

Nutrition, alternative modalities, centered riding and hoof issues included in full day of learning at new center in Northern California.

by Patti Schofler

A team of like-minded professionals came together May 23 at Fairwind Farm in Solano County's Fairfield, to mark the opening of Equitopia, a center for education and training through an integrated approach to care and wellness. Among those speaking at the day-long seminar were: Carla Bauchmueller on Centered Riding; Dr. Clair Thunes on equine nutrition; Dr. Joanna Robson on saddle fit, chiropractic and acupuncture; and Michael DeLeónardo on farrier service.



“Our learning center serves as a gathering place for respected professionals, experts and service providers in their fields of equine health and welfare to provide participants with a path to whole horse and rider wellness and training,” said business woman Caroline Hegarty,

founder of the Equitopia Center at home at Fairwind Farm's 40-acre riding and training facility. The next Equitopia seminar, Wellness Weekend, will be Aug. 22 and 23.

Centered Riding

Kicking off the morning, Carla, a certified Centered Riding and licensed German National Federation instructor, outlined the three Centered Riding principles: centering, alignment and breathing.

"We create patterns over the years that we need to change in order to ride better and for the betterment of the horses. These principles address those patterns," she explained.

Centering and alignment address the physical body parts with the pelvis as the center. It also addressed mental focus and being with the horse. "When you are riding, create a bubble around you and the horse, as if the outside influences bounce off the bubble and do not affect you and the horse."

The third element, breathing, is important to relaxation for horse and rider. When the rider takes shallow breaths, just breathing through the chest and drawing minimal oxygen to the lungs, the horse mimics that breathing fashion. Shallow breathing which does not reach deep into the entire rib cage can create tension. "When you breathe fully, you start feeling the horse use his rib cage for breathing."

Nutrition: A Balancing Act

Dr. Clair Thunes, an independent equine nutritionist with Summit Equine Nutrition, built a diet for an example 1,200-pound mare in light work. The foundation of her diet was a daily feeding of forage equal to two percent of the mare's body weight.

"We are blessed in California with exemplary hay," she pointed out. "I had a client who, when

she moved back East, she had to feed twice as much hay as she did in California due to the lower quality. We tend to feed more hay than Europeans do because our hay has such high value that we don't need lots of grain."

That said, no matter which hay is fed, it cannot supply all the necessary vitamins and minerals for a horse at work or a lactating mare. For example, horses cannot naturally produce the 10 essential amino acids, the building blocks for protein production, which are essential to forming muscle, enzymes and hormones throughout the body. All essential amino acids must be present in the diet at sufficient levels. Inadequate intake of essential amino acids by mature horses may lead to reduced feed intake, body tissue loss, poor hair coat and reduced hoof growth.

One solution is to add alfalfa to the diet as it has a better amino acid profile than grass hay. This addition, however, can have its own set of problems due to alfalfa's higher calorie and calcium content. Many owners decide to solve the problem by feeding a commercial complete feed, today available from all the major feed companies.

The problem here, however, is that in order for the sample horse to receive her complete ration of vitamins and minerals as formulated in most complete feeds, she would need to consume 17.76 pounds per day or a bag every three days, a costly proposition.

"Complete feeds provide the horse's forage and are designed to be fed alone and not with hay. Feeding at these high intakes ensures the horse gets enough vitamins and minerals. If you feed half the recommended amount or less, you get half the vitamins and minerals. If we fed the example mare enough of the complete feed to meet vitamins and mineral needs in combination with hay, we would likely make her fat," Clair said.

A ration balancer, on the other hand, is designed to be fed in small quantities, one to two pounds a day. Low in calories and highly fortified, they provide the needed minerals and vitamins as well as a source of quality protein.

Clair pointed to the importance of a scientific and tested evaluation of the horse's diet. "Your horse could look good on the outside, but be getting sub-optimal nutrition which will eventually affect the horse. If, at 15, he takes a bad step and injures a suspensory ligament, has that

ligament been affected by 10 years of sub-optimal diet? Possibly.”



Saddle Fitting & Alternative Modalities

Dr. Joanna Robson, DVM, owner of Inspiritus Equine, Inc., lectures nationally and internationally on a variety of subjects including pain recognition, thermography in the equine industry, saddle fitting and alternative medicine modalities. The latter two were her subjects for the seminar.

