

Always Consider the Footing

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As riders we brush, saddle up, anticipate our ride, helmet up and go. As we venture out, the surfaces we choose to ride on may vary in texture, resilience and depth. Do we consider our horses footing when they're riding? Or are we passengers void of consciousness to the ground, footing we travel upon?

On LI there are five general surfaces our hooves come in contact with. There are sand, compressed dirt, grass, artificial turf and roads, asphalt/concrete. Whatever your riding discipline or athleticism, Dressage, Jumpers, Barrel to Pleasure, will you and your horse be happy or unhappy with your chosen footing?

Here are three key words in the matrix of dissecting ground footing. ACCELERATION, DECELERATION and IMPACT. 1. Acceleration is the gait, speed at that moment in which the hoof (hooves) are moving forward. 2. Deceleration is the conclusion of acceleration to a downward thrust, when a hoof comes in contact with the ground/footing. 3. Upon deceleration there is immediate impact, concussion, absorption merge upon the ground surface to the hooves. The hooves, bony column, limbs and muscles merge in an involuntary biomechanical defense, warding off impact energy.

In a perfect world, footing should be approximately 2 to 3 inches of a softer giving surface, with a harder substrate below. A favorable GF accommodates penetration to the surface for a heel first, flat foot landing. The foot will be able to slide forward slightly. Secondly the GF will offer enough resistance when the hoof departs the ground for break over and take off. This adequate resistance is necessary for hind end propulsion, whereas the front is considered pull and drag. A satisfactory GF is beneficial in absorption, dampening and dissipating ground reactive forces. Sand, grass and soft dirt allow hooves to penetrate the surface of GF, diminishing, and negating those destructive concussive forces.

These repetitive ground reactive forces over time on a hard surface can exacerbate medical conditions predisposing to lameness or early retirement. EX: bony lesions, arthritis, navicular disease, etc., manifesting inflammation, deterioration, intermittent bouts of lameness contributed via riding on hard unforgiving surfaces.

Soft tissue issues, ligamentous, tendinous or muscles are exacerbated by soft penetrating surfaces. Why? Because it requires more shear energy, and elastic energy to move forward thru a deeper footing. Fatigue and hyperextension may occur. EX: suspensory, superficial flexor tendon, fetlock injuries etc. A harder surface is more desirable, resulting in less energy displacement with minimal deep penetration of hooves to the surface area.

The exchange in thought is easy. Run on the beach, dry sand, wet sand, dirt, grass and the road. What was your pleasure, comfort, discomfort and dread? Now you're beginning to think like a horse. Good! Use discretion, concern and care when selecting the footing you travel. When riding, remember you are the delegated driver and the voice of reason.

Your horse is in your hand, literally. Enjoy the experience.

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