HANDLING & TRAINING of the
hippotherapy horse

CONTRASTS IN QUALITY
AND WHY IT MATTERS

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Hippotherapy Description:

- Used by PT, OT or SLP professionals.
- Part of an integrated treatment plan to achieve functional outcomes.
- Best described as using equine movement and related therapy activities to promote functional skills.

But what does it mean to the horse?...

IT IS A DISCIPLINE
A Discipline

- Hippotherapy is a discipline/profession for the horse. As with all disciplines, the basis is common horse training, then . . . .

- There are necessary qualifications for both the horse and handler specific to hippotherapy.

- There are training and conditioning requirements necessary for hippotherapy.

- There are specific performance expectations unique to hippotherapy.

  - Hippotherapy is a ‘performance event’

Athletic ability and their need for social interaction & leadership makes horses excellent working partners for humans.
Handling the therapy horse “in hand”

Leading
• Video of leading

Long Lining
• Video of long lining

The horse’s Movement is the Key

✓ Inherently multidimensional in nature (3 planes + forward motion)

✓ A high level of intensity/sustainability at an average of 100 inputs per minute (average 2500 inputs per session)

✓ Horses are highly organized neurological entities capable of very refined and controlled movement.

✓ Human interaction can serve to enhance or detract from the nature and quality of a horse’s natural movement.

Biomechanics of horse at walk

- Vertical Displacement
- Lateral (flexion & displacement)
- Rotation
- Anterior-Postrerior
- Moving Forward Through Space
Planes of movement in the horse

Planes of movement in the human

Remember the inverse relationship of the horse’s pelvis to the human’s pelvis...

Movement along the frontal plane in the horse transmits movement along the transverse plane in the human.

Movement along the transverse plane in the horse transmits movement along the frontal plane in the human.
Treatment with Equine Movement has a unique dynamic for the Horse:

- The patient is not "riding" or directly "controlling" the horse
- The quality of the horse's movement must be managed by a handler "on the ground" or "in hand"
  - THIS REQUIRES A GREAT DEAL OF SKILL
- Leading and long lining are the primary means of handling the therapy horse "in hand".
- The handler is not able to utilize the traditional "leg cues" used when mounted.
  - IT IS ALL DONE THROUGH HANDS, VOICE AND BODY POSTURES.

Quality of Movement
Impact of Movement

• The movement imparted to the human results in biomechanical and sensory influences.

• The quality and nature of these influences is directly related to the “quality of movement” provided by the therapy horse.

• The dynamics of a horse’s movement must be considered relative to the needs of each patient being treated. “Quality of movement” is a relative term.

Leading

Good Leading
• Video of skilled leading

Poor Leading
• Video of poor leading

Long lining

Good Long Lining
• Video of skilled lining

Poor Long Lining
• Video of poor lining
How does one ensure quality of equine movement?

- **CONDITIONING**
- **TRAINING** – not only of the horse, but of the handler as well
- **COMMUNICATION** – a vital aspect of the treatment ‘team’

**conditioning**

Well Conditioned Horse  
Poorly Conditioned Horse

**conditioning**

Well conditioned horse – natural collection  
Poorly conditioned horse - lacking natural collection
Training

Training is an ongoing process.

- Initial training to teach the horse what the performance requirements are for a hippotherapy horse.
- Maintenance of the horse's conditioning and performance over time.
- The discipline of hippotherapy is more challenging for the horse than is assumed. Unique challenges to maintaining horse's performance.
- Horse professionals have to adapt their knowledge to the discipline of hippotherapy with an open mind to hippotherapy's unique demands.

Transmission of Movement

- The movement of the horse's hind legs and pelvis is transmitted to and produces movement in the pelvis of the human.
- There is a slight delay in the human reaction due to the distance between the horse's pelvis and the human's center of gravity.
- Proper engagement of the horse's hind legs, along with supple elevation of the horse's back, will directly affect the postural alignment and muscular activation of the rider.
- OTHER ASPECTS TO CONSIDER...
  - STRAIGHTNESS
  - RHYTHMICITY
  - CONNECTION

What is ‘Collection’ In a horse?

- The horse steps further in under its body with the hind legs.
- Transfer's more weight on hindlegs than front legs
- More bend through the joints of the legs
- Lifts the back and engages the spine into a ‘spring’
- Allows a horse to make sudden changes of direction

- A horse that is not collected will have stiff, poorly coordinated movement, lacking fluidity and suppleness, as well as poor mobility through the spine.
COLLECTION IS COMPROMISED WITH A HOLLOW BACK


COLLECTION IS A COORDINATED ACTIVATION OF THE HIND QUARTERS MOVING UP INTO THE FRONT QUARTERS.

IMPELLION, RHYTHMICITY, SYMMETRY ARE ALL POSITIVELY IMPACTED BY COLLECTION.

