

# If Only They Could Talk



**Our regular focus on equine health. This month vet JOHN MARTIN John Martin discusses veterinary examinations at the yearling sales.**

**W**E HAVE arrived at that time of the year again when the yearling sales are in full swing and although there remains a lot of racing in the next few weeks of the turf season, some of the focus here at Johnston Racing now turns to sourcing two-year-olds for 2024.

Charlie and Mark have already attended sales in Saratoga, Deauville, Baden-Baden, Newmarket, Doncaster, Fairyhouse and, as I write this article, they are at the prestigious Goffs Orby Sale in County Kildare.

From there they will head to Newmarket where, over a two-week period, in excess of 2,000 horses will be presented for sale. Picking out the ones of interest is a mammoth task, requiring a huge amount of time and effort to, firstly, research the pedigrees of the animals that are to be presented for sale.

From those pedigrees a list of potential purchases will be compiled, and the next task will be to physically inspect each individual. Mark and Charlie have devised their own grading system for size and conformation and following their physical examinations, the list of potential purchases will be whittled down further.

Within this shortlist there will be some horses which may

have some clinical imperfection and these horses are referred to myself and my colleague for further examination. With digital radiography now commonplace in all equine veterinary practices, most horses being presented for sale, particularly at the bigger sales will have a set of 36 X-rays and an endoscopy video uploaded to an online repository which we can access remotely. We then relay our findings back to Charlie and Mark at the sales complex.

A successful purchase relies on a combination of experience, science and a significant portion of luck. When large amounts of money are changing hands for the potential stars of the future, veterinary advice is often sought. The challenge for vets is not to discourage people from buying good horses but to balance the risk of imperfections against the athletic potential of a horse.

There are a variety of reasons for horses to fail a veterinary examination, ranging from poor conformation, lameness, or pre-existing injuries to imperfections on radiographs or endoscopy results. The definition of all this '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 the prolonged training regimes required to achieve a level of fitness to win races. They must also possess athletic ability in terms of both speed and stamina, along with a determination to run and win.

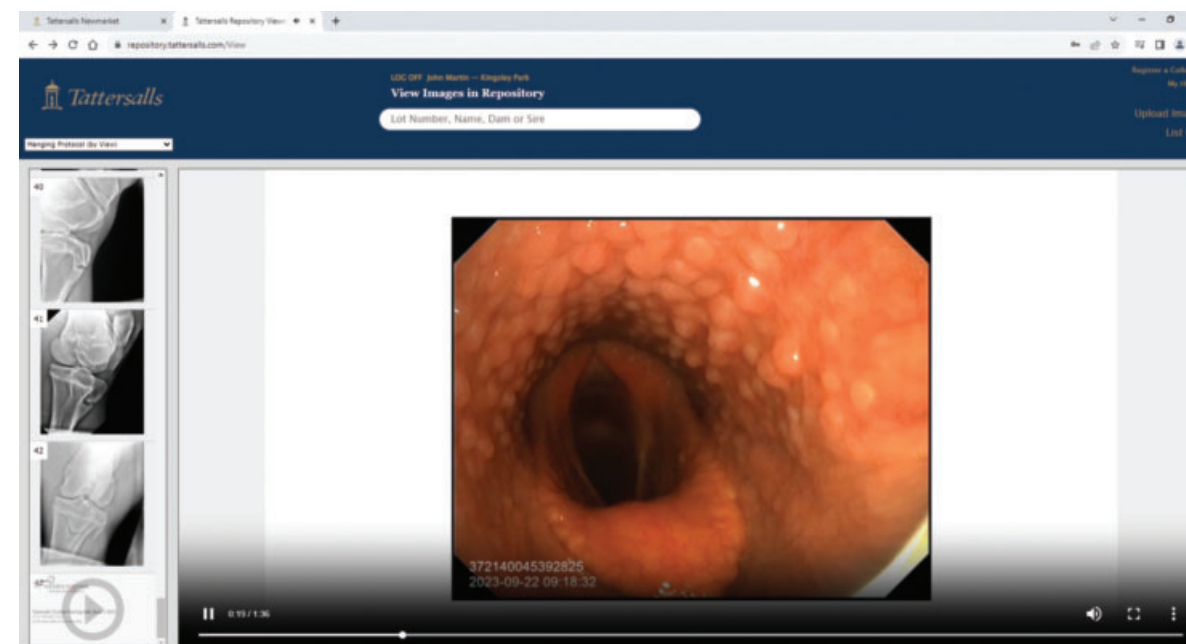
There are numerous abnormalities that are commonly found when reviewing X-rays of horses at sales. Previous injuries sustained as a foal or youngster may still be visible. Foals can commonly fracture their sesamoids and the pedal bones in their feet. These fractures don't always heal satisfactorily and can have implications for their future training prospects as they can cause chronic lameness issues.

Developmental abnormalities, and specifically Osteochondritis Dissecans, are commonly seen on yearling X-rays. 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.

These irregularities in the articular surface of joints in horses can cause inflammation, lameness and can predispose the horse to developing degenerative joint disease (arthritis). OCD lesions have certain predilection sites: the sagittal ridge of the distal cannon 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



Viewing an endoscopy video in Tattersalls Online Repository

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.

The next aspect of the yearling to come under veterinary scrutiny is the respiratory tract. Wind testing is common at racehorse sales and begins with an exercise test to see if the horse makes a respiratory noise. This is achieved by lunging the yearlings. If an inspiratory noise is detected then the horse is referred to a panel of experts assigned by the sales company.

A resting endoscopy examination will be performed 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 larynx.

Making a noise when exercised therefore implies a functional narrowing of the airway. An endoscopic examination allows you to visualise these structures, but there are limitations to this examination as quite often the findings at rest do not always correlate with what is happening at exercise. Another limitation is that perceived abnormalities in yearlings can often be attributed to immaturity and will resolve in time.

**I**N the future, dynamic endoscopy may become a feature of pre-sales examination which is a more accurate method of assessing the function of the upper airways. ■



Radiograph of a stifle cyst and defect in the articular surface of the distal femur



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