

Care and Maintenance of the Senior Equine

By Pamela J. Wangenheim-Hawkins



Pikard, 20.

There are many factors that we have to take into account when we are talking about the best possible care for your senior equine. What I mean by this is that each horse is different in the way or the age in which they arrive. Did they come to us with old injuries, new injuries, arthritis, or behavioral issues due to many years of pain? Or maybe you have had your horse since he was young and now he's aging.

First of all I'd like to say I don't think a horse is a senior until he is 20 years old. If he/she has been cared for properly or was acquired early enough in life that good maintenance prevented too much damage, then 20 is not old. Also, let's consider exceptional breeding. I don't mean exceptional breeding because the horse is built to please the eye or is built to move like a rock star. I'm talking about the type of breeding that allows a horse to go on and on for many years and remain sound, energetic, and healthy. I can tell you from personal experience with thousands of horses in my lifetime that the horses I have seen last the longest and stay the most sound over the years have had some of the worst confirmation as far as what dressage judges want to see. These horses are not picture perfect, but they are sound and low maintenance. So just keep that in mind as to where we are headed with the horses you see out there today that have soundness issues before the age of 10 or sooner. There are other factors besides breeding that we will go over later in this article.

The Program I Use with a New Horse in Training

I begin by putting a new horse in training with me on the lunge line. I observe the horse in both directions at the walk, trot and the canter with no saddle or bridle, just a halter with a line. I watch the horse on hard ground and on soft ground. I look for any problem areas. Usually horses that come into training with me are somewhere between the age of 5 and 17. Some have been working, some have been standing and doing nothing. Others might even have

been involved in a different discipline, or out to pasture, or recovering from an injury. I have seen so many different scenarios. Regardless of what they were doing, I start very slowly, as if they had been doing very little. New situations, new trainer, new footing, and stress are all taken into account. I would say most of the time the horses I get are not completely sound. In my 37 years with horses (and 26 as a professional), I've had a handful of horses that started out in my program sound. Whether they were older or younger, it seemed most of them had soundness issues about which the owner was unaware.

After my evaluation lunge which is very short in duration depending on the horse, I discuss with the owner what their expectations are. Usually they are within reason. I then suggest a trip to the vet (preferably of my choice but I'm flexible and will let them use their vet) to go over the horse very thoroughly. I can't do "My Thing" if I don't have a diagnosis. After I get the diagnosis and prognosis, then I do what I do. What do I do? This is one of the reasons I like to use my vet. My vet knows that what I do in my program is only to better the comfort and performance of each horse. I begin the "Training" of each horse differently depending on each's issues, temperament, and previous training. The "Training" of the horse consists of finding the flexibility, the balance, the straightness, and the pressure it takes to have this horse travel correctly underneath me. After riding thousands of horses over the years, I can tell you that the ones with a soft and flexible topline are the ones that stay sound the longest. Horses are no different than us. If we do yoga or Chi-Gong, Pilates, Zumba, or other beneficial types of limbering and loosening exercises, we stay sounder longer too. I do not believe in the rigid, frozen, stuck, hard dressage horse. I have ridden many of them and can just feel the discomfort in their bodies.

From this evaluation, I usually recommend the chiropractor. Again, I prefer to use my chiropractor, but if the owner has one he or she prefers, we try that first.

Shoeing!

You MUST have a fabulous farrier. A farrier that can balance a horse from the bottom up and who really keeps you informed of the frequency needed for your particular horse to get trimmed or shod and lets you know if any treatment is needed for their hooves. It is important to have a farrier who is looking out for the best interest of your horse.

Massage Therapy

Having a good massage therapist or someone who does equine bodywork for your horse is a plus. Our horses get done once a month if not more depending on the situation. Our horses are athletes and should be cared for as such.

Supplements

There are a lot of supplements out there on the market. I personally like to use Uckele.com for myself and my horses. Uckele is a company based in Minnesota. They do a hair mineral analysis on your horse. The results are usually available in about 4 weeks via email. Then, Uckele sets up a consultation with their nutritionist. He will share with you the best feed types for your particular horse and what supplements will help your horse the most. From personal experience, it saved my life. Almost all of the horses I have in training have had the benefit of Uckele. For horses not showing anymore, I give them Devil's claw and Yucca as well. Whatever you do, stick to it daily.

Injections

Last but certainly not least, I consider injections. I am more supportive of natural treatments and powerful supplements, but when a senior needs hocks, coffins, stifles, neck, etc. injected to have a good quality of life and to continue his/her training, then I am all for it. Cortizone and Hyaluronic Acid work best for a senior horse.

