

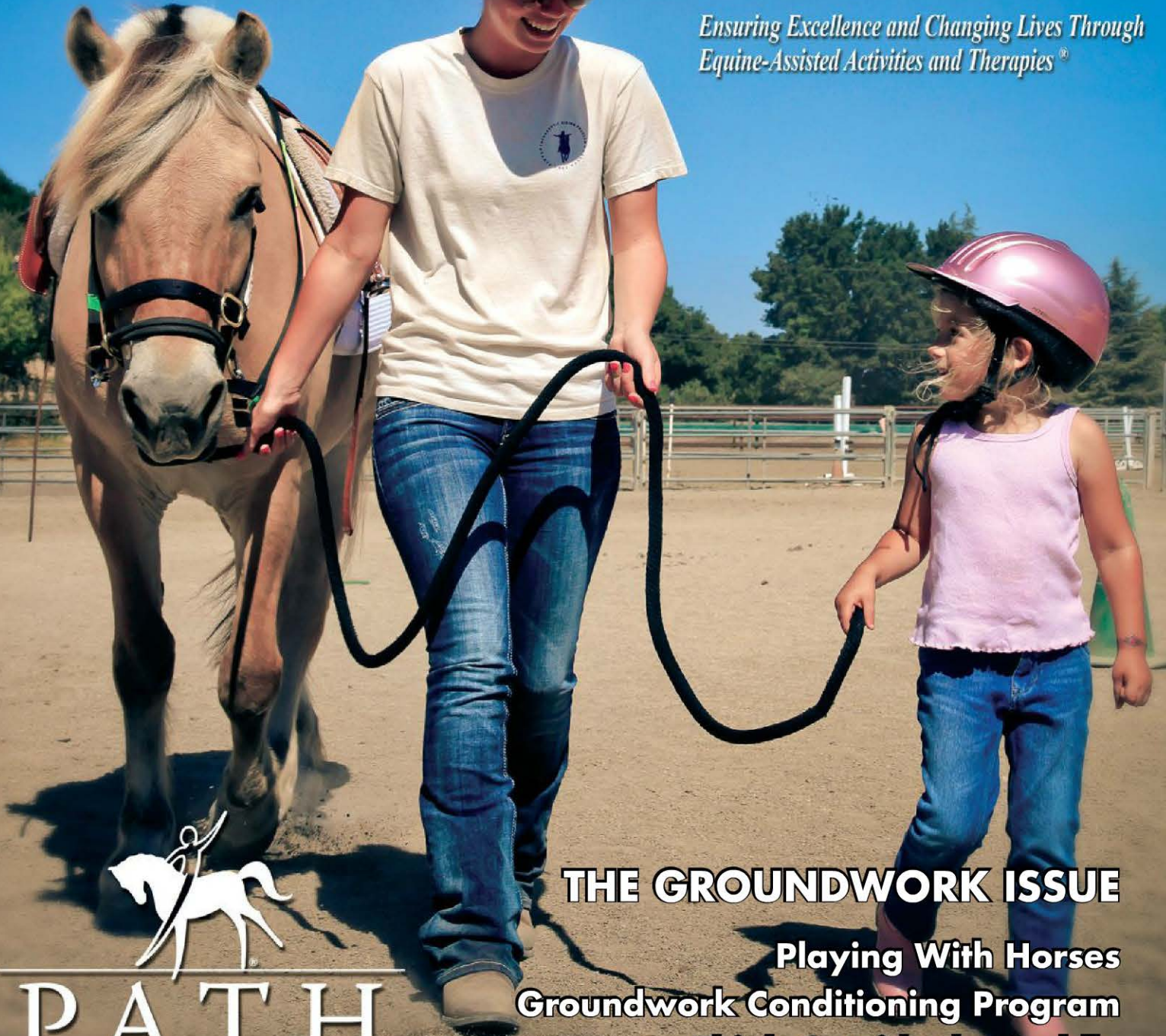
Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International

STRIDES

Vol. 20, No. 3

Summer 2014

*Ensuring Excellence and Changing Lives Through
Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapies®*



PATH
INTERNATIONAL

THE GROUNDWORK ISSUE

**Playing With Horses
Groundwork Conditioning Program
Think Outside the Saddle
Equine-facilitated Wellness**



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On the Cover: PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor Taylor Eldevik with her student Jordan Harvey leading Board at the Santa Ynez Valley Therapeutic Riding Program, a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Solvang, CA. Photo courtesy of Amy May, who is also a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor.

