

Old-school horsemanship has effective applications with today's performance horses.

The value of “good old fashioned horsemanship” gets a lot of lip service. But when it’s time to apply it, not everybody gets on board. Connie Williams of Renaissance Equine Therapy in San Diego County’s Ramona sees this a lot. An extreme example is the reaction she gets when using an “old school” treatment of letting flies amass on a deep, gaping flesh wound.

“Most people freak out there,” Connie admits with a laugh. “But it’s 100 percent tried and true. The fly larvae eat the dead flesh and clean the wound out better than anything we can do.” Two or three days of letting the flies do their thing is followed with a wound pack made of another natural remedy, “sugardine,” setting the stage for what Connie describes as remarkably fast and thorough healing.

Wound treatment is a relatively minor component of the work done at Renaissance. More typical are horses in need of patiently performed, consistently administered physical therapy, plus mare care, delivery, imprinting and manners lessons for foals.

Whatever their situation or diagnosis, all patients benefit from the calm environment and calm handling at Renaissance. This reflects another old-school horsemanship conviction Connie sees validated every day.

“Horses are like people,” she says. “If they are not comfortable in their environment it’s hard for

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them to heal. We focus on physical and emotional comfort and we find that makes a huge difference. We do as much mental rehab as we do physical.” Connie’s husband and partner when he’s home from serving in Afghanistan calls it “behavior recalibration.”

Three large pastures, big stalls and pastures and open-sided sheds provide a variety of spacious shelter. Chiropractic work and massage aid the healing process, and so does time. “We were seeing how short term a lot of care is when a horse is injured or recovering from surgery,” Connie explains of the motivation for opening Renaissance Equine Therapy four years ago. “Insurance only covers so much and everybody’s money only goes so far. We set up an aftercare facility to give horses a better chance to repair longer and get better and in a way that more people can afford.”

Horse ownership is expensive already and Connie believes that many make it more so by buying into the notion that more cost equals better care. Many of her methods are as effective today as they were when she learned them growing up on a big cattle ranch. “We used a lot of treatments that were very effective but did not require a lot of expensive medication.” Honey, sugardine and Epsom salts are some of the effective yet cheap treatments in her first aid kit.

Horse sense is equally important. “An equine physical therapist must have a profound understanding of animal behavior and psychology and must possess an innate ability to read equine body language during treatment,” says Connie. “A deficiency in any of these skills can be extremely detrimental to the animal’s recovery.” In a lifetime with horses, she’s learned that any recovery is based on “healing from the inside out.”

Each horse’s individual routine is determined with the veterinarians who refer patients to Renaissance. These include Mark Silverman, DVM, MS; Jessica Stokes, DVM; MS; Max Wilcox, DVM; Christi Garfinkel, DVM; and Miska Paget, DVM.

Renaissance typically takes on only six rehab cases at a time, ensuring that each gets the care needed. In addition to Connie, an experienced ranch hand lives on the property and a talented young rider is employed for the many patients on their way to a full return to performance work.

Mares & Foals

Caring for mares through delivery and helping their babies get off to a well-mannered start is a rewarding aspect of Renaissance's work. "There seems to be a common misconception about how imprinting should be done," Connie observes. Too often, the method of handling foals immediately at birth and regularly throughout their first days can desensitize babies to the point where they don't respect anything or any one in their environment. "That can lead to really monstrous babies," she says. "They don't respect your space or have any manners. It can seem cute when the baby weighs 75 pounds, but when they get heavier, it can create stressful and dangerous situations."

The Renaissance style of imprinting involves handling newborns typically three times in their first day and a half. After that, age-appropriate manners lessons are taught. After their first month at Renaissance, most foals will stand for the farrier, load in a trailer and stand tied quietly. "It makes them much more enjoyable and gives them a solid foundation for safe handling and reduced risk of injury."

Connie was surprised to learn that imprinting was not well known among her initial clientele of mostly performance horse owners. But once they've had one foal go through it, they're sold, she says. A common example of the value of imprinting is the reality that many yearlings need corrective shoeing, Connie notes. "But they wouldn't if the farrier had been able to deal with their feet before that."

Mares typically come to Renaissance two weeks prior to their due date. In four years, the team has overseen smooth deliveries and healthy babies for its first 48 customers.

For more information, visit www.renaissanceequinetherapy.com or call 760-390-9806.

Try An Old School Remedy

“Sugardine” is a mixture of grocery store variety betadine, sugar and water. Dilute the betadine with water, three parts to one, then mix with sugar to make a paste. Use it to pack a large wound and, if the wound is located on a wrappable body part, wrap it with an absorbent diaper to take up the seeping fluids, changing the dressing a few times a day. If it’s an unwrappable body part, that’s OK, too.

“The sugar draws the bacteria and moisture out of the dead cells and feeds the healing cells that the body is generating,” Connie explains.

For scratches and minor cuts, natural honey is a terrific topical treatment, she continues. Make sure it’s organic or natural honey, which is thicker and won’t have any problematic impurities. “Unprocessed honey is a lot thicker than processed, and usually thick and sticky enough to stay on the wound without too much dripping.”