

Physiotherapy Assessment for the Equine Athlete

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KEYWORDS

• Equine physiotherapy • Assessment • Functional • Palpation

KEY POINTS

- Equine physiotherapists take a functional approach to the assessment of the horse, using clinical reasoning through all stages of the assessment.
- Equine physiotherapists are consulted when there is a movement dysfunction or poor performance, which may or may not be directly associated with the diagnosed condition.
- Equine physiotherapists try to use an evidence-based approach to their assessment, which includes the use of outcome measures.

INTRODUCTION

Physiotherapy assessment of the equine athlete involves an extrapolation to the horse, of the skills that these practitioners have developed in their training and practice as human physiotherapists. Unlike veterinarians, physiotherapists do not require a pathoanatomic diagnosis to develop a treatment plan.¹ In contrast, physiotherapists use a more functional approach to assessment of the horse by way of observing and identifying movement dysfunctions or impairments, and using their clinical reasoning to relate what they observe and also palpate to the presenting problem. This article gives the reader some insight into the subjective physiotherapy assessment and the physiotherapist's physical examination of the equine athlete. Outcome measures are also discussed. It is beyond the scope of this article to include a discussion of the equine physiotherapist's important role in assessing the horse–rider unit.

The author has nothing to disclose.

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The Basis of Equine Physiotherapy Assessment

It is paramount, when devising and delivering any form of treatment or management of the equine athlete, to have a comprehensive assessment process. Skills that are useful for a comprehensive physiotherapy assessment are listed below:

- Good communication with the owner, handler, and trainer;
- Good powers of observation (static and dynamic);
- Knowledge of anatomy, functional anatomy, and biomechanics of the horse;
- The ability to perform or direct functional movement tests;
- Good palpation skills; and
- The ability to interpret all of these assessments.

The process of interpreting all these parameters is clinical reasoning, or problem solving, and is an essential part of the each step of the equine athlete assessment.¹ Communication is one of the critical skills required to develop good clinical reasoning,² and has been linked with significant outcomes of care, including accuracy, efficiency, supportiveness, adherence to treatment plans, and client and veterinarian satisfaction.² Communication includes determining the problem that the owner, handler, or trainer perceives as existing in their equine athlete, and what they wish to have assessed and managed. The owner, handler, or trainer should have a preliminary veterinary diagnosis for any conditions or diseases that exist in the horse.

Often, physiotherapists are consulted when there is a movement dysfunction or poor performance, which may or may not be associated directly with the condition that has been diagnosed. An example of such a situation is that of a horse with healed fracture of the orbital socket, which had been caused by a traumatic accident involving the horse pulling back and striking the area of the head on a metal pole. The diagnosis was the fracture, and reconstructive surgery was performed. Three months later, the fracture was healed and horse seemed to have recovered well, yet the horse demonstrated an inability to flex laterally in either direction on a small circle, owing to segmental hypomobility in the midcervical spine. The latter may have occurred during the traumatic incident, yet was not part of the original diagnosis.

Therefore, after the diagnosis is given by the veterinarian, it is important for the physiotherapist to take an extensive clinical history to document the degree of functional disability perceived, onset and progression of the disorder, and the past history related to the disorder.¹ Taking a history requires good interpersonal skills as well as a good knowledge base. Time spent with the owner obtaining information allows the physiotherapist to observe the animal's general demeanor and behavior while observing its general condition, conformation, gait, and posture.¹

When performing a physiotherapy assessment for the equine athlete, the structure of a history may include the following (adapted from Goff¹):

- Recording of the area affected/effect of dysfunction;
- Current veterinary diagnosis;
- Current perceived impairment or movement dysfunction;
- Past history (including past treatments);
- Questions to determine contraindications and precautions to treatment;
- Questions related to the equine athlete's sport (including equipment and tack used);
- Owner and handler expectations of future occupation or activity; and
- For ridden horses, questions related to rider biomechanics and existing injuries.

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