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And Mans Best Friend

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Health Summer Behaviour

by Sue Palmer



When I first visit a horse for either a physio assessment and treatment, or for a behavioural coaching session, I delve into the history of that horse with a host of questions, including 'Can you describe your horse's behaviour? Have there been any recent changes?' If the horse is a mare, I also ask 'Is she mare-ish'? Physical health and behaviour are closely linked in horses, since the only method of communication that a horse has with his handler is through his behaviour – how else can he say whether he's feeling good or bad?

There are of course many other reasons for changes in behaviour, including changes in the weather. It's well known that a horse is likely to be more full of mischief on a wet, windy day than he is on a hot, summer's day, in just the same way that we humans slow down as the weather gets warmer. If you are backing a youngster, for example, it's sensible to pick a day when the weather is calm to get on his back for the first time, rather than a day when it's blowing a gale! Equally, you may want to avoid a day when the flies are particularly bad, as flies are a potential cause of physical irritation that may lead to unpredictable behaviour.

Mares can demonstrate dramatically different behaviour in the summer than in the winter. Hormones may be responsible for this (just ask any woman with PMT!), and it's important to bear in mind that this is not something that your mare can do anything about. There are herbal supplements and medication available from your vet that may help reduce or even completely resolve difficult behaviour due to hormonal changes. Hormonal behaviour can develop later in life, so just because your mare has not demonstrated this in the past does not rule hormones out

as being the problem. I have personal experience of this, my ex-police horse developed severe ridden behavioural difficulties at age fourteen which were thankfully almost completely resolved with a course of Regumate.

Headshaking is another behaviour that appears in the summer and generally disappears in the winter. It is not known what causes headshaking, although there are many theories out there and potential therapies available. One theory is that as the air warms and expands, the extra pressure in the nasal passages leads to nerve irritation that causes the behaviour. I am currently trying out some physio techniques that I hope have the potential to at least partially alleviate headshaking, so watch this space. Again I have personal experience of this particular problem, and in the summer my mare Bell wears a full face mask both in the field and out riding – without this she is virtually un-rideable as her head tosses so much that I'm worried she would fall over.

Punishing your horse for a behaviour that has a physical cause is, to me, unacceptable. Imagine having an ongoing itch that you were punished for itching, or being whipped



for feeling irritable when you had PMT. It is not always easy to address the underlying cause, but as responsible horse owners that is what we must strive to achieve. Your horse will appreciate the time you take to listen, understand and appreciate how he or she feels, and you will feel calmer and more confident that you have done the best you can to help your horse be comfortable.

Photographs Simon Palmer
www.into-the-lens.com



HOLISTIC HORSE HELP

Sue Palmer, Holistic Horse Help, is a Chartered Veterinary Physiotherapist and Equine Behaviourist. You can find more about the work she does at www.holistichorsehelp.com.