



# Keeping the Performance Horse Healthy, Fit and Happy

There are many components to keeping a high performance horse healthy and happy. During the NRHA Futurity & Adequan® North American Affiliate Championships a variety of therapies are offered to satisfy these needs.

BY MEGAN ARSZMAN

Competing at the NRHA Futurity & Adequan® North American Affiliate Championships (NAAC) is a marathon—10 days of classes on top of the hundreds of miles some travelled to get to Oklahoma City. Add in the hours of training under the saddle prior to the event itself, and you have one tired athlete. Recently, however, there has been an uptick in owners and trainers insuring that their horses stay happy and healthy throughout the entire event by utilizing the many

different horse health providers that grace State Fair Park every year.

"I love to see the horsemanship amongst trainers and exhibitors," says David Williams, founder and president of Equine Therapy Spa LLC. "I think people are becoming more concerned about prolonging the lifespan of their performance horses."

"These shows are such marathons, the horses don't sleep much and we ride them quite a bit," says NRHA Professional Matt Mills. "I feel like (using therapy treatments) helps the horses come out a little fresher and

have a little more energy because they've rested."

While at the Futurity and NAAC, owners have a variety of options to employ on their horses: salt water spa therapy, massage therapy, TheraPlate, ice therapy, shockwave . . . just to name a few. There is also a range of veterinarians available for the everyday horse health issues such as colic, lacerations, pre-purchase exams and lameness diagnostics. Whatever you can think of to keep your horse healthy, chances are it's available at the Futurity and NAAC.

*"Best doctor in the world is a veterinarian.  
He can't ask his patient what's the matter.  
He's just got to know."*

*Will Rogers*



Dr. Sherry Johnson assessing sensitivity to hoof testers as part of a performance evaluation.



Dr. Alan Donnell and Dr. Josh Donnell performing pre-purchase examinations in the Equine Sports Medicine truck at the NRHA Futurity.

### Equine Sports Medicine Trailer

Located outside the Adequan® Arena resides a modified NASCAR trailer that has been converted to a mobile equine veterinary clinic, known as Equine Sports Medicine. The Equine Sports Medicine trailer is based out of Pilot Point, Texas, but travels to all the major shows to provide owners and trainers with first-class, on-site veterinary care. The team of veterinarians dedicated to providing care to our top level equine athletes includes Dr. Alan Donnell, Dr. Dave Frisbie, Dr. Josh Donnell and Dr. Sherry Johnson.

"We go through all of the phases of the show," explains Dr. Sherry Johnson. "Upon move-in we triage any health problems encountered during travel such as respiratory issues, colics or lacerations. Then throughout the show we do everything we can to keep the equine athletes healthy and sound as they prepare for the biggest competitions

of the season. Towards the end of the futurity when sales are really ramping up we do a lot of prepurchase exams, X-ray interpretations and any health papers needed for shipping."

Inside the trailer you'll find top level diagnostic and therapeutic equipment including ultrasound, endoscopy, digital Xray, shock-wave and therapeutic ultrasound to name a few.

"We treat anything that the equine athlete encounters while they're showing and competing, so we're prepared for just about everything," says Dr. Johnson.

Performance issues related to lameness are not uncommon at high-profile shows such as the NRHA futurity. "We start our lameness exams by listening to specific ridden impressions that trainers or exhibitors may have.

A trainer may describe that the horse isn't running to his stop as well as he usually does, or he's struggling with a



Dr. Alan Donnell assessing fetlock x-rays at the NRHA Futurity.

specific lead change. All of that is great information, it gives us a place to start," says Dr. Johnson. The veterinarians then perform a thorough lameness exam either under saddle or while being lunged, complete with flexions and diagnostic blocking if indicated. "Once we have the lameness localized to a specific region of the body, we'll put all of our imaging efforts there to diagnose exactly what the problem is. Based on our findings, we then build a treatment and re-

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The Equine Therapy Spa, LLC, a mobile saltwater therapy spa.



Using the TheraPlate at the NRHA Futurity - vibration therapy can help increase circulation in the hooves for hoof care, help soft tissue injuries as well as bone and joint issues.

habilitation plan that best fits each equine athlete. Our top priority is to help these athletes safely perform at the highest level they can," says Dr. Johnson.

### Equine Therapy Spa

For years, athletes have enjoyed whirlpool and ice bath therapies to help with inflammation and pain after a tough workout or game. Now, equine athletes can do the same with the Equine Therapy Spa, LLC, a mobile salt-water therapy spa.

The water can be 35 F or 112 F, depending on what the horse needs. The hot water is good for older horses with

arthritis and for loosening up muscles prior to being worked. The cold water draws out soft-tissue inflammation.

There are 66 jets on the floor of the spa, so the aeration from the jets acts like a massage for the soft tissues and aids in the dispersal of fluid building up in the legs.

The salt water (50 pounds of Epsom salts plus 55 pounds of Dead Sea salt) acts like a poultice wrap in aiding the withdrawal of inflammation and also helps with skin irritations such as scratches, which can be common for horses at events such as the Futurity Show.

When David Williams was a reining trainer he was looking for some sort of advantage to aid in his horse's health and longevity. After seeing a European model of the

same type of spa, he set to work building his own, which soon became the only mobile unit in the United States. Now, this is a full-time job for him and there are two other mobile units in the country.

"We have clients that will bring the same horse to the spa every day," says Williams. "This is a major event; the stakes are high. The horses are not getting much rest and we're asking a lot more of these horses."

Williams believes that with the amount of training 2- and 3- year-old horses do, the physical and mental strain is the greatest in those years, thus requiring a little more care of the body. Each session lasts 17 minutes.

"We work with horses who have soft tissue inflammation, and even horses who are sound, but the trainer or owner just wants to use the hot water to loosen up muscles before the show or do a rotation of hot and cold water for maintenance, just like any professional athlete would do," he says.

### Therassage

A team of four top-level students and instructor are on-call throughout the entire NRHA Futurity and NAAC to provide therapeutic massage and other modalities to the horses competing at the event. Greg Gage has been a certified human massage therapist for 24 years and founded the Therassage program to instruct students wanting to learn about the use of massage therapy, kinesio tape and the use of ice therapy and equine vibration therapy.

Many trainers now employ vibration therapy at home and on the road. Vibration therapy can help increase circulation in the hooves for



Cold therapy is oftentimes the best treatment for performance horse injuries.

hoof care, help soft tissue injuries as well as bone and joint issue.

"It's a relatively inexpensive equipment that you can have in your barn," says Gage. "It helps with recovery time of injuries, or you can use it prior to being worked or shown to help warm up the muscles."