It is longer acting and appears to help in most cases. The goal is to make the horse as comfortable as possible with the best outcome. Check with your vet and your USEF rulebook about what is legal and the time duration before you may compete again before use. I have seen some horses that I thought were never going to be sound again that received injections and went on to do very well for a year or more. Movement is life, and sometimes just getting the horse comfortable enough to get going again is all he/she needs. Then the movement itself is what keeps the horse sound. However, the oldest horse in my barn has never received an injection or anything other than supplements. He retired at 39 from showing at Prix St. George. He is in his 40s today and still sound. He is on turn-out every day and lunge walk, trot, and canter 3-4 days a week. He likes to be kept like a show horse. Clipped, trimmed tail and mane, regular baths and he gets fed approximately 6 times a day. We give him alfalfa, alfalfa/timothy pellets, Safe Choice, his Uckele supplements plus Flex Max Plus, electrolytes, wheat bran, rice bran, coco soya and his medications which consist of Thyro-L and Prascend daily. On Saturday Mornings for the past 12 years, he has had his favorite glazed donut and sometimes coffee!

Lunging

Yes, I have a barn full of oldies but goodies. Most of them still compete and are completely sound with very little maintenance. They get turn out and lunging to warm up before anyone gets on their backs. This is key to many of the horses at my barn. I do not hop

on them with a back that is not warmed up. Long walks if not lunging that day is an alternative. My horses all have to have complete manners on the lunge. They are NEVER allowed to get out on that line without walking both ways first. They can run and buck and play after they are warmed up. Sometimes they only go on the lunge to walk and trot to just get moving before riders mount.

Horses don't go lame from lunging. They go lame from not lunging properly or not warming up properly. There is no excuse for a horse not having perfect manners on the lunge line. I may use side reins for horses that need to come up over their back more before riding. There are so many different situations, but hopefully you get the idea about warming up and stretching your horse before bringing him up and putting him together. I don't bring them together every day if it is a horse that gets tight. I don't spend as much time stretching down if they are heavy on the forehand or tend to be loose and disorganized. Every horse is different and needs different techniques to stay sound. It is important to develop a feel for this.

Walk breaks are also important during workouts. I provide several during mine. Developing stamina and strength is critical but not at the expense of soundness.

Stress and Other Therapies

Stress creates inflammation. Inflammation leads to pain. Pain leads to lameness. If I have a horse with soft tissue issues, I like to wrap the tendons with a poultice and rinse with cold water in the morning. Shockwave therapies, magnets, acupuncture, sport boots, ice therapy, etc. are all ways to help maintain a sound senior. I like to give my horses Tumeric powder in their lunch daily to reduce inflammation. I give approximately 4 ounces a day.

Know Your Horse

Be consistent with routines, therapies, treatment and supplements. Really know your horse from his breathing, heart rate, manure texture and smell. Know when your horse sleeps. Know every lump and bump and bubble on your horse so you know what is normal and what is new. When you know your horse, you know when he or she is not up to the work. So back off and give your horse a day of rest, even if it is a day you usually work him. A senior horse usually has the

work ethic of a soldier. You need to know when he needs a break. He may not tell you. One of the reasons I like to put an old guy on the lunge for a few minutes before riding is because I can judge if he is not up to it that day. Use good judgement and listen to your horse. The more you listen, the more you will have enjoyable days together. The workouts will get shorter with age,

and the weather becomes more of a factor with the aged ones. This does not mean the aged ones can't be kept in phenomenal shape. It means you can be wise about it so your partner can last a long time and still be comfortable doing it. I have never felt an aged horse should be given up for a new young horse. As an owner and a rider, it is your responsibility to make sure your senior has the best life he can have until the end.

Most show horses do not appreciate being dumped in a pasture to fend off other horses and be chewed up by flies. Putting a horse out to pasture isn't bad, but coming in after a fair time out is more comfortable. From my experience, show horses love to show. Mine may not score as high because they get more limited in their movement or suppleness but that does not mean they shouldn't go do it and feel useful and have some fun.

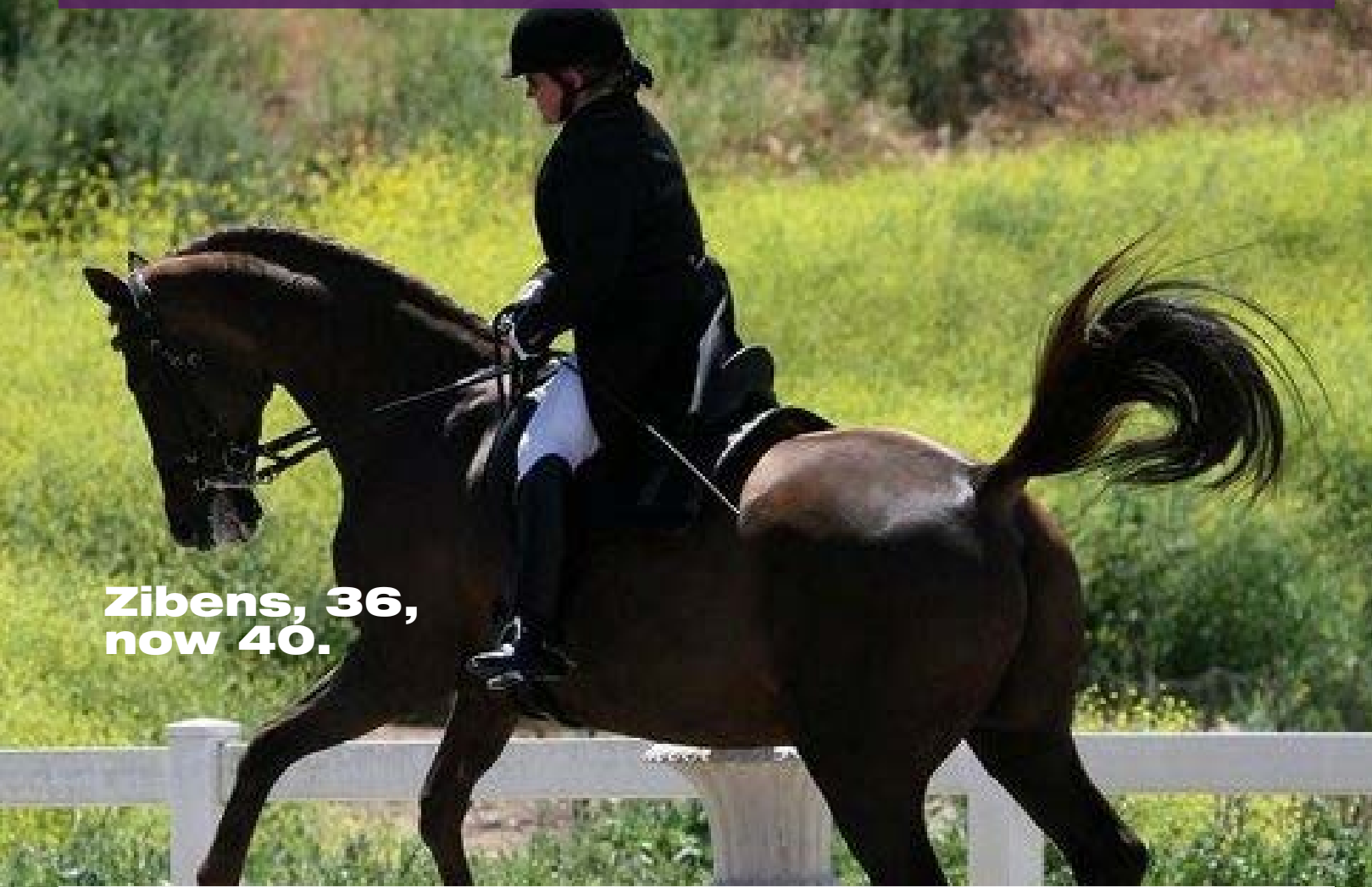
Enjoy your seniors and spend times with them. They will live and be sound a very long time if the proper care and maintenance is followed. Good Luck and God Bless!

Most of the time the horses I get are not completely sound.

Pictured Above:

Pikard:

We don't have an exact age on Pikard. He is approximately 18-20 now. In this picture he was around 16. He was showing I-1. He came with ringbone in every foot. Worse in the hind end. However, in a stress test this horse trots away sound in the hind end.



**Zibens, 36,
now 40.**

Movement is life, and sometimes just getting the horse comfortable enough to get going again is all he/she needs.

Zibens

Zibens showed PSG with ease at the age of 36. He is alive and retired from riding. He now gets lunged 3-4 times a week with turn-outs daily and long handwalks. He has always been on an alfalfa diet 3x a day. He now also received Safe Choice original and alfalfa/Timothy pellets 3-4 x a day as well at the age of 40. He has never received joint injections. He has only started getting Prescend and Thro-L about 2 years ago. He gets body clipped and groomed and bathed like a show horse. That's what he's been all his life and that's what he likes to be kept as. Reminds me of someone in the military for most of their life. Maybe not a soldier anymore but certainly has the habits of one.