Joanna discussed a number of the potential asymmetries in the horse's body and how the saddle must accommodate for them. Some horses have a dropped back, others a lumbar roach, long or short wither, broad or thin withers.



In line with these disparities, all saddles should conform to the following:

1. The tree points should sit behind the shoulders in order to stay off cartilage and nerves, and to allow full range of motion;
2. The panel of the saddle must stay off the spinal tendons and ligaments, and ideally rest

on the latissimus dorsi and longissimus dorsi muscles.

3. The tree should end at the last rib or it will press down on the loin, creating pain. An external visual marker is a cowlick of coat hair that forms where the last rib ends.

She also clearly explained the difference between width and angle. Width is not angle. "Changing the gullet plate in a removable system changes the angle, but may not change the width at the top of the pommel."

And angle is not width. "The shoulder fit on a western saddle is often a problem with being narrow on top and too wide on the bottom. You see western saddles sitting on top of the cartilage and on top of the shoulder. If too narrow at the top and wide on bottom, the angle is wrong. The angle of the tree should match the angle of the shoulder. And the saddle should be fitted to the largest shoulder."

Billet alignment is often an indicator of correct fit. If the billets are too far back, the saddle is not fit correctly on the shoulder. If the billets point forward, the saddle is usually too high in front. If the billets point back, it may be too wide and dropping down.

Another indicator of incorrect fit is "bridging." "If the saddle is losing flush contact with the back, either the tree is too narrow and lifts off the back, or there is a flocking problem." Also problematic is most of the panels sit up off the back and only the edges of the panel make contact.

Physical signs from the horse that a saddle is not fitting correctly are galls, muscle wasting, bad behavior, training problems, hock and stifle arthritis, soft tissue injuries, cartilage damage, bracing, standing out behind and spinal pathology.

Joanna's discussion of chiropractic and acupuncture included misconceptions and how to choose a professional in these areas.

Indicators that a horse may need the services of a chiropractor include crooked gaits, trouble collecting and extending, fighting the bit, lead swapping, refusing fences, and tripping, picking

up a lead, birth trauma, flips/falls, saddle issues and other weakness.

Some thoughts to keep in mind are:

1. A professional needs to know when not to adjust a patient. "You can make them very sick because you overwhelm the nervous system. It's important to know when to stop."
2. If a technique looks like it hurts, it probably does, and may not be correct. Adjustments should not be forced.
3. Avoid long leverage technique.
4. You need tension in order to create resistance for a proper adjustment. The horse shouldn't be tranquilized.

Lower Limb & Hoof Issues

Michael DeLeónardo, Jr., a certified journeyman farrier, owner of DeLeónardo Farrier Service and a tester for the American Farrier Association certification program, devoted his talk to the more prevalent diseases of the lower limb including laminitis, ring and side bone, and white line disease/seedy toe.

Many of the basic concepts on how to treat laminitis have not changed over the past 40 years.

1. Reduce swelling of sensitive tissue of hoof
2. Realign hoof capsule with trimming
3. Support the coffin bone
4. Make horse comfortable

However, the technology has improved. "Forty years ago, if a horse had laminitis you took him to stand in the cold water of a river to reduce swelling. Now you have ice tubes to cool the feet."

Another technological improvement is glue-on shoes, which he prefers for a laminitic horse, rather than nailing the shoes. "Nailing on the shoes causes concussion which leads to swelling."

Michael's talk included a hands-on sampling of the variety of shoes available to help horses with laminitis, from boat shoes to clog wooden shoes. He favors rocker toes with a heart bar shoe. "You should X-ray before putting on a heart bar shoe because you have a variety of pressure points that have to be right."

For ringbone he prefers a half round shoe. For side-bone he makes by hand a shoe that is flat and wide on the side that aligns with the side bone. He also adds a pad to displace outward the concussion caused by the horse's movement, rather than sending it up the leg.

When the white line or connective tissue between the hoof wall and soft laminae is infected, Michael will leave off the shoe and pack the foot with keratex or antibiotic putty.

"The foot is a map of the horse's health," he explains. "Farriers are part of the horse's team between the owner, the vet, the saddle fitter, the trainer. We all need to work together."