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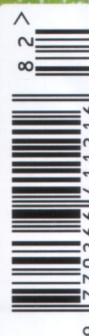
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Equine design explained

Good conformation can support performance and soundness, but as there's no such thing as a perfect horse here's how to work with what you've got



OUR EXPERT

SUE PALMER is a chartered veterinary physiotherapist and equine behaviour consultant. Her instructional 'Horse Massage for Horse Owners' is available as a book, DVD or one-day course. Find out more at www.holistichorsehelp.com

How a horse is put together has a huge impact on his life, from the type of work he finds easiest to his long-term soundness and health. In basic terms, good conformation means a well-proportioned horse with clean, straight legs and a free, straight and balanced movement. Chartered veterinary physiotherapist Sue Palmer says: "Good conformation allows the horse's body to work as efficiently as possible, improving the chances of his working life being long, successful and pain-free."

If you're aware of your horse's conformational issues you can ride and care for him appropriately. "Poor conformation causes stresses and strains, and leads to your horse compensating by using parts of his body for work that they didn't evolve for. This creates greater potential for injury and long-term damage, so being aware of any issues and acting accordingly helps avoid problems."

Knowing the points of the horse will help you assess his conformation



OUR EXPERT

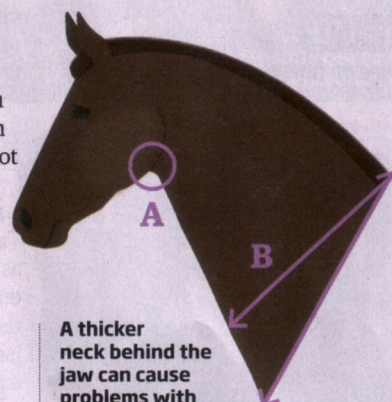
NICKY JARVIS is the senior veterinary surgeon at equine charity Redwings. She's particularly interested in the care of the veteran horse and regularly speaks on the topic. Find out more at www.redwings.org.uk

The equine head and neck

A horse's head should be in proportion with his body, with a strong jawline with plenty of space for good respiratory function. Sue says: "The length of the head and neck, and the angle at which the head is set onto the neck, will affect how easily a horse is able to work in an outline - horses with short necks and thickening behind the jaw will find it more difficult to 'round'." A shorter neck can make a rider feel less secure too. "In addition, a short neck will tend to mean that a horse is less flexible

and less well balanced," says Sue.

Inside the mouth, conditions such as parrot mouth, where the top teeth overhang the bottom, or an undershot lower jaw which protrudes, can also affect a horse and will require more regular attention than a normal mouth. "A horse's freedom of movement is affected by tension through the jaw and poll. Conformations that affect the alignment of the teeth could contribute to this tension, as the jaw may not be able to move in the way in which it is meant to," adds Sue.



A thicker neck behind the jaw can cause problems with rounding (A), while a more upright shoulder makes a short neck appear longer (B)



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Horse Care Back to Basics

The equine body and shoulders

The trunk of a horse's body houses all his internal organs, connects his front end to his back and his legs to his body. A deep chest allows good cardiovascular function, and well-sprung ribs give a good body shape. Sue says: "The skeleton provides the framework for muscular attachment. The better aligned a horse's skeleton is, the more evenly weight can be distributed through it, meaning there's a better chance of him staying sound."

A sloping shoulder will make the horse's movement smoother and also give the rider greater security in the saddle. "An upright shoulder gives a shorter, choppy stride which leads to greater concussion," adds Sue, so avoiding excessive work on hard surfaces can help. Poor shoulders may lead to problems with the saddle moving, and a horse with excess flesh (known as loaded shoulders) may struggle to move well, be tricky for saddle fitting and be wide to ride.



IN NEED OF HELP?

Your vet, physio or instructor can all help when it comes to assessing conformation