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Equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) horses not only give from their hearts, but they also perform very physically and mentally challenging work, day after day. To be capable of continuing their jobs over time, they need a healthy conditioning program to maintain physical and mental soundness. Groundwork conditioning can be a critical addition to EAAT programs and can be easily taught to horse leaders.

For the past two years, Eagle Mount-Bozeman, a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Bozeman, MT, has utilized groundwork training based on the Refined Performance Horsemanship (RPH) Program founded by Karen Ososki. RPH emerged from more than 20 years

capable of working with more comfort, calmness and soundness. The benefits of RPH's groundwork program for EAAT programs include:

- Minimizing lameness and soreness issues
- Improving herd behavior and fitness
- Reducing burnout
- Decreasing behavioral issues
- Increasing participant safety by minimizing behavior issues
- Creating a smoother-strided horse, making it easier for riders to balance
- Establishing a healthy leading partnership between the horse and the handler while keeping the handler in a safe environment



Refined Performance Horsemanship

A Sound Groundwork Conditioning Program

By Karen Ososki

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF REFINED PERFORMANCE HORSEMANSHIP AND SHUTTERSTOCK

of studying and putting into practice a broad range of horsemanship principles, including natural horsemanship, classical principles, biomechanics, conditioning and schooling. Ososki refined and combined elements of these principles to create a holistic approach to horse training that results in relaxed and willing minds and balanced, supple bodies.

RPH focuses on developing muscular and skeletal foundations that are biomechanically healthy. Its conditioning groundwork is a series of accumulative, slow, progressive stretching and bending exercises designed to allow the horse to find its own balance and throughness without the weight of the rider. Once a horse is able to move freely, it becomes a more willing partner and is

- Refining the handler's skills in observing how the horse balances without a rider
- Helping handlers understand how suppling, strengthening and conditioning allow the horse to perform well

How EAAT Affects Horses

Before discussing how groundwork exercises specifically benefit EAAT horses, it is essential to understand the physical and mental demands placed on them and how these demands may undermine participant safety by creating behavioral issues. EAAT horses are ridden by participants who are often unbalanced or unsymmetrical. This can put extra strain on the horses who

struggle to maintain their own balance and symmetry in order to carry riders safely. Being unbalanced can result in sore backs or lameness issues, such as pulled leg tendons and ligaments.

Participants who have difficulty controlling their limbs may mentally challenge the horse. For instance, inconsistent leg and hand aids and unsteady rein contact may confuse the horse. Horses may also be frustrated by slow leading and being on too short a lead. Horses who become sore or increasingly confused or frustrated may eventually act up by becoming cinchy when being girthed. It can also lead to biting, bucking or kicking when being saddled or mounted, or flipping the head or biting when being led.

their highest potential, they should be encouraged to adopt a healthy frame or posture that allows development of the necessary muscles for balance and throughness (the supple, unblocked, connected state of the horse's musculature). When posture muscles are carefully developed through a program that includes aerobic conditioning, healthy muscle development and suppleness and balance exercises, the equine athlete will move freely without injury for many years. Center staff and volunteers (even non-riders) can take part in this conditioning process as a warm-up before lessons and during the cool-down after a session.

Groundwork can be incorporated into both schooling and conditioning programs. Schooling differs from conditioning in that it focuses on training movements



◀ **A: Head Down Exercise.** Notice how the horse is standing square, facing directly forward, with the ears level and the topline being stretched. The softly blinking eyes are a sign of how relaxed the horse appears to be.

◀ **B: Poll Flexing Exercise.** The key is to have the jaw give on the inside. Notice how level the horse's ears are and that they could even be more level.

Varying horses' workloads and giving them time off is essential in preventing lameness, burnout and behavioral problems, but it is not the only key in keeping horses healthy and happy. To be able to develop and perform optimally, the horse needs to be placed in a conditioning program designed to improve overall fitness, strength and endurance and instill a kind, obedient, willing attitude. In addition, PATH Intl. Certified Instructors, Equine Specialists in Mental Health and Learning, volunteers and staff can better help both participants and horses when educated in equine movement biomechanics, the study of how a horse's anatomy (muscles and skeletal interaction) determines an equine's natural movement. For horses to perform at

and skills with repeated practice to further the horse's ability in different disciplines, e.g., jumping or reining. This is similar to people taking tennis or golf lessons. A conditioning program is the equine equivalent of going to the gym, taking a yoga class and attending counseling for work-related issues. Unfortunately, too often horses are schooled more than they are conditioned, resulting in soreness or lameness or unresolved burnout.

