

American Association of Equine Practitioners

TRANSITIONING THE RETIRED RACEHORSE

**Guidelines for Equine Practitioners, Adoption Organizations and
Horse Owners**



TRANSITIONING THE RETIRED RACEHORSE

Introduction

Racehorses of all breeds are incredible athletes and often go on to other careers after retiring from racing. Many find new homes through retirement facilities that provide permanent sanctuary or provide retraining and adoption opportunities. These horses' second careers range from non-ridden, companion animals to high level athletic sport horses.

As in most equine endeavors, the horse's physical and mental attributes are evaluated to optimize rehoming opportunities. The equine practitioner can assist, both at the track and at the retirement facility, with these important decisions. Many variables must be considered in this process. While there are no absolutes, some conditions may limit a horse's future athletic endeavors, namely the soundness of the individual animal and the identification of various conditions that may affect future career prospects.

These guidelines outline some common health issues and offer opinions based on the AAEP Racing Committee's collective expertise and experience. Based on their professional experience, most veterinarians will have a personal perspective regarding which medical conditions are consistent with various career endeavors. Presently there are minimal scientific data on which to base these prognostic decisions, therefore the thoughts and recommendations found here are largely based on professional veterinary opinion. As improved documentation of injury rehabilitation becomes available, more accurate prognostic decisions will be possible.

In order to gather data that can be useful for future prognostications, an evaluation form with standardized diagnostic terminology has been created. This form will be distributed to aftercare facilities with the idea that the information can be used for research that will assist veterinarians in making more accurate recommendations for future use.

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Initial Considerations

The veterinarian advising or making recommendations about the future career prospects of a horse should be familiar with the demands and health requirements of that career. It is advised that the veterinarian's prognosis for athletic ability be conservative in order to avoid situations where failed expectations result in a horse becoming unwanted.

The first step in determining the prognosis for a racehorse to be transitioned to another career is a comprehensive evaluation. This should include a detailed medical history and a thorough musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiac, neurologic and ophthalmic examination. Because many horses that are to be examined may have recently been administered medication for a health issue, it may be necessary to examine the horse more than once to accurately assess its health status.

Examinations upon arrival at a facility are standard procedure for most of the major retirement organizations. A veterinarian's input can strengthen this process and provide much needed support to these organizations in making good choices for the horses. As such, good records of these exams are essential. Our ability to incorporate trackside exams, and especially a medical record, can greatly assist these organizations by adding valuable information about the horse and saving time and money.

The AAEP recommends that responsibility for the horse's evaluation be borne by the horse's donor prior to leaving the racetrack, thus saving the facility funds and allowing them to more effectively assess the animal. Although the physical examination performed on a horse leaving racing and again when entering the aftercare facility provides important information for management and future use, it should not be viewed as a substitute for a pre-purchase examination on behalf of the adopter. It is the responsibility of the adopter to commission a pre-purchase examination performed by the veterinarian of their choice as a part of their own due diligence if so desired.

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Many retirement facilities have limited capacity and lack the resources to support horses for a long period. Therefore, it is in the interest of both the horse and the facility to make prudent and efficient decisions regarding individual horses in order to responsibly manage financial resources. Humane euthanasia is a legitimate consideration for horses that have chronic unsoundness, for horses that are uncomfortable to the extent they cannot humanely live out their days in a field, or for horses with severe behavioral issues that make them unsafe.

Physical Assessment

For the purpose of these guidelines, the following definitions are used to loosely describe the levels of career expectation for the horse leaving a racing career.

- Level I: Pasture turnout, non-ridden.
- Level II: Light use, to include trail riding at the walk and occasional trot on good footing.
- Level III: Moderate use such as flat work at the walk, trot, canter and varied terrain. Occasional jumping in good conditions generally with fences less than two feet.
- Level IV: Full athletic work; no exclusions.

In addition to physical condition, temperament is a critical factor in determining the successful placement of former racehorses. Most retirement facilities are managed by experienced horse people whose assessment of a horse's temperament, demeanor, socialization (human and equine) and tractability will be important. Such evaluation requires a good history and regular monitoring by experienced observers. While the veterinarian may have input as to a horse's temperament for a specific purpose, such decisions should be made in consultation with facility management. Stallions and colts should be castrated before transitioning to a second career.

The following is a list of conditions commonly seen in retiring racehorses with collective comments on the prognoses associated with various second career options.

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Musculoskeletal Conditions:

Lameness due to osteoarthritis is common in retiring racehorses and may often be the precipitating cause of the horse's retirement. The degree of lameness can be highly variable and is not always consistent with radiographic findings.

Fetlock

The fetlock joint is a joint where osteoarthritis is common in racehorses.

Degenerative disease in this joint can be hard to manage in performance horses, especially where lameness scores of 2/5 on the AAEP Lameness Scale are noted.

