

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A THERAPY HORSE**  
**AND GROUND TRAINING THE THERAPY HORSE**

**CanTRA Conference**

**St. Victoire De Sorel, Quebec**

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This presentation looks at the finer points of choosing a therapy horse, and training it so that it fits into the program and has lasting benefit to riders. It also looks at the compatibility between a horse and a rider.

So often a horse starts off being a good therapy horse but ends up leaving the program due it becoming unreliable. Coaches and trainers need to react much quicker when things start to go wrong.

It often happens that a Center is offered a horse or pony either for free or for a small price. This horse may not be what is required in the program. 'Never look a gift horse in the mouth' is an old saying that actually has little relevance to therapeutic work. If a horse works out well for several years the initial cost becomes irrelevant. The other saying 'it costs as much to feed a good horse as a bad horse' is much more relevant.

Every Centre should have a Horse Committee of three people. With more than three people it is hard to come to decisions, and a committee of two cannot make a decision if they are not in agreement.

Whether a horse is suitable is often contentious. This may be because horses react differently to the handlers and coaches. One coach may say that a horse is the best one while another coach does not want to use it at all.

It is important to have a shopping list organized before going to see a potential horse. Do not forget your first impression of it.

Try to arrive early to see the horse. Tell the owners that you want to see it in the paddock or stable before it is tacked up. Check that there are not wet sweat marks from a previous ride. Unfortunately people are not always honest about their horses and they want to sell it at any cost. I always tell an owner that I will be taking a blood test during the vet check to check for anti-inflammatory or tranquilizer substances.

## Assessing a potential horse

- Temperament – look at its eye and its behavior. Does it stress when it's away from other horses? How does it react with other horses?
- Confidence – this is one of the most important aspects. A horse that is full of self-confidence is less likely to shy and is much more reliable for independent riders. A horse that is lacking in self-confidence is more likely to overreact to the environment, the rider and the volunteers. It will not be consistent in its reactions.
- Mare or Gelding – some Centers have a gelding only policy. There are a lot of really good mares in different programs throughout the world but they need to be managed. If there is enough land for the horses to be turned out with the mares and geldings separated, the 'touchy' mares are stabled next to horses they like, and there is no problem with the horse's behaviors in a riding setting then there is no reason why a mare cannot be used. Horse handlers need to be aware of the natural horse behaviors and their hierarchy system.
- Soundness – the basic safety rule is that if a horse is not sound enough to be ridden by an able bodied rider it should not be ridden by one with a disability. Some horses arrive in a program having been retired as competition horses. They may need medication to keep them sound. If the cost is reasonable and the horse is of particular value to the program then it would be a considered decision to keep the horse. Lots of people want to give their old and worn out horse to therapy programs. They are not doing us any favors.
- Conformation – horses with very odd conformation can stay sound for years but one should be aware of good and bad conformation as it applies to therapy horses. An older horse that has obvious faults but has stayed sound is probably a better bet than a young horse that is has poor conformation.
- Condition – it is expensive to put condition on a thin horse. Thin horses have more chance of developing a sore back. Older horses tend to require more feed than younger ones.
- Education of a horse is very important. The horse needs to be able to interpret what it is the rider is asking it to do. Some highly educated horses simply do not cope with riders with unrefined aids, as they become muddled and uncomfortable both physically and mentally.

- Goodwill and Coping – this is something that is hard to measure but is easy to identify when goodwill has been lost. A horse that has lost its goodwill will clearly indicate this and unfortunately it becomes unsafe for the therapy program. Poor management usually causes this. Sharp teeth, or an ill-fitting saddle do not help a horse to cope with a heavy or unbalanced rider. Horses that have riders that are too big for them are a common cause of problems.
- Attitude when learning new activities – some horses pick up new skills very quickly while others have more problems. What matters is that the learning is correct in the end. Once something has been learned it is there for life so the time of learning is not important. A quick learning horse is more likely to pick up bad and unwanted habits.
- Horse's natural balance. Is the horse 'uphill' or 'on the forehand'? Unless specifically trained, horses will be one sided in the same way that most people are either left or right handed. A crooked horse gives the rider an uncomfortable ride and the horse ends up with a sore back and becomes less willing to go.
- Forward – this means that the horse is keeping itself going without the rider having to use continual leg aids. Whether being led or ridden the horse needs to be 'thinking forward'. If a horse does not keep itself going it is very difficult for a rider with a physical disability to ride effectively and independently. It is a very negative experience for a horse leader to have to drag a horse along.
- Tempo is the speed of the steps. Rhythm is the evenness of the steps. Although different from forward they are all integrated parts of how a horse travels.
- Quality of the Paces – the walk needs to have a regular rhythm and a clear over-track. As there is no suspension in the walk there is no impulsion. A good walk is described as being active. In trot the horse has engagement and suspension. Some trots are too bouncy for a rider to sit on. If the horse is not forward it is difficult for a rider to learn how to post. Riders learning to canter need a stride that is not too long or too choppy. The smoother the gait the easier it is for the rider to keep in balance.

### Specific Training for the Therapeutic Program

Leading – with a lead rope, with the reins under the neck, and reins over the neck  
 Training in a group situation

## Horse Trainers

Even older horses need to have maintenance training. As horses age they lose muscle tone and develop sway backs. Working horses from the ground can help to develop and keep a good top line which means that the horses last for longer in the program.

In a Center there are volunteers and coaches of varying standards of ability and knowledge. Many people do not have the skills to ride a horse and improve its training. With both leading and riding there can be different levels of expertise.

- Beginner – this person will be under constant supervision. Basic leading skills will be established. If this person rides it will be on trail rides and not involve schooling.
- Horse Handler– this person can maintain a horse working correctly but does not have the skills to initially train it.
- Trainer – this person has the skills to train and change a horse's way of going.

A person may have no riding skills but can become a very good horse handler or even a trainer on the ground.

## Training for specific riders

When a person becomes an independent rider it is essential that the horse can interpret the aids of that rider. If the horse does not understand what it is being asked to do it becomes agitated and unreliable. It is important to teach it the rider's aids. Use the 'new aid, old aid' system and the horse will soon understand the new aids.

All therapy horses should understand the different types of rein aids – opening rein, dressage rein, both reins in the rider's left hand and both reins in the rider's right hand.

## Analyzing Problems

Lots of problems develop gradually but can be unnoticed until the problem is huge. What is visible is the result of the problem rather than the cause. Unless the cause is found it will not be possible to cure the problem.

If a horse acquires a sore back and starts to buck there is no point punishing the horse for bucking. It will just add more stress. The problem is that the horse will learn the undesired behavior.

Therapy horses are handled by lots of different people. As much as possible everyone should do the same thing so there is consistency for the horse.