

Riding Off Into the Sunset Years

Just because a horse has reached his older years doesn't mean he has to hang up his horseshoes and be content with pasture life.

By L.A. Rose

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My old grey mare just wasn't what she used to be. At 28, Ginger's lip and back had begun to droop. She was overweight. When I took her out, she groaned and took mincing little steps. She had been a delightful riding partner because of her calmness and her willing nature. But, past her prime, she seemed ready for retirement. I put her out to pasture.

Sound like your "mature" horse? Have you been considering a retirement plan for your old campaigner or trail buddy? Well, before you decide to send him off to Leisure World, listen to this. Some time later, I was reading about the positive effects of exercise on people who are aging and I'd been on two rides where the horses were older than my own Ginger. Both animals still had good conformation, were spirited and extremely happy. They had a purpose and they were active. As I looked at these two energetic horses, I thought, if people 50 and older can improve their physical performance, why can't horses? So, with the thought of rejuvenating Ginger, I began to research the possibilities.

I found good news for Ginger and for your older horse, too. Dr. Karyn Malinowski, equine extension specialist at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, and older-horse expert, says many horses continue to be active well beyond the age of 20. But to keep them active as their body condition, muscle tone and general well-being start to decline, Dr. Malinowski says, "You've got to change your older horse's diet and lifestyle." With that advice, I went to trainer Kim Sullivan, a graduate of University of California at Davis and former member of the Davis equestrian team, to learn what I could do.

Equine Checkup

Kim said the first step was to have Ginger evaluated by both my veterinarian and farrier. Once we knew Ginger's limitations, we could set realistic goals and make modifications to our exercises that would allow her aging joints, bones and muscles to ease back into activity.

My vet, Dr. Jim Garfinkel, looked at Ginger's overall condition and soundness, her respiratory and musculoskeletal systems, and found no significant problems except for her weight. Then he focused on her eyes, ears and mouth, and in particular her teeth, since decayed teeth and sharp points that grow on the older horse's back molars can cause improper digestion. Ginger's sight, hearing and teeth were good, but I was advised to watch for excessive salivating, which is an early sign of teeth problems. I then went to my farrier with Dr. Garfinkel's diagnosis. Certified farrier Rick Williams pointed out that proper trimming and shoes are extremely important when starting any horse on an exercise routine because of the increased stress on the animal's legs and hooves. But in the older horse, preventive shoeing and trimming can help minimize concussive shock, aid flexion and extension, and alleviate lameness or unevenness of gait due to arthritis or degenerative joint disease.

Ginger's problem was flexion and extension, so Rick trimmed her toes as short as possible and applied rounded shoes. This, he explained, would cause her to break over easier in her stride and would lessen the tension on her stiff tendons and joints. Later, if needed, he said we could apply pads between shoe and hoof or use a coated shoe to minimize concussive shock to her legs and hooves.

At this point I realized Ginger probably could indeed be rejuvenated. Physically she was sound. And you may discover the same about your horse once you've spoken with your own veterinarian and farrier. But another aspect you'll need to look at before beginning any "youth-enhancing" program is diet.

Senior Specials

According to Dr. Peter Gibbs of Texas A&M University, the large-intestinal function alters as a horse gets older. This creates an increased need for things like higher-quality protein, alternative forms of roughage and supplemental vitamin B. The commercially processed senior feeds are good for the older horse who cannot maintain weight, either because he's unable to properly chew his feed or because his body is less efficient at utilizing the nutrients. On the other hand, lack of exercise and a diet rich in the wrong things can make older horses — just like people — put on unwanted pounds.

Excess weight is particularly bad for the older horse. It causes additional stress to old legs and joints as well as the

cardiovascular system. This all translated into some major dietary changes for my overweight Ginger. Also, I'd been feeding her straight alfalfa, which taxes the liver and kidneys. Dr. Malinowski fed a ration of half grass/half alfalfa with a supplement of energy-dense grains plus a vitamin supplement to her study group of older mares. Gradually, over a 7- to 10-day period, I switched Ginger over to a similar diet and added a daily dose of 1 to 2 ounces of vegetable oil to improve her skin and coat. Within a short time, Ginger began to slim down and her coat took on an improved sheen.