These horses may be successful in Level II activities but can be expected to require an increased level of care to maintain their existing level of soundness. Horses with a significant decrease in fetlock flexion, even if not exhibiting lameness, may also be compromised for significant athletic careers (Level III-IV).

Treating osteoarthritis in any joint can involve additional veterinary expenses for the adopting owner. These situations should be outlined to the prospective adopter, as well any prognostic information. Intra-articular therapies and/or surgery may help a number of horses have successful careers at lower levels (Level I-III).

However, it is important to bear in mind that if a horse cannot be maintained for racing with appropriate therapy, it may be challenging to maintain that horse in a high-performance career, such as upper level dressage or jumping.

Small osteochondral fragments in fetlock joints often have minimal impact on future soundness if the animal is given appropriate treatment and time to recover.

Fractures of the proximal sesamoids vary greatly and must be individually assessed. In general, small apical fractures and basilar fractures without extensive degenerative joint disease and marked suspensory ligament disease may be serviceable for moderate level activities (Level I-III). Full body fractures often render a horse unsound for any athletic activity.

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Carpus

The degree of damage to the carpus can dictate future athletic career options. The carpus can incur damage to the articular cartilage and palmar intercarpal ligaments, all of which can influence future career choices. Significant damage to either or both of these series of structures can result in reduced athletic potential going forward. Carpal chip fractures can be removed surgically, which can improve the athletic prognosis as well as provide an opportunity to assess the joint structures as a whole. Palmar fractures can have varying degrees of influence on post-racetrack careers and each case needs to be assessed individually. Other carpal bone fractures such as slab fractures should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis and, where possible, surgical repair sought to improve the prognosis for an athletic second career.

Foot

“No foot, no horse” is a universal truth that crosses all equine disciplines. Foot conditions are often managed on the racetrack with therapeutic shoeing and medication and without a specific diagnosis.

Good farriery over time can remedy many hoof conditions seen in racehorses, and if the adopting group is willing to invest the time and money, these horses may transition to varied types of second careers. Quarter cracks can be a challenge to manage during the horse’s racing career, but with time and therapeutic shoeing can be treated successfully. Horses with chronic foot pain can be poor candidates as top-level athletes unless the underlying cause is identified and successfully remedied.

There is a significant number of horses retiring from racing which have had laminitis that has gone undetected, so it is advisable to obtain foot radiographs upon intake to the aftercare facility if possible in order to identify these individuals

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quickly. Horses that have had laminitis need careful evaluation as this may impact their career options. Since there are many causes of foot pain, establishing a diagnosis is key to identifying reasonable athletic expectations.

Horses that have been treated with a palmar digital neurectomy will require open documentation and careful placement by the adopting group given the additional care requirements for such horses.

Wing fractures of the third phalanx (coffin bone; P3) often have a good prognosis for lower intensity activities but such injuries need good documentation. Solar margin fractures of P3 generally have a favorable prognosis with appropriate management and shoeing strategies. However, coffin bone fractures involving the joint surface, in any horse, have a poor prognosis for riding soundness.

Tarsus

Hock lameness is a common problem in many equine athletes, and is often manageable in both racing and sport horses. Osteoarthritis of the lower joint spaces of the hock can often be managed successfully using a multitude of therapies and may not be the limiting factor we once thought it was when managed proactively with a committed owner-veterinarian team approach.

Stifle

Chronic stifle lameness will prevent most racehorses from transitioning to moderate or intense sport use, as it has been documented in a number of breeds and disciplines. Osteochondral fragments (in the absence of osteoarthritic changes) typically respond well to surgical removal, which coupled with appropriate intraarticular therapies, will return many of these horses to soundness at low or moderate level activities. Meniscal or ligamentous damage typically limit horses to low levels of activity.

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Internal Fixation

Although surgical intervention involving internal fixation with a screw or screws seems to carry a stigma with adopters, many horses with screws remaining have a favorable prognosis for future athletic activity.

Tendon and Ligamentous Injury

Tendonitis of the superficial digital flexor tendon is a common cause of retirement from racing. The severity of this injury will determine the prognosis for other activities and also the time frame for recovery. The majority of “bowed” tendons, if treated appropriately and given enough time, will enable horses to be retrained for many disciplines after racing.. However, the timeframe for these rehabilitation projects can be 10-12 months.

Suspensory ligament injuries may range from a mild strain to complete failure. The latter is not amenable to transition, and unless extensive treatment is instituted, is a life-threatening injury with a poor prognosis for survival. The prognosis for suspensory desmitis depends on the extent and degree of injury and is also influenced by whether the injured limb is a forelimb or hindlimb. Hindlimb suspensory desmitis tends to carry a less favorable prognosis than disease in the forelimb. Horses with mild to moderate suspensory desmitis, if treated appropriately and given the time they need rest, may be transitioned to Level I to II activity.

