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# hoofbeats

riding, training, horsekeeping

Vol 25 No 4

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**Girth  
Pain**

**the future  
of training...  
pat parelli  
hair analysis  
weaning  
fitting falsies  
sitting in balance**



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# hoofbeats

A National Riding, Training and  
Horse Care Magazine . . . .  
incorporating *The Green Horse -  
sustainable horsekeeping.*

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# Inside

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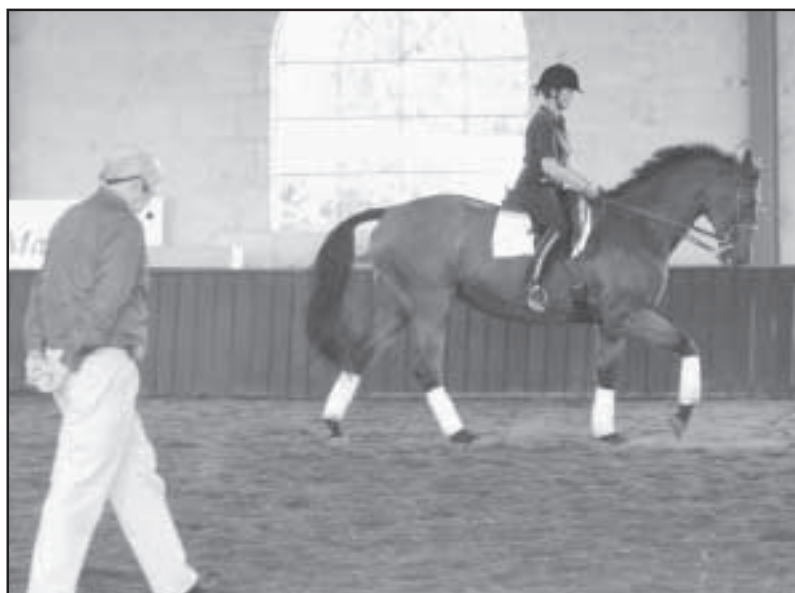


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photo by Coco



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## EDITORIAL

### HOUSEKEEPING

For the first time this year we actually had the editorial completed and ready to run before the final deadline date. An unusual feat, that is partly due to contributions by our new freelance journalists, who are working on articles ahead of deadline. You will have already seen articles by Freda Nicolls, and this issue Jane Myers and Nicole Field have their debut in the pages of Hoofbeats.

We believe that to produce informative articles on riding training and horse care writers need to be actively involved, and it is a prerequisite for a job at the magazine. In-office, we have been joined by two new team members, Carol Willcocks and Jade Knight. Carol is a successful endurance competitor and has had a lifelong involvement with horses in a variety of disciplines. Jade has recently sold her elem/med dressage horse and is now looking for a new horse to suit her new lifestyle.

Combining work and the preparation and training required for showing can often create difficulties for competitors, especially if they live 1 1/2 hours away from the office and there are deadlines to meet. But Karen McDonald solves the problem by bringing her overnight bag and horse to work. From the Royal, Karen took home the ASH Champion Gelding, Champion Mare and Supreme Ridden ASH sashes (and the following week competed in the Blackwood marathon). Kate Billings, whom we were very lucky to have on work experience, won the Champion Rider under 17yrs. and although not strictly competing, Carol was also a star at the Royal, riding her Arab gelding (flowing garb and all) in the show's evening entertainment under lights.

### EQUITANA

We love this event, it is the one opportunity that Australian horse enthusiasts have to all come together - racing with trail riders, dressage with western, all mingling and chatting and enjoying the atmosphere, the new products, the opportunity to gain knowledge not only in your own discipline or interest but also to acquire an insight into an aspect of horsemanship you may never have been exposure to or considered previously. It will be over by the time you read this, but we know we'll have had a great time.

### NEW YEAR DAWNING

This year has seen the magazine expanding in all directions, we have increased the number of pages and increased the number printed, all of which has necessitated an increase in team members to be able to continue to produce the well researched and informative articles you have come to expect. Much of the hard work of setting up and planning has now been achieved, and we are looking forward to settling down to organising and writing the many exciting articles scheduled for 2004.

### Cover:

Emma Hayward checks the girth of Zeus  
Sandy Hannan photo

## 38 ON THE MENU *by Denise McKay and Sonja Vandermark*

Horses require an adequate source of salt and minerals in their diet, which can be added by a number of means, including blocks and licks.

## 41 BRANDING

Traditionally, hot or freeze branding has been used for positive horse identification, yet Australia has no national regulations with each state having different requirements.

## 45 WEANING - breaking the bond *by Carol Willcocks*

The process of weaning is seldom left to nature for horses kept in a controlled environment. Appropriate handling of this stage is crucial, as any adverse effects can have an impact on the young horse's future development.

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Books make a good choice for gifts and a selection of new titles includes something for everyone involved with horses.

## 52 HAIR ANALYSIS - Science or magic? *by Simone Sherlock*

There are two different methods of hair analysis, one that may be the future option for retrospective drug detection, the other, an increasingly sought holistic diagnostic tool.

## 57 A LESSON WITH UWE - *by Karen McDonald*

A lesson with Uwe Spellen is very much like attending one of his seminars as he seizes every opportunity to point riders, trainers and judges in the right direction.

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Subscribe, or give a Christmas gift subscription enter this fantastic prize draw.

## 62 FITTING FALSE TAILS

The more balanced outline that a correctly matched and fitted false tail can give the horse has been recognised, and the practice adopted, by a range of disciplines.



# Girth PAIN



*Veterinarian Ian Bidstrup, who recently completed a Masters of Chiropractic Science thesis on this subject, believes most horses that react badly to being girthed up do so because of spinal and rib cage pain - not just to be 'difficult'.*

*He suggests that girth pain is a very common phenomenon in horses, with degrees ranging from mild (very few outward behavioural signs) to extreme, where fastening a girth causes them to collapse on the ground, shaking.*

*Very commonly, horses appear to suffer moderate pain yet just seem to learn to accept it. The sad part is that, in Ian's clinical experience and backed up by his preliminary scientific experiments, the vast majority of 'girthy' horses appeared to be suffering pain as well as 'behaving badly'.*

**or just behaving badly?**

**O**wning, handling and riding a 'girthy' horse can be a frustrating and annoying experience, as well as being downright dangerous in some circumstances. Dismissed purely as 'bad behaviour' by many, girthiness is often managed to a degree by tightening the girth cautiously (while jumping out of the way to avoid those gnashing teeth and the swishing tail) and being ready for anything once mounted. In many cases, this scenario continues throughout the horse's working life with little or no thought given to finding out if there is an underlying problem causing genuine pain or discomfort.

In this thought-provoking overview of 'girthiness', many aspects of the problem are explored, including some treatment options that may be helpful in managing girth pain syndrome.

## **Is the Spinal Column the actual source of girth pain?**

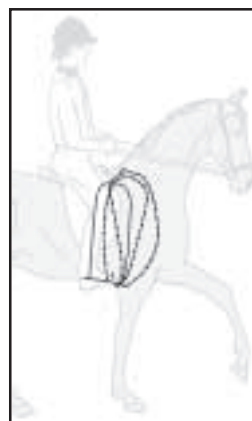
The origin of girth pain is unknown, however, veterinary chiropractic practitioners believe its origin to be distortion of spinal nerves of the upper chest, and believe that this nerve distortion is due to restricted mobility of the associated vertebrae. The reason for this belief is threefold. Firstly, girthy horses have abnormal nerve responses in both the wither and down the nerve pathways along the ribs under the girth. Branches of the same spinal nerves service both of these regions. Secondly, vertebrae which are associated with the affected spinal nerves are found to be restricted in their mobility and thirdly,

freeing up these vertebrae greatly diminishes or removes the symptoms of pain and ticklishness seen in girthy horses. The change is virtually instantaneous, and often lasting.

