

Jumping Pains

Question: I am an english rider and occasionally I do a little jumping. We always start out well with a few good jumps but as we continue, my horse becomes cranky. His head comes up, he flattens his ears and his neck gets stiff. Can you give me some information on why this might be happening and how I may correct this behavior.

Answer: When the ride starts out nice but then falls apart, something has begun to bother the horse. It may even be a combination of a couple of things. Here are some suggestions to consider. You may need to have an experienced rider or a trainer help you do a final evaluation.

Saddle Fit

The first thing I do in this situation is to check the fit of the saddle. An uncomfortable saddle will irritate any horse and the longer you ride the worse it gets. I don't believe any saddle fits 100% correctly but we do our best to get the best fit possible. Even a custom made western or dressage saddle will never be a perfect fit because the horse's body changes. The top line is changed by age, more or less work and increases and decreases in weight. We need to make sure the saddle is not pinching, that it is not so wide that it is dropping into the shoulder blades or so narrow that it is jamming into the shoulder blades. You want a saddle to fit so that the shoulder has freedom of movement. You don't want a saddle that rocks and this can happen when the horse has a fairly flat back. The saddle may be alright for flat work but as the horse moves into the jump, the movement increases the irritation.

Medical/Chiropractic

The next thing to consider is a chiropractic work up. I enjoy the benefits of a chiropractor and so do the horses here at the barn. They quickly learn that the "magic hands lady" brings comfort and relief. A misalignment can be aggravating and as we ride, jump or ask more of the horse, his movements get stiffer and he becomes cranky. Misalignment makes it difficult to pick up a correct lead and may make jumping actually painful. A chiropractic problem can cause the neck to stiffen. Depending on the area you live in, the cost is usually between \$80 and \$140. Every horse gets a little out of kilter from time to time but if there is real misalignment you need to have it treated. Horses with long backs or stiff hocks use themselves differently and can really benefit from chiropractic treatment.

Mental/Emotional

Another area to think about is the mental attitude of the horse, the flight instinct. Did you lunge the horse to get the freshness off or did you just get on and ride? When we lunge a horse, we do not just run the horse around as fast as he can go. While I think it is good to get the kick and the buck out of a horse before mounting, there is more to it. I want the freshness off the horse so that he is calm and high emotions don't lead to an attitude problem. When I am done lunging I want the gaits to be soft, with cadence and the horse's ears on me waiting for my next direction. It may take me five minutes or thirty minutes, depending on how long ago the horse was ridden, what kind of attitude the horse has, and how well trained he is. If we do not do ground work but get on and ride, asking the horse to do complicated movements and to use

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itself differently, the horse may not be ready physically or emotionally to get down to business. Jumping requires the horse be balanced in the approach and leave the ground at a specific spot. To do this the horse must have his head in the game and use himself correctly. If there is an attitude problem, the neck will stiffen and the horse will become cranky.

Training/Equitation

Finally, the problem may be a training issue or the way you are riding. Your position and/or balance may not be quite correct. You need to make sure the horse is giving to your hands. When I run into this type of behavior I do some in-hand work, what I call the concentrated circle exercise. I make sure the horse is giving to my hand, regardless if the horse is in a halter or snaffle bit, as he is moving around me, I ask him to soften. You should also consider how consistent you are with the cues and how you follow through when they are ignored. It would be helpful for you to have an experienced rider or trainer provide an evaluation.

These are the things I would consider and I would begin by checking the fit of the saddle. The next time the vet or your trainer is around, ask that person to look at the fit. I hope this helps you and good luck with your jumping.

For more information on Charles Wilhelm's training, please visit www.charleswilhelmtraining.com