Pikard (pictured on the title page)

We don't have an exact age on Picard. He is approximately 18-20 now. In this picture he was around 16. He was showing I-1. He came with ringbone in every foot. Worse in the hind end. However, in a stress test this horse trots away sound in the hind end. He has received much chiropractic, massages, many supplements and also a regular customer of Uckele. The biggest obstacle we encountered with Picard was a lack of confidence and could not

stand for 2 seconds with a rider on his back. It was too uncomfortable for him. My focus with Picard was to strengthen his topping and get him strong in the hindquarters without getting him tight. I had to ride him in a big fat snaffle wrapped in latex because he would not allow any contact with his mouth. He would get an ear cramp from his neck in the beginning. He would panic at any movement of the bit. This took a long time to correct. Though his issues were so extreme, he was worth the patience and time. He loved to work so that was what I used to get him to the other side of his discomfort. It's no different than a human body. Movement is life! He had to get moving in order to heal emotionally and physically. His owner Wendy Morgan is an amazing person to allow him the time to get where he needed to be. She even showed him 3rd level for a while last year. He requires injections once a year and sometimes a little sooner in the hicks and recently in the front coffins. He is on 2 different joint supplements, MSM, yucca, and requires a very balanced rider with no tension in the seat or hands. Actually, he also knows what you are thinking too. You have to stay clear and almost comatose at the same time to be a good partner to this horse. He is still a riding horse today. He will return to showing this year. He has had some time of teaching Wendy and getting a new saddle to go with his changing needs. He is a sweet and lovable guy. Pikard



Jordon, 21.

Jordan aka Jasper Ridge

Showed I-1 until 21 years old. Retired at 22 in 2013. He lives at home with Kim Penman now. He is 24. Jordan received extensive warm-up daily for his tight top line that actually was no longer tight after the first year. Everyday he was flexed and stretched before bringing him together. He received chiropractic, massages, and many supplements along with isoxoprene and hock injections. No grains or sweet feeds. Always on alfalfa and had previous soundness issues. Mostly the right front due to ringbone that was there many years before. With much maintenance he was very sound for many years. He learned passage and piaffe and the one tempis.



Hamilton, 21.

Hamilton

Hamilton is 21. This is him last year at I-1 and I-1 Freestyle. When Hamilton came to me he was so tight and what I call "Crunchy". I wasn't sure how well I could get him moving to be honest. Started with lots of stretching and flexing and lunging before riding. Long side reins to get him to come over his back and push from behind. He had just started 4-1 when I met him. I remember asking Yasmine to do some canter on the spot so I could just get an idea about canter pirouettes in one of our early lessons. She said, "He can't do that. He panics". I said, "How did you do Second level without canter on the spot?". She said, "Not very well".

I knew if I could get Hamilton soft in the jaw and pole, he could do anything. He's such an amazing horse. Truly the smartest horse I have ever worked with. If he were a person he would have a PHD in physics. He may not have the fluid trot still to this day (but so much better than before) but he has a stellar canter and an exceptional walk. I can work with that. With Yasmine being so talented, and him being so smart, they advanced so gracefully. He now is learning passage and ones. It took about 10 minutes to teach him piaffe. His career before Dressage was being a jumper. He's hot and very strong! Teaching him to be patient and to slow his tempo was really the hardest with him. He may not have this huge extended trot but she has scored in the mid 60's to the low 70's with him at the FEI levels.

Habitat aka Hobbi

Is a Trekhener gelding. In this picture he was 29 years old. He's now 31. He is still a riding horse. He came to me in 2008. He was pretty uneven in the front end. Most of his soundness came from Dave Krahn our fabulous farrier and how he was ridden. Hobbi requires a very supportive ride. In this picture I'm showing I-1. I received a 63% in this picture. He wants the rider to show him where to place himself and then allow him to be there. Don't force him, or carry him, just allow him but only after you place him where he needs to be. He takes more seat and thrust from the core than anything else. He is a hot little horse with so much knowledge. Was extremely well trained to Grand Prix by someone long before I met him. His remedies for soundness also include chiropractic, massages, lots of joint supplements and natural anti-inflammatories, hock injections and just experimenting with the OS-FOS injection. I see even more freedom of movement and he is doing very well. We don't ride him in the heat much. Never get on without lunging. He is too old and needs a little warm up. He has a custom saddle and a wonderful owner. He receives whatever he needs. Diet is all alfalfa then wheat bean, rice bran, alf/ Tim pellets, joint supp. , electrolytes, daily wormer, MSM, yucca and Smart Tendon. Most of his issues have been a tight topline and tendon issues. Those have been resolved with maintenance and movement'



Habitat, 31.