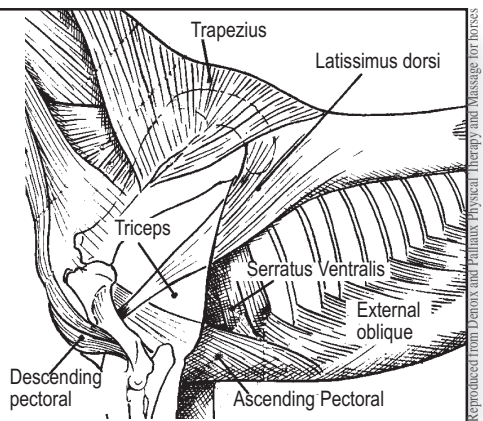
## **Behavioural Signs**

A number of symptoms are associated with girth pain syndrome, as well as with saddle soreness and other problems. The most common and obvious sign is, on fastening of the girth, the horse attempts to bite the handler - often repeating this action at each stage of tightening the girth. Another frequently reported behaviour is inflating the chest (blowing out) to fix and splint the ribs, which prevents the girth from being applied very tightly, and may be a sign of the horse bracing to protect itself from pain. Other signs include kicking at the girth, slight changes in facial expression (such as partial closing or tightening of the eyes or frowning), grunting, lifting the head and swishing the tail.

Once girthed up, a horse suffering from girth pain may refuse to move forward freely for 10-20 minutes after being saddled, either merely resisting the leg aids or commonly 'humping up', pigrooting or bucking at the start of a ride. In extreme cases, there may be violent bucking and/or pigrooting and/or lying down for a short spell after being girthed up. While being ridden, other signs include difficulty bending to one side and/or problems striking off on the correct canter lead. During the transition from trot to canter on the most affected side, the horse will often swish its tail, lay its ears back



*Horses with girth pain can show tenderness from the border of the shoulder blade to the pectoral (chest) muscle. The intercostal muscles between ribs, the serratus ventralis and the pectoral muscles also appear to become tender.*



Reproduced from Denon and Pulliam Physical Therapy and Massage for Horses

and/or 'hump' then settle as though nothing had ever been wrong. In addition, even though they may seem content and have a relaxed temperament while not being ridden, horses suffering from girth pain tend to be 'piggy' when under saddle - resisting turning sharply, rushing jumps and generally seeming to be unhappy. They also appear to have an increased tendency towards developing girth galls.

Additionally, indications of girth pain that can be detected as a response to touch. The skin in the girth area of most horses is ticklish behind the elbow; however, gentle stroking should remove any reaction. If the skin remains jumpy when touched after gentle stroking, then there is likely to be an active problem. If, as a consequence of tapping or prodding the skin behind the elbow, the muscles all jump - including the muscles of the leg above the elbow - this can be an indication that all is not as it should be. Tightness and tenderness of the muscles under the girth or above the shoulder blade usually means that the horse will try to move away when touched or their facial expression will change to show fear or anxiety.

Physical signs to look for include uneven alignment of the shoulders, with the saddle slipping to the lower shoulder. The hoof of the side most affected by girth pain is usually narrower and higher in the heel when compared to its opposite pair, which consequently alters leg length and shoulder angle.

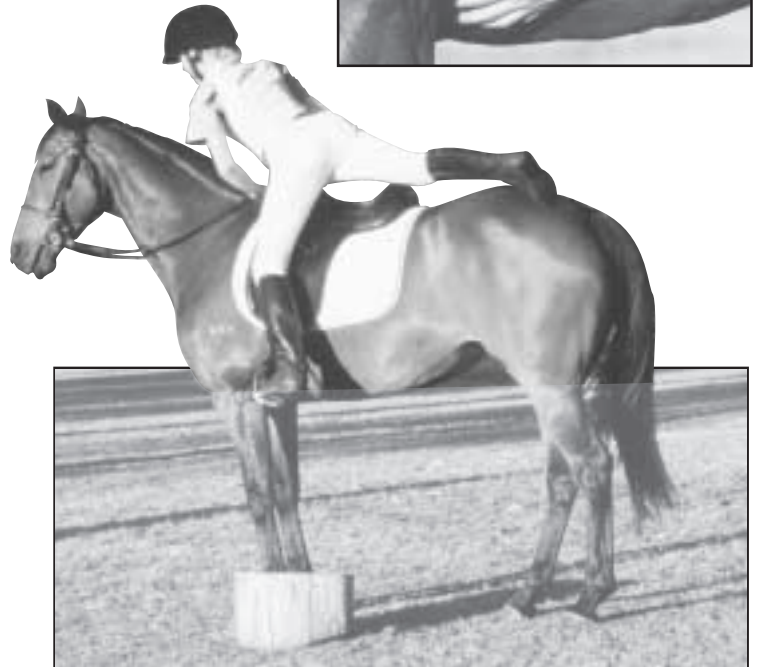
**Causes**

The cause of girth pain is still under debate but it is highly likely that it may stem from a ribcage problem at birth. According to the latest research, ribcage trauma is a likely to be a regular feature of both natural and assisted births with recent research revealing a 5% incidence of broken ribs, and a 20% incidence of ribcage trauma in newborn foals. The problem area outlined in this research corresponds with the highest part of the wither and overlaps with

*Continued*

*Right: Gentle stroking of the skin in the girth area should remove any 'ticklish' reaction. If the skin remains jumpy when touched after gentle stroking, then there is likely to be an active problem.*

*Below: Mounting from a block, or some other support, is mandatory for the health of the wither area - no matter how light the rider is.*



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# Girth Tension

Interestingly, it appears that girth pain syndrome may be associated with breathing difficulties - particularly in racehorses - due to the restriction in vertebral movement and reduced capacity of the ribcage to expand.

According to research, the difference between winning and losing a horse race could all come down to the tightness of the horse's girth.

In a recent study into the effects of girth tension eight ex-racehorses of both Thoroughbred and Standardbred breeding took part in the study conducted by the Mornington Peninsula Horse Hospital and The University of Melbourne Veterinary Clinical Centre. The researchers measured the typical girth tension applied to a Thoroughbred racehorse under saddle and found this to be 13kg.

The study horses were fitted with a racing saddle with the girth tightened to a tension of either 5, 10, 15 or 20kg and then jogged on a treadmill and the run-to-fatigue times and distances recorded. When the horse could no longer keep pace with the treadmill, the horse was considered fatigued.

The study found that performances were reduced by up to 20% by an over-tightened girth.

On average, for each kilogram of increase in girth tension over 5 kg the horses fatigued sooner and tired quicker.

Researchers found that when girth tensions were above 10 kg there was little difference to the degree the performance was reduced. While the reasons for this can only be speculated at, it is possible that the discomfort girth tension creates forces the horse into developing alternative breathing strategies.

The researchers also suggest that girth tensions above 10kg may cause the soft tissue and fluid within the thoracic wall to displace during exercise - this would minimise the effect of a tighter girth.

As the research was based upon a run-to-fatigue test, it is possible that horses in a sprint race may not experience a loss of performance due to increased girth tension. Yet as the study alludes, it is clear that the health and welfare of a horse will certainly be compromised if the practice is allowed to continue.

The average horse owner may not be able to determine the kilogram tightness, therefore the best advice would be to use an elasticised girth with the minimum tension to safely secure your saddle for your discipline.

