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N u t r i t i o n , I n c .

The First 100 Days

By Dr. Bill Vandergrift, EquiVision, Inc.

Retired Thoroughbred race horses coming directly off the track usually benefit from a bit of rest and relaxation to help them wind down emotionally and allow their bodies to reset from the many stressors that are a normal part of a race horse's life. In short, it allows them to be normal horses and prepares them physically and mentally for whatever their future careers might be.

The first couple of weeks are an excellent time to assess the special needs of each individual horse. More than half of all retired horses coming off the track present with gastric ulcers and/or hind gut inflammation or colonic ulcers. Many have poor or inconsistent appetites, low body conditions, weak top lines, or suffer from lameness of one sort or another. Some are confused as to how they are to interact with other horses and their new handlers, who in most cases now treat them in a significantly different manner than what were accustomed to.

Where to Start

Your retired race horse has just come off the transport and is now looking around at his new home and handlers – what do you do first? If the horse arrives at night or very late in the afternoon, I usually put him in a stall with plenty of fresh clean water and all the grass hay he wants. I may also orally dose him with electrolytes and an intestinal stimulant, especially if he has been on the road for more than three or four hours. I then turn the horse out by himself in a relatively small secure paddock the next day. However, if the horse arrives early enough in the day, I will sometimes turn him directly out in such a paddock straight off the transport. In either case, I make sure there is plenty of fresh clean water and grass hay or pasture available. I like the paddock to be large enough to allow the horse to run and buck, but small enough to facilitate catching and easily keeping an eye on him. The paddock also needs to be free of obstacles and corners that could be hazardous to a horse that just received his or her get out of jail free card. Some people like to give a tranquilizer before turning a race horse out for the first time. I personally do not normally do this because I like to get a “read” on the horse in his normal state of mind and I have never had a horse hurt themselves when turned out like this.

Assess and Address

Be aware that many off-the-track Thoroughbreds come to you with less-than-optimal feet. Unhealthy feet can affect all other body parts. For example, sore backs, sore hocks, gastro-intestinal inflammation, and/or poor appetite can all be secondary to discomfort caused by poor hoof mechanics. I recommend that you have a competent farrier evaluate the horse's feet as soon as possible for low or high palmer/planter angles, thin soles, crushed heels, poor digital alignment, overall hoof mass and any other condition that could contribute to discomfort either in the foot directly or other parts of the body. A horse that is in chronic discomfort usually is not very pleasant to be around. I have seen horses that were considered mean and aggressive transform into calm, compliant horses that enjoyed interaction with people and their new job once the primary cause of their discomfort was alleviated.

The next important item for your off-the-track Thoroughbred is what to feed. This is a situation where it never fails to return to basics: fresh air, fresh water, good quality forage and plenty of it. Most of the time you will have no idea what the horse was fed before it came to you so you want to offer a diet that is safe in regard to gastro-intestinal function. However, you also want to feed something that the horse is likely to eat, especially since many race horses develop a finicky palate due to the stress of intense exercise. I like to start with a beet pulp-based feed that also contains some grain such as *Triple Crown Complete*. If, upon first presentation, the horse looks at this feed with an expression of what is this?,” I add a bit of sweet feed or plain oats in order to get the horse on feed. Then I reduce the amount of added grain in the diet over the next seven to 10 days until I am feeding *Triple Crown Complete* or, in some cases, *Triple Crown Senior* only.

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A finicky appetite is a symptom of a digestive system that is not working optimally due to intestinal inflammation, poor fermentation in the large intestine, colonic ulcers, gastric ulcers or poor intestinal immune function. Horses that do not have a good appetite should receive a daily oral dose of EquiVision's *ADR paste* for two or three days or until they begin to exhibit a normal appetite. Once a normal appetite is established, EquiVision's *ADR powder* and *Fish Oil Factor* should then be top dressed on the horse's daily ration to support and maintain normal digestive health and function. Horses that exhibit symptoms of hind gut inflammation should be placed on EquiVision's *21 Day Hind Gut Health Program*, which can be given concurrently with gastric ulcer medications such as omeprazole, and fed a no grain, beet pulp-based feed such as *Triple Crown Senior*.

Achieving normal digestive function will go a long way towards supporting the special needs of the individual horse. A horse's special needs might include increasing body weight and condition, improving a weak top line, hair coat quality or hoof growth rate and/or hoof quality, normalizing immune function, increasing or decreasing energy levels as the case may be, and addressing injuries such as fractures, tendon or ligament tears, strained muscles, and neurological disorders such as EPM and/or joint issues.

Where you and your off-the-track Thoroughbred are at the end of the first 100 days depends on how well you assess and address the individual needs of your horse during the first 30 days. Many times when you address what appears to be an obvious issue (sore hocks or gastric ulcers for example) you either get no improvement or a short-lived improvement. This is because the primary problem was not uncovered. If you treat an "obvious" problem, but get little or no response, it does not necessarily mean that your treatment or approach was wrong or ineffective. It more likely means that there is another issue that is actually the primary problem. I encourage you to keep looking until you find it! Don't just try different therapies to address the same issue and body parts. Often the most obvious problem is the not the primary problem.

For example, many racing Thoroughbreds develop sore backs and hocks which in turn may cause intestinal inflammation, which in turn results in poor appetite, which in turn results in poor body condition and performance. The obvious treatment is to inject the hocks and facilitate physical therapy and chiropractic adjustment for the back, along with providing omeprazole and intestinal conditioners plus high fat supplements to improve body condition and hopefully performance. This approach usually improves the horse's comfort and performance, but only temporarily because the primary problem was not addressed which in many racing Thoroughbreds is a negative planter angle—fix it and the other problems either take care of themselves or can be improved on a more permanent basis. Don't be surprised if your otherwise "high strung" Thoroughbred becomes relatively calm and compliant when the primary cause of discomfort is finally alleviated.