Collection can be ‘discipline specific’
Collection

• Video of collection in a therapy horse

straightness

• Video of horse (front angle) and leader w/ no connection (bending of head to inside, dropping of shoulder – loss of ‘straightness’

• Video of horse (front angle) and leader w/ good connection, head body is straight and shoulders are lifted.

How is this being transmitted to our client?

Note the “straightness” in the line of travel

Straightness can be positively or negatively impacted by conditioning, training and handling skill
Even on a bend, a horse’s hind end must follow its head/shoulders to insure that the horse’s foot falls maintain “straightness” in the line of travel.

Don’t want to see the hind legs in a different track than the front legs.

Why are these aspects important in the hpot horse?

We have to consider how each of these conditions is affecting the way the horse moves within the session—and ultimately how that movement is being transmitted to the client.

Are we ensuring that we are ‘transmitting’ the highest quality of movement to the client in order to elicit the highest level of functional change?

Quality of movement—INFLUENCE ON SPEECH

INFLUENCE OF POOR LEADING

INFLUENCE OF PROPER LEADING
WHAT HAPPENED?

Subtle changes in the position & handling of the horse professional directly influenced the horse’s quality of movement (rhythmicity, impulsion, collection) resulting in positive changes in the client’s core muscular activation and recruitment of her respiration to support phonation.

WE WERE ABLE TO ELICIT MORE FUNCTIONAL CHANGE WHEN WE IMPROVED THE QUALITY OF MOVEMENT.

Quality of movement - INFLUENCE ON posture

POSTURAL ALIGNMENT W/ POOR LEADING

POSTURAL ALIGNMENT WITH PROPER LEADING

What happened?

- Subtle changes in the position & handling of the horse professional directly influenced the horse’s quality of movement (rhythmicity, impulsion, collection) resulting in positive changes in the client’s core muscular activation and co-contraction of flexor/extensor muscles.
Quality of movement - INFLUENCE ON sensory-modulation

SENSORY MODULATION W/ POOR vs. PROPER LEADING

Notice the immediate change ...

What happened?

LETS GO BACK...

HOW DO WE ACHIEVE COLLECTION IN A HORSE DURING HIPPOTHERAPY?

- PROPER CONDITIONING IS THE FOUNDATION!
- TRAINING - teaching the horse to respond to body cues
- CONNECTION - Handler must maintain a subtle but consistent communication and interaction with the horse
What is CONNECTION?

Connection between horse and handler is absolutely necessary for quality of movement.

From first introduction to first treatment session

Houston's First day
- Video of initial interaction with a therapy horse in training

Houston's First HPOT Session
Communication

Communication between the horse professional and the therapist is essential to ensure quality of movement is achieved during the session.

It is important to remember that your horse professional is an important aspect of the treatment 'team' when utilizing equine movement as a treatment tool.

If your horse professional does not understand the dynamics of the horse's movement that you are utilizing, OR what functional outcome you are trying to facilitate in your patient, how can he/she maximize the quality of movement from the horse?

Poor communication between therapist and handler

Video of "Don'ts"

Good communication between therapist and handler

Video of "Do's"
Welfare of the hippotherapy horse

- Lack of conditioning, lack of training, and poor horse handling often result in hippotherapy horses developing physical ailments, misbehaviors, and can shorten their careers.
- Horses are prone to develop soreness at their poll, their withers and along their backs.
- There is a strong potential for unintentional “abuse/neglect” in poorly managed therapy horses.

Safety

- Video of therapy horse spooking w/ poor leading
- Video of therapy horse spooking w/ proper leading

How to improve training of horses and handlers in your practice?

- Therapists must embrace the importance of treating hippotherapy as a discipline for the therapy horse and demand better performance in their horses and their horse handlers.
- Explain the importance of treating hippotherapy as a discipline for both the horse and the horse professionals in your practice.
- Therapists should use the professional horsemanship/horsemanship in their horse community. Most trainers are happy to share their knowledge.
- Implement an ongoing “assessment” and “review” of hippotherapy horses performance as well as the performance of the horse professionals in your practice.
DO NOT accept a lack of willingness on the part of your horse professionals to address your concerns and/or develop conditioning/training protocols.

As a treating therapist – you have a right to expect professionalism in your hippotherapy horses and in your hippotherapy horse handlers.

— Quality Matters —

resources

• Hyperlink to AQHA list of professional horsemen...

AHA Horse Handling Courses – go to americanhippotherapyassociation.org

• Resource for long-lining

• Train Your Horse for Showmanship
  http://horseandrider.com/video/train-your-horse-for-showmanship-
  11167

Here’s how to teach your horse the six basic maneuvers that allow you to compete in showmanship at halter?and that just a fingertip-finesse handle on any horse.