The external appearance of soft tissue structures (tendons and ligaments) often does not reveal the extent of an injury and it is advisable that ultrasonography, or additional advanced imaging techniques, be used as an adjunct to physical examination to document the degree of injury in cases where soft tissue injury is of concern.

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Respiratory Conditions:

Respiratory conditions can be significantly detrimental to a racehorse's performance at the track. Some of these conditions can be addressed with medication and rest, and others may require surgical intervention. However, once the condition has been adequately addressed, most horses can go on and perform well in a second career as the respiratory demands of most other disciplines are not as rigorous as those of racing.

Upper Airway Conditions

Laryngeal hemiplegia ("roaring") is a common cause for racing retirement. Although the degree of obstruction may determine future athletic success for other purposes, affected horses can have fulfilling second careers in disciplines where maximal exertion is not required and making a respiratory noise is not a concern. Adopting owners may make a choice to elect surgery to address laryngeal hemiplegia in which case expanded opportunities for a more intensive athletic career may exist.

Horses experiencing displacement of the soft palate while racing may not show the same symptoms at slower speeds and may be useful for exercise at Levels I-III.

Treating lower airway inflammation may improve the condition in many horses.

Arytenoid chondritis may severely limit a horse's athletic potential.

Medical and surgical treatments for each of these respiratory conditions may improve airway function and offer an expanded range of career options for horses. However, these considerations are based on a well-documented history and endoscopic examination prior to referral to the retirement facility to clarify the athletic potential of affected horses.

Equine Asthma and EIPH

Mild-to-moderate equine asthma is frequently encountered in racehorses. Horses with an undiagnosed chronic cough should be properly diagnosed and treated

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appropriately for the best long-term prognosis. Horses with exercise induced pulmonary hemorrhage (EIPH) in racing will rarely experience this issue in their second career unless it involves maximal exertion at speed such as in three-day eventing or barrel racing.

Gastrointestinal Conditions:

Gastrointestinal conditions are commonly encountered in horses whether they are involved in athletic pursuits or not. Identification, treatment and management of any GI problems is important regardless of the athletic status of the horse, and both aftercare facility management and potential adopters should be made aware of any chronic gastrointestinal issues that a retired racehorse may have in order to evaluate its suitability for a second career.

Underweight

A thorough physical and dental examination may define the cause of a low body condition score (<2/9). Adequate nutrition, dental and good general care will typically reverse most underweight conditions. Horses may also lose condition after leaving racing, particularly if managed in groups and fed together. For example, a competitive racehorse may still end up at the bottom of the social hierarchy when transferred to a new facility. Intact males are often a management problem in these scenarios and should be castrated as soon as feasible.

Gastric Ulcers

Gastric ulcers may be a cause of a low body condition score and require gastroscopy for accurate diagnosis. Elimination of the stress of competition may improve this condition but some horses will require appropriate medical therapy and dietary management. Alternatively, the horse may be treated empirically for ulcers and its response to therapy evaluated.

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Chronic diarrhea is a rare but serious condition that will require extensive workup and treatment.

Neurologic Conditions:

There are a number of horses racing at the track with undiagnosed neurologic disease. As a result of subtle neurologic deficits, these horses may be prone to injuries which are not the primary problem. A neurologic examination should be performed upon intake to the aftercare facility in order to render an accurate prognosis for future athletic activity, as well as creating an awareness of any neurologic deficits from a liability perspective.

Costs

The cost of housing, retraining and rehoming retired racehorses can be significant. These costs are increased if the horse requires extensive veterinary medical evaluation and care. Information and medical records that can travel with a horse to the transition facility can help to offset some of these expenses.

Many adoption facilities enjoy close relationships with veterinary practices that render care at significantly reduced costs. These practices see this care as a service to the horse and the facility. However, it is our duty whenever possible to encourage responsible racehorse ownership and to facilitate retirement of horses before their chances at a second career are diminished by accruing additional injury. It is incumbent upon each individual aftercare facility to create and maintain relationships with local veterinarians and to address veterinary costs on an individual basis.

We encourage prospective adopters to pursue a pre-purchase type of examination as part of their due diligence when transitioning a horse from the racetrack to a successful second

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career. The information provided by any and all examining and treating veterinarians will be a valuable component to the transparency afforded during a pre-purchase exam

Working Together for the Horse

As more horses are transitioned from racing to other uses, the role of the equine practitioner and rescue/second career organizations will be of increasing importance. The guidelines outlined in this document are designed to enhance this transition and to establish reasonable expectations for second career options for these horses. It is the goal of this Committee that the well-being of the horse be paramount in the decision for future career choices and that rehoming groups apply sound financial decisions in their care and management programs. Working together, we can all make a difference.

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