

If Only They Could Talk

Our regular focus on equine health. This month MJR vet NEIL MECHIE explains the process of "Vetting" at the sales.

AS any honest racehorse trainer or bloodstock agent will tell you, finding a future winner at the sales is no easy task.

A successful purchase relies on a combination of experience, science and a good helping of luck.

When large amounts of money are changing hands for the potential stars of the future, veterinary advice is usually sought. Vetting of horses prior to purchase can often be a contentious issue. I still remember Mark telling me as a student several years ago that vets rarely encourage you to buy a horse -- instead they tend to discourage you from making purchases. The challenge for vets is not to discourage people from buying good horses, but balancing the risk of imperfections against the athletic potential of a horse. There are a variety of reasons for horses to fail a veterinary examination, whether it be poor conformation, lameness, pre-existing injuries, or imperfections on radiographs (x-rays) or endoscopic (wind) testing.

The definition of a "Vetting" is the process aimed at establishing whether a horse is able to undertake its intended use and so "fit to fulfil its purpose".

The most simplified aim is for a racehorse to run and win at the highest possible level. What must be considered is what is required for a horse to achieve this aim.

The horse must be sound enough in conformation, action and wind to allow it to withstand prolonged training regimes required to install adequate fitness to win. It must also possess athletic ability in terms of both speed and stamina, along with a determination to run and win.

There are numerous abnormalities that are commonly found when reviewing x-rays of horses at sales. Previous injuries sustained as a foal



Set to be "Vetted" -- a yearling at the sales

or youngster may still be visible.

Foals commonly fracture their sesamoids and the pedal bones in their feet. These fractures don't always heal satisfactorily and can have implications for their future training prospects as they can cause chronic lameness issues. Older horses may have signs of degenerative joint disease or previous injuries sustained in training.

Osteochondritis dissecans (OCD) is a developmental disease of young, fast-growing animals. For bones to enlarge as an animal grows, cartilage must first be laid down at the growth plates. This cartilage matrix is then used as a scaffold for bone production (ossification).

OCD lesions arise due to an imbalance in which fast cartilage growth outpaces ossification, the process of turning cartilage to bone. With ossification unable to keep up, deeper layers of the cartilage die and its attachments break down, forming cystic lesions or cartilage flaps and chips.

These irregularities in the articular surface of joints in horses cause inflammation, lameness and can predispose them to developing degenerative joint disease (arthritis).

OCD lesions have certain predilection sites: the sagittal ridge of the distal cannon (metacarpus/metatarsus) in the fetlock joint; the distal intermediate ridge of the tibia and lateral trochlear ridge of the talus in the hock; and the medial and lateral trochlear ridge of the femur and femoral condylar cysts in the stifle.

The different sites and severity of lesions determine their significance. Small lesions in the fetlock are commonly seen and horses may show minimal or no clinical signs of joint inflammation and mild lameness.

Larger lesions of the trochlear ridges or femoral condyles of the stifle may cause chronic joint inflammation and lameness, even with surgery on the damaged tissue, the prognosis for withstanding training and racing can be poor.

Respiratory tract (wind) testing is common at racehorse sales and has two components; an exercise test to see if the horse makes a respiratory tract noise at work, and a resting endoscopy to assess the functionality of the larynx and soft palate.

Respiratory tract noises are created by turbulence in airflow through the larynx and pharynx. This turbulence arises due to obstruction of the clear passage of air from the nose into the trachea by tissues whether it is the soft palate or vocal chords.

Making a noise when exercised therefore implies a functional narrowing of the airway.

This can be visualised using an endoscope, a small camera inserted into the airway.

The problem with wind testing is that horses can make a noise at exercise and have imperfections visualised through an endoscopy, but they do not have a performance-limiting effect on the horse when racing. On the other hand, horses can look normal on a rest-



Above: fetlock x-ray showing an OCD lesion which can be easily managed and does not stop a runner from winning



Stifle OCD lesions -- more difficult to manage and maintain soundness during normal training

ing "scope", and not make a noise at gentle exercise. But at the end of a race they may suffer functional narrowing of the airway which makes a noise and limits the horse's performance.

Conformation and gait assessment constitute a large proportion of the examination of horses at sales. Individuals have their own opinions on what they perceive as good conformation and what flaws in conformation they deem as acceptable and those they choose to avoid.

From a veterinary point of view, bad conformation is one that predisposes a horse to certain types of injury or poor performance. An example of this is a horse that is "back at the knee", which may put it at a higher risk of knee injuries whether acute or chronic due to the increased stress going through the front of the knee during exercise.

The assessment of horses at sales is primarily subjective, based on opinions and experience of previous successful and unsuccessful purchases. From a veterinary point of view, advice is given on a scientific basis taking into consideration the risks and benefits of each individual horse's attributes.

Some horses will have findings on examination which cause a vet to advise a potential purchaser not to buy it outright. On the other hand, some will have negative attributes which may not put a stop to a sale, but would mean a reduced price.

As you can see the purchase of racehorses for large amounts of money is not a clear-cut matter.

Here at Mark Johnston Racing, Mark has combined his own vast experience with a team to accompany him to the sales including vets and

bloodstock advisors helping to trawl through hundreds of yearling's pedigrees, x-rays and conformation notes hoping to make the best possible purchases for his owners. ■

£65.50
INCLUSIVE DAILY RATE

The Mark Johnston Racing daily training fee includes:

Gallop fees; vaccinations; worming; exercise shoes;

on-site resident vets; in-house ultrasound scanning; in-house digital X-rays;

all referrals including bone scans, surgery, etc; dynamic 'overground' endoscopy;

routine endoscopy; all medicines and drugs; dental care;

vitamins and minerals; swimming; gelding; etc. etc. etc.

ALWAYS TRYING TO GIVE VALUE FOR MONEY



Neil Mechie

Neil is 25 and did his veterinary degree at the University of London. He then worked for 14 months as an intern at the Minster Equine Hospital, York, where his duties included surgical and colic work. After a spell at the specialist equine practice of vet Simon Stirk, near Ripon, Neil worked for six months at Clevedale Veterinary Practice at Guisborough. Neil's keen interest in racing is heightened by the fact that he has a point-to-pointer, and when not kept busy with work by Mark, Neil spends time looking after his border collie.

The MJR veterinary team

At Mark Johnston Racing, peace of mind is a priority for our owners. This is why we have included the vet fees in our inclusive daily rate for horses in training.



Fia Brink

Fia has packed a lot into her 27 years! Born in South Africa, Fia developed her love of horses when helping to look after her grandparents' horses there.

After a spell living in Holland she came to live in the UK, and while she returned to Holland to finish her education she now considers the UK as home.

After graduating from the University of Edinburgh's Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies in 2009, Fia has worked in a variety of 'mixed animal' veterinary practices.

Although she has no specific connection with racing she points out that Holland has a very equine-oriented culture, and in her time in Britain she has fallen in love with British racing.



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