

Horse Baggage

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A true bargain in the horse world is a rare animal indeed.

The recreation horse sector may inadvertently be supporting the gross oversupply and over breeding of horses that are often rejected by the thoroughbred racing and standardbred harness racing industries.

Reject horses from these two industries are cheap. The blunt reality is that the going price is based on what the horse may fetch if it were slaughtered. These horses are also cheap because they didn't cut it; either on the racetrack or maybe before they even got to the track. The horse may have developed behavioural problems by being subjected to the 'industry accepted' ways of breeding, handling, stabling or housing, and breaking in. Or many of these horses fail the breaking-in process and break down. Behavioural problems are often accompanied by physiological problems as well. In some cases the horse survives all that and is found to be 'just too slow' on the track.

These horses usually come with some baggage though.

Based on supply and demand, there seems to be a sub industry that trawls the reject thoroughbred and standardbred horses and picks the nicer looking ones for retraining. These horses have all had the basic handling and breaking-in, and in the case of the thoroughbred, been started under saddle. With the standardbreds, starting them under saddle seems to be pretty straight forward too as they have had quite a bit of handling before they are cast off. Once they are going under saddle they are then offered to the market - at what may seem a bargain price.

The buyers in that market often include the unwary or the inexperienced horse person who is attracted by a nice looking horse with a sub thousand dollar price tag.

However, you only get what you pay for.

These cheap horses are like a new house with just walls and roof. There is a whole lot more time, money and effort required before the house is finished and liveable. On the horse side of this analogy there is a whole lot more time, training and solidifying required to get the horse to be a sound, safe and reliable riding horse. The cheap horses are also like thin ice; very fragile and prone to collapsing at the slightest provocation. And this can be very dangerous for the new owner. Sadly, when this happens it does not bode well for the horse either, because it usually cops the blame!

One of these "off the track" horses has recently come to our property. A couple of 'incidents', some pretty serious bruises and a loss of confidence by his new owner resulted in him being sent here. I look at this as an opportunity to learn more about horses in general; to unravel this horse's story and to see just what is going on. It also allows me to reflect on 'why?'

This attractive standardbred gelding is four and half years old. He gets very confused with his feet when put under pressure. He is so unconfident about his world that when something out of the ordinary happens, he panics. He should not have to deal with a rider on his back yet.

Luckily I reckon his baggage is fairly straightforward and should, with some time, planned handling, desensitising and confidence building, be a thing of the past. Hopefully! But one just never knows what happened in his history to cause him to be cast out of the trotting/pacing world. And there are no guarantees that all will be well in the long term.

Most horses with time and care do come around. Time can be the hurdle with the human though. It's the thing that a lot of us don't have too much of; although it is the one thing that given plenty of, a lot of serious horse baggage problems seem to slowly clear away. Time and gentleness and understanding, all in large doses is what is required. Usually (sadly) what happens is that the problems appear and no simple, quick fix seems to work so the horse is either sold on, dumped, given away or parked up in the back paddock and neglected. This, I feel, is a serious failure on our behalf.

If we stopped 'saving' these cast off horses from these dubious 'industries' the cast offs would most likely end up being slaughtered. Sad as this may seem, this situation would then allow the wider community to see a bit more of the truth about horse racing and trotting activities. I deliberately do not use the word 'sport' with these two activities as I think they are so removed from sport in the real sense of the word. You may disagree, and that's fine. A 'sport' has willing participants. Horses in these two industries are not willing participants!

My partner and I have also spent many, many hours getting one horse over a fear of having her ears touched. Was she ear twitched? Probably! Ear twitching is the default handling technique of a lot of vets and many so called horse handlers. This sweet mare now loves having her ears (and everywhere else) touched, rubbed and stroked. Baggage that took a long time to resolve. And if we valued our time at \$10, \$20 or \$30 an hour, she is now worth many hundreds, or even thousands, of dollars more. This money will never be recouped though and the problem of horses with baggage just got more challenging. Baggage costs a lot to get rid of. Baggage removal also can be dangerous as often the horse will fight to protect himself when things get scary.

Another thoroughbred horse here actually beat the horse dentist. The dentist couldn't even put a gag on him to look at his teeth. Did he (the horse) have a problem with a bit? Maybe. With time and a ring spanner (gotta have the right tools) he now accepts us being in his mouth. More hours! More baggage put in the history bin.

One alternative, although more expensive in the short term, is to plan and breed and handle your horse yourself; or have someone very trusted to do it for you. This way you know exactly what has happened to your horse. Who has done what to him/her and why. Having a horse in your life needs to be planned and the relationship needs to be considered as a long term one; sort of like selecting and training a life partner.

Choosing to have a horse this way, we know such things as; What types of handling and training has he had, what hoof care he has had right from the start? Rather than trying to rehabilitate a set of hooves that may have been compromised by eighteen months or so of no hoof care as a youngster (neglect - see *side bar story*), then followed by shoeing at an age when the hooves, bones and legs have not even fully developed properly.