*Girths with an elastic insert are regularly used within the racing industry.*



## Girth Pain Continued...

that of the area of rib pain commonly seen in horses with girth pain syndrome. In some cases, the syndrome may develop as a consequence of a traumatic event - such as a fall, especially if it is over backwards - where the wither is damaged. The available evidence seems to suggest that significant portion of these horses then develop girth pain and associated problems with the spinal column. When a horse goes over backwards, falls on its shoulder, trips badly with a saddle on or is girthed up roughly, the problem that perhaps started at birth can be activated. As a result, a good horse can quickly or gradually turn 'sour' and start 'behaving badly' as pain levels increase.

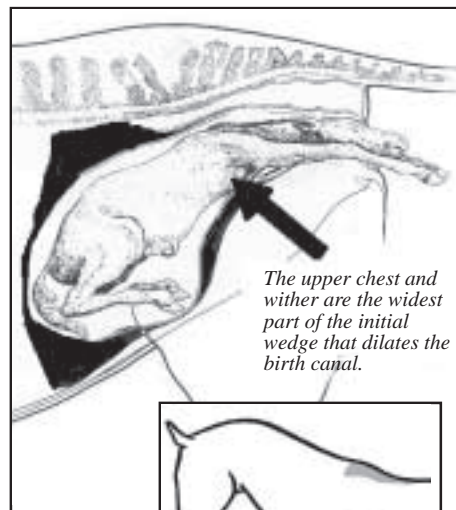
In some cases, reactivity of the girth region may be associated with the horse favouring one fore or hind leg, or leaning. Doing so produces a postural twist of the ribcage, something that would affect both rib and spinal movement. This could initially cause a low-grade flare up of birth damage, and possibly over time develop into a major source of irritability and pain.

It appears that, in many horses, girth irritability or pain is there but is low grade and most seem to have 'learned to live with it'. From most horses' points of view, when the saddle and girth are first put on during the breaking in process, it's a bit uncomfortable, but it's made clear that they're not allowed to complain by biting or carrying on, so they don't - well, not unless they've got 'attitude' and have to let every one know about it! The horse, if there is considerable discomfort or pain, has to either put up with the problem, or do something to evade the pain hence behaviour such as biting at the handler or girth, pigrooting or bucking, can develop.

### Diagnosis and Treatment

Combining the expertise of an equine veterinarian, veterinary chiropractic practitioner or other very highly and scientifically trained spinal therapist, and an equine behavioural specialist, is very important in the diagnosis and treatment of girth pain syndrome. In addition to spinal dysfunction, issues of foot pain, leg lameness, saddle fit, and especially behaviour, can all contribute to the syndrome, and thus all need to be dealt with.

Many therapies can be used to ease the pain and dysfunction associated with girth pain syndrome including a method known as Willoughby Veterinary Chiropractic. Developed by Dr Sharon Willoughby (the founder of the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association), this technique involves chiropractic adjustment of the joints between the affected vertebra, and of the vertebrae and rib. It appears to work at the heart of the problem by using true bony chiropractic to work only on affected joints, as opposed to 'leg pulling' or massage types



*Areas indicated by birth trauma research overlap with the area of rib pain commonly seen in horses with girth pain syndrome*



of chiropractic that only treat the symptoms. Improvement is usually immediate, the effect is long lasting and, at times, the results are nothing short of spectacular.

Osteopathic techniques which gently improve the flexibility of the ribcage by encouraging relaxation of the tight muscles and joints can work very well. Massage of the girth and wither area is helpful and will, where tolerated, at least give temporary relief. Acupuncture is also very effective in settling down the affected joints and muscle knots, therefore the combination of these therapies gives a much-enhanced result. Chronic foot problems, hoof imbalance or favouring one leg, pelvic twists and falls etc. may, however, cause the problem to return.

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***The cause of girth pain is still under debate but it is highly likely that it may stem from a ribcage problem at birth.***

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In conjunction with treatment by one or more of these methods, there are ways in which the rider can assist in the recovery process. A balanced seat with even weight distribution is essential to reduce the tendency for the horse to twist its ribcage, therefore postural adjustment of the rider may be required. Shoulder in is one of the most useful exercises that can be used to encourage the horse to flex its rib cage, and