsemen or veterinarians, to hone our skills at detecting the signs of change in our four-footed athletes and prevent disease from setting in. Hence the value of a discipline like TCVM which concentrates on the individual – human or animal – as a whole, a unique patient receiving a unique treatment...

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