UC Davis Offers “Nose to Tail” Evaluations of Equine Athletes

A burgeoning service at the UC Davis veterinary hospital is its Equine Integrative Sports Medicine Service. Consisting of an array of complementary medical and evaluative procedures, the service is attracting many clients looking to maximize the performance of their sport horses. Led by Dr. Sarah le Jeune—who is board certified in surgery and sports medicine/rehabilitation, as well as certified in acupuncture and chiropractic—the service offers treatments and evaluations of the entire equine athlete.

With the subtlest issues potentially affecting an athlete, Dr. le Jeune feels it is important to examine every aspect of a horse and its equipment—right down to a blanket or a small piece of tack. Beyond physical limitations such as injuries, equipment can certainly play a role in determining the success of an athlete. One of the most important elements of peak performance can be proper saddle fit. Ill-fitting saddles can be a determining factor in a horse with back pain. Many saddles are too narrow and can pinch a horse’s back, causing significant restrictions of back movement, which is critical to the proper functionality of an athlete.

Many of Dr. le Jeune’s patients compete in dressage, where a horse’s performance is judged on their gaits and movements. Even the slightest ailment can cause a decrease in their performance and ultimately their score. So while Dr. le Jeune, of course, evaluates for limb lameness and other significant ailments, she also examines secondary factors like a horse’s hoofs, teeth, and diet.

Many of Dr. le Jeune’s appointments are not at the hospital. She prefers to see horses in their home environment. Traveling to a hospital can cause a horse’s adrenaline to mask any mild or subtle issues it may have. By seeing them in their natural environment, however, horses remain calm and the evaluation will reveal their true state of health. Home visits also give Dr. le Jeune an opportunity to evaluate a training session with a horse’s rider and trainer, giving her a better understanding of that horse’s condition. Often times, Dr. le Jeune will even ride a horse herself to get a feel for more subtle issues that can only be discovered by riding rather than by examining.

Working with trainers is important to gain insight into the full background of a horse, and what may be affecting its optimal performance. Is the horse having behavioral issues or is it a pain issue that needs to be discovered?

“...in my experience, most of those issues are pain related,” said Dr. le Jeune. “Rarely are there truly primary behavioral issues. Most horses want to do what we want them to do. The reason they’re not doing a particular task is because there’s pain.”

After discovering the cause of pain, there are several treatment options Dr. le Jeune can perform. Some major injuries will require surgery, and she will work with clients to rehabilitate the horse and hopefully return it to competition. Recovery for equine athletes is similar to that for human athletes, and Dr. le Jeune will team with trainers to determine the proper timing of recovery procedures and workouts.

Many times, an athlete’s back, neck, or muscle pain can be treated with chiropractic and acupuncture treatments. These procedures are becoming increasingly popular, and can easily be integrated into conventional diagnostic and treatment modalities to optimize clinical outcome.

In addition to equine athletes, Dr. le Jeune also sees livestock athletes, such as bucking bulls. Bulls with back pain simply won’t perform. Like other animals, many livestock also respond positively to acupuncture to alleviate their pain. Previously, she has utilized acupuncture to optimize the performance of a popular bull from the Professional Bull Riders Tour.

Not every patient of Dr. le Jeune’s is an athlete, though. Many non-athletes also benefit from her service, such as geriatric or arthritic horses that have trouble standing up and laying down.