On the other hand, you may find your once easy-keeper no longer seems to hold flesh. His intestines may have lost the capability to fully extract the calories and nutrients from his feed. You'll need to work with your vet to ensure your senior gets a diet that supplies enough energy and nutrients without overloading him on harmful, unnecessary ingredients.

Conditioning

Finally, Ginger and I were ready to begin conditioning. Conditioning is the key to achieving and maintaining body tone and the appearance of youth, according to the UCD Book of Horses (Harper Collins, 1996). To start our conditioning program, my trainer advised me to get organized. This meant, for consistency, that I needed to develop a checklist to track Ginger's progress. Because of her age, I was going to need to increase warm-up times, decrease the intensity level and duration of exercise periods, and increase the cool-down times.

We started each workout with stretching exercises to increase flexibility and range of motion and reduce the risk of injury. If Ginger was particularly stiff or sore, I massaged her first and warmed her up by briskly walking her for about 10 minutes to get blood to her muscles and loosen her joints.

Then we began our exercise, using long, slow periods of steady work to create a foundation of good muscle and tone and to condition tendons and ligaments. We worked through four stages over several months. In the first stage, we started slow. We walked 2 to 4 miles at a strong, steady pace, on level ground, completing our walk in 30 to 45 minutes. Because Ginger had been inactive, we stayed at this stage for more than 6 weeks, until she was able to perform the task comfortably. Gradually we increased our mileage and eventually worked up to stage two, walking hills in combination with our flat walking. When Ginger was able to do that comfortably, we added stage three, trotting at short intervals on soft, flat ground. When Ginger was able to trot for extended periods on flat ground, we moved onto the final stage, trotting hills.

In her book *The Older Horse* (Breakthrough Publishing Inc., 1986), Eleanor Kellon, DVM, says, "Keep in mind that the goal of interval training is to get the maximum benefit with the minimum stress on the horse." So, during our training, I had to constantly be alert for pain that Ginger might be feeling. Pain might indicate I was moving her too quickly or that there might be undetected physical problems.

At this point, we work out only two to three days each week. The key to our progress has been to take it slowly and avoid shortcuts — whenever I tried to push Ginger too fast, we paid with lameness.

Ginger has begun to step out with renewed vigor since we have been doing our conditioning I think she's feeling good, and that has been significantly helped by the final step:

Massage

Nola Cousart, CEMT, and graduate of Equitouch Systems, an equine massage school, introduced me to the benefits of massage. As Nola says, "p training.< our during comfortable Ginger keeping in difference major a made has it that found have I And heals.? touch positive All>

The use of massage, just once a week, as part of your conditioning program can help your older horse by promoting healthy muscles. According to Nola, massaging before and after workouts improves circulation, helps keep muscles toned and brings nutrition into the muscles.

There are three basic massage techniques: effleurage, compression and direct pressure. To perform effleurage, you slide an open, flat hand over the horse's skin and down the length of the muscle, feeling for tension, tightness and abnormalities. You follow this with compression, in which you target problem areas you found during effleurage. To compress, you press into the muscle and rotate the hand in a half-circle toward the horse's tail with a rhythmic, pumping action. Finally you apply direct pressure to extremely knotted tissue using a thumb or finger pad. You push into the knot, hold the pressure for 30 seconds, release; repeat for 40 seconds, release; and repeat and hold for 60 seconds.

When massaging, you need to be constantly aware of your horse's reaction. If a particular technique seems unduly painful, you need to back off. Also, you need to avoid hot areas (which might be infected), bony areas and swollen areas.

Massage has helped to loosen Ginger's tight muscles and knotted tissue, and prevented muscle strains and tears as well

as the loss of range of motion. In addition, through massage, I found I am immediately aware when muscles and joints are stressed and I can take preventive steps toward healing them before they become inflamed.

Rejuvenating your horse is a long-term proposition. It requires patience, awareness and commitment. But as Ginger and I continue working out and as we adventure farther and farther, with increased energy, I have no doubt it's worth the effort. She has begun to kick up her heels in the pasture again, as she used to when she was young. She seems to feel better and enjoy life. I can feel it in her step. I hear it in her nicker. And I feel closer to her than ever before. I have rediscovered a partner with whom I can keep riding into the sunset.

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