(We also need to consider the practice of 'casting off' a horse that doesn't fit in with our agendas or plans. This places them in the category of cars and

motorbikes - when they don't fit in any more or are worn out, we 'get rid of them'. Not a nice way to treat a partner, is it?)

A closely related situation confronted me recently. The horse; a 16 year old thoroughbred with a fine pedigree. His history; Never raced but did have two major knee operations at a very young age which resulted in him being stable bound for many months. Very little movement after subsequent major operations may have caused some abnormalities in his bone and body development. He also had the 'front hooves from hell'. Several trimmers had tried just about everything to make this horse comfortable and sound, and to get his hooves to grow into a 'normal' shape. But they didn't and at best he could cope with a low energy trail ride. At his worst he was quite lame especially on his leg with the dodgy knee. The operations didn't really work it seems.

His owner and I knew there were significant things wrong in his hooves and his knee. We were going to radiograph his hooves to see what was going on inside but on a sunny autumn Saturday, after seeing the pain he was in and realising he was not going to get better, we decided to put him down. This was a very tough decision especially considering that this horse had as good a nature as you come across.

I did take his front legs before we buried him. When the pedal bone was removed from his left hoof capsule, I was shocked at what I saw. The degeneration was massive. The pedal bone was half the height of a similar sized healthy one and the bone structure was like that of a calcified sea sponge. Maybe one more canter and this critical bone may have shattered, resulting in an agonising state. The right pedal bone was almost just the same. We both knew we did the right thing for this horse.

Consider also a horse carrying a rider. So many horses are subjected to this while they are still babies. Thoroughbreds for the race track are typically 'broken in' at one and half years of age (as well as being shod). Many performance horse are started under saddle well before they are physically mature too. This, more often than not, ruins their bodies for the rest of their lives. It may not catch up with them until they are in their middle years, but it is baggage that can often never be repaired.

No wonder these horses are so cheap!

There are many human analogies. Young gymnastic performers are often beset by early onset arthritis. Ballet dancers suffer similarly too. Elite footballers are plagued with body ailments before they are forty. Very often they started high level football at a young age. My own knees are shot from a lot of serious snow skiing years ago. And on the other side of the coin are the middle aged marathon runners. How many winners and successful runners are thirty, forty and even fifty years of age? They usually only start this type of activity when their bodies are fully developed - and it is a different type of impact that they subject their bodies too - AND it was their choice, unlike the horse who has no choice.

Physical horse baggage can often be directly related to 'activities' they were asked to perform by humans. For example, if we scrutinise the horses' ages in high level endurance or eventing we see that very few of these 'elite' horses are older than twelve or thirteen. The average age of the horses in the middleweight class at the 2008 Quilty is 10.48 years. Older horses competing and placing in these types of events are rare. And what is the general age of gallopers on the racetrack? Of course there will always be someone who has an aged endurance or race horse, living out its life in condition and health as 'good as the

days he raced'. No one brags about the horses who are no longer with us; who had their life prematurely brought to a halt because of the ailments it suffered due to its competitive life though.

When humanity ceases to treat animals as subordinate creatures, we will go a long way to prevent some of the suffering these fellow living beings endure.

So, avoiding horse baggage is a smart idea, for horse and human. It allows us more time and energy to focus on establishing and building the relationship we have with our horse. It's like fertilizing the good paddock to reap the best result possible. And sure, with time and skill, some baggage can be successfully removed from horses - but isn't it smarter to avoid it in the first place? Let those who created the problem take full responsibility for it and deal with it in the way they best know how. And we can deal with the challenges we have created. That's fair, isn't it?

Side Bar Story

Many foals bred these days are not handled till they are weaned. What often happens is these young horses are turned out with their mothers on generally soft paddocks to grow up a bit. These soft paddocks do not wear their hooves as they would given a 'wild environment' in which to roam. But the foals hooves keep growing. So we often see young horses' hooves with very long heels and too often with one heel or quarter that has broken off. This results in a major physical imbalance for that leg and limb. This often further results in physical damage to that limb and to other associated parts of the horses body. And this very often results in the foal favouring the sore side and developing a club hoof. And this is, more often than not, missed by the breeder and so they think that the foal was born with the club hoof. Club hooves, more often than not, are accompanied by an imbalance in the muscles of the limb. Often body work (in conjunction with appropriate hoof trimming) on that limb or the atrophied or tight or scarred muscles results in the club hoof resolving.

So a solution to preventing many limb and gait abnormalities is to apply regular, physiologically correct hoof care, (in conjunction with encouraging movement on a hard terrain) to the foal from just after birth. And yes this means handling them just after they are born. And yes this means that they will accept this and other handling (and it is much easier) right from the start - which surely beats battling with a scared yearling. Foal imprinting, done correctly, turns out a very nice horse. Appropriate hoof care carried out right from the start of the foal's life gives the hooves (and the foal) a great start.