Cornerstones of Conditioning

Groundwork is essential, preliminary work that helps build a strong foundation for riding activities by establishing strong, broad basics that advance a horse's education and ability. Natural horsemanship principles

focus on creating respectful horses by establishing the handler as the leader. By aligning with a horse's natural behavior, the handler communicates to the horse through politeness, fairness and leadership. Its exercises are designed to help the horse mentally and physically relax.

Mental and physical relaxation are important for all equine activities and are essential components of muscle control, reflexes and expansive breathing. If the mind is not relaxed, horses can become tense, more reactive and can spook more easily. To relax, the horse needs to find its own lateral and longitudinal balance (unrestrained way of moving) and to be able to carry itself with lightness and self-carriage.

Classical principles are focused on improving the horse's athletic ability to more easily perform its role. A cornerstone of classical riding is to move the horse from back-to-front with light hand contact for maximum efficiency in impulsion. This means that the horse's forward movement is not restrained by a rider pulling back or down with the hand. A rider who tries to create a rounder downward posture in his or her horse by pulling can hinder the horse's ability to push from behind. Without that push, the horse loses the ability to use its back efficiently for movement. Such hand movement can impede the efficient forward movement of the horse and leads to soundness and behavioral issues.

The back-to-front principle is just as important when handling the horse during groundwork. The horse should move forward into light contact on the lead or lunge-line. Pulling or jerking motions on the lead can hinder a horse's willingness to go forward and may result in mental or physical problems.

Riding forward into (soft) contact from behind creates a horse that drives forward from its haunches rather than pulling with its front legs and travels with a supple and free back versus traveling with a stiff back. Forward movement is easier for the horse when the back is relaxed and supple. This also makes it smoother for the rider to sit. Relaxation exercises result in the horse swinging through its back with each stride, lengthening and stretching its frame and developing more elasticity within the movement, which allows the rider to achieve better balance and therefore improves participant safety.

Suppleness and flexibility describe the range of motion around joints, or how the horse's musculoskeletal system works in a synchronized way that develops flexibility throughout the body. Through lateral exercises, the horse stretches and bends on both sides of its body. This increase in flexibility leads to straightness and the most efficient, healthy movement for the horse.

Groundwork exercises are the most beneficial when using natural horsemanship and classical principles based on biomechanically sound movements to encourage suppleness, flexibility and mental relaxation. In a balanced conditioning program, these exercises:

- strengthen muscle groups so that the horse carries itself with lightness and self-carriage,
- encourage the horse to balance equally on both sides and move straight in both directions while on a line or curve, and
- teach lateral and other movements on the ground before attempting them on horseback.

Beginning Groundwork Exercises

Before working with the horse, the handler should approach the horse calmly and assertively, which helps the horse relax during the exercises. The exercises should not be done quickly as the key to success is to return the horse to a relaxed state before moving on to the next exercise.

Each exercise should end with the same process of rewarding the horse for its efforts. To do this, allow the horse to stop, relax and process the exercise after satisfactory completion. After each exercise, the handler should remain quiet—both verbally and physically—until the horse blinks slowly, chews and/or yawns, behaviors which signify both relaxation and processing. This can take two to five minutes. Once this occurs, pet and encourage the horse for a job well done.

A rope halter and flag are needed for the following exercises. Rope halters provide clear communication with the horse by applying pressure to the poll and nose through the thinness of the rope and the knots, allowing a handler to control an excited horse more easily. Never use web halters with buckles, snaps or metal parts as they may break or injure the horse. A 12-foot lead rope for stretching exercises and a 20- to 24-foot lead for lunging is also recommended.

A flag is used to extend the handler's arm and provides more obvious direction for the horse. When introducing a flag to a horse for the first time, use caution. If not used to a flag, the horse may kick, spook and pull away, move into you or run you over.

A well-designed warm-up enhances performance and reduces the risk of injury while gradually increasing the intensity to facilitate the body's adjustment from rest to exercise. The first objective is to establish physical and mental relaxation in the horse, so that the limb movements become free and elastic and the horse starts to move through the back. The warm-ups should be short (10-30 minutes) to avoid fatigue and be completed prior to any conditioning or schooling session. A warm-up routine can include: 10 minutes of active forward movement at the walk; 10 minutes of active trot or canter on the lunge-line; 20 minutes of groundwork exercises, stretching exercises and suppling exercises. The following are a few of the beginning groundwork exercises that have been included in the RPH Program, starting with an exercise to desensitize the horse to the flag.

Flag Desensitizing

► **Purpose: Enables the handler to use the flag as an aid in directing the horse's movements without the horse becoming nervous or tense.**

1. Stand in front of the horse and let the horse see and smell the flag, keeping the flag very still.
2. Slowly and gently move the flag to the left and then to the right.
3. Once the horse accepts the flag, slowly rub the horse on the left and right side of the neck with the flag.
4. Calmly shake the flag near the horse's head on each side, but do not let the horse become overly anxious.
5. As soon as the horse shows any sign of staying (not moving away), take away the flag.
6. When the horse chooses to leave, let it go around the circle only once before stopping it.
7. When the horse stops, gently touch it on each side with the flag until it accepts the flag.
8. Once the horse calmly accepts the flag, begin the groundwork exercises.

Stretch and Relaxation Exercises

These exercises are designed to help the horse relax and stretch throughout the body while maintaining a close partnership with the handler. Great care should be taken to prevent over-stretching and to minimize reflex muscular tension (the myotatic stretch reflex, which resists stretching) by emphasizing relaxation and a proper warm-up. The handler should devote at least 15-20 minutes to these exercises to enable the horse to let go of tension and stiffness.

Lower the Horse's Head to the Ground

PHOTO
A

► **Purpose: Gains the horse's attention and relaxes the topline.**

1. Stand at the side of the head looking forward with the horse.
2. Hold the lead with the thumb pointing toward the ground.
3. Ask the horse to lower its head by applying downward pressure on the lead and releasing the lead as soon as the horse gives at all, even if the horse's head is not yet to the ground.
4. Continue asking the horse to lower the head until the horse relaxes and keeps the head within three inches of the ground for 20 seconds.
5. Repeat, standing on both sides to accustom the horse to accepting the handler out of each eye.

Flex Each Side of the Poll

PHOTO B

► **Purpose: Stretches and relaxes neck muscles at the poll and encourages the horse to give in the jaw.**

1. Stand at the horse's cheek, facing it.
2. Place one hand on the cheek bone and the other hand on the opposite side of the muzzle.
3. Gently pulse with both hands to encourage the head toward the side of the hand that is on the cheek bone. The head only needs to move two to three inches.
4. Keep the horse's ears level.
5. Encourage the horse to remain in this position for 20 seconds.
6. Repeat on each side.

Every horse has a stiff side and a more supple side. Horses are naturally left- or right-handed. Most horses are stiff going to the left and are usually heavier in the left rein/lead line; these horses travel with a hollow right side. A handler can see this from the ground because when the horse travels to the left on the lunge, the head faces to the outside and the barrel is counter-bent on the circle (barrel is curved inwards toward the handler). This stiff, counter-bent way of moving is due to contracted muscles on the right side and overstretched muscles on the left side. By opening up the barrel and loin muscles, the horse becomes straighter and more symmetrical.

Back the Horse in a Circle

► **Purpose: Helps the horse free up its forehand by shifting the horse's longitudinal (back-to-front) balance and weight back; opens the shoulder and chest muscles**

1. Stand on one side of the horse's head facing the horse's shoulder.
2. Ask the horse to move backwards by gently putting pressure on the lead line.
3. To complete a backward circle, the front leg on the inside of the circle goes straight back while the front leg on the outside of the circle moves away from the inside (moves lateral).
4. To move the outside leg laterally, lightly shift the lead in the direction you want the leg to go.
5. As the horse shifts its weight backward and to the side, keep its head and neck level or lower with the withers.
6. If the horse lifts its head above the withers or drops the head to behind the vertical, there may be too much pressure on the lead.
7. If the horse will not back up with a light pressure on the lead, lightly touch the horse on the front legs with the flag.
8. To keep the horse relaxed and in a healthy position, do not jerk or swing the lead line to back up.
9. Repeat standing on each side of the horse.

Disengage the Haunches

PHOTOS
C, D, E

► **Purpose:** Stretches and increases suppleness in the loin and hip muscles; helps open up the rib and barrel muscles; helps the horse to find its lateral (side to side) balance by not allowing it to lean in on the inside shoulder

1. Stand alongside the horse's shoulder facing the haunches.
2. Lightly rest the tips of your fingers on the top of the noseband, but do not wrap your fingers around or hold onto the noseband as the horse can pull and hurt your shoulder. Try not to pull the head around toward you.
3. Encourage the horse (with the flag from behind) to go forward in a very small circle.
4. Encourage the horse's haunches to step sideways by approaching the haunches with energy or the flag.
5. The horse will cross the inside hind leg in front of the outside hind with the horse's outside hind leg moving forward at a 45-degree angle.
6. Aim for the horse to give in the poll and move with a relaxed topline.
7. Repeat on each side.

Shoulder-in on a Circle

► **Purpose:** Stretches and relaxes the shoulders; opens up the chest muscles

1. Lead the horse at the shoulder, walking on the outside of a 20-meter circle.
2. As the horse lifts the inside front leg off the ground, move into the horse's shoulder so the horse steps forward and laterally into the circle.
3. Over time, make the circle smaller.
4. Repeat both ways.

◀ **PHOTOS TOP TO BOTTOM:** (C) Disengage the Haunches Exercise. Notice the hind leg crossing and the bend in the whole body. The licking and chewing are a result of the horse relaxing. (D) Disengage the Haunches Exercise (as seen from the side). It is essential to keep the horse moving forward with no pivot on the inside front leg. (E) Disengage the Haunches Exercise (as seen from behind). Note that there is no pressure on the noseband as the hand just provides a pivot point. (F) Leg Yield Exercise. In the first step, the green wrapped diagonal legs step together. The hind leg is crossing while the front leg steps out to the side. (G) Leg Yield Exercise. In the second step, the white wrapped diagonal legs step together. The front leg is crossing while the hind leg steps out to the side.

Balance Exercises

For the horse to move freely, it must be in longitudinal and lateral balance. A horse naturally carries approximately 60 percent of its weight on its front legs and 40 percent on the back legs. This can lead to leg issues when a rider is placed on the horse's back. It is important to help the horse shift some of the weight to the hind end. Also, a horse that leans in on circles, losing lateral balance, may over time develop lameness issues.

Longitudinal Balance: Move the Horse Backward and Forward One Step

► **Purpose:** Develops longitudinal balance; encourages the horse to shift weight more onto the haunches

1. Stand on one side of the horse's head facing in the direction of the horse's backward movement.
2. Ask the horse to move one step back by gently putting pressure on the lead line.
3. Then gently encourage the horse forward one step—only one diagonal pair of feet should move.
4. If the horse lifts its head above the withers or drops the head to behind the vertical, there may be too much pressure on the lead.
5. If the horse will not back up with a light pressure on the lead, lightly touch the horse on the front legs with the flag.
6. Repeat on each side.

Lateral Balance: See Disengage the Haunches Exercise

Lateral Suppleness Exercises

Lateral movements happen when the horse moves forward and sideways simultaneously. Lateral exercises, such as leg yield, encourage the horse to stretch and bend on both sides of its body. This increase in flexibility leads to straightness in the horse.

Leg Yield

PHOTO
F & G

► **Purpose:** Develops suppleness and helps the horse become more responsive to the leg aid. As the diagonal pair of legs crossover, the chest and hip muscles open up.

1. Have the horse walking forward while you are facing its shoulder.
2. Put one hand on the noseband and with the other hold the flag toward the horse's hocks.
3. Ask the horse to move forward and to the side in a 45-degree angle.
4. Your energy (handler behind the eye) pushes the horse forward and sideways while your hand with the flag encourages the horse's hocks forward and sideways.

These are a few of the beginning groundwork exercises that have been included in the RPH Program. Equine groundwork can be very fulfilling and extremely beneficial for EAAT horses. With these exercises handlers can form a close, leading partnership with their horse. They can help the horse relax and find balance, throughness and suppleness; refine the horse's movements; and enhance their aids in a safe, slow-paced environment resulting in better communication. This groundwork builds a strong foundation that leads to better performance for both the horse and participant.

Karen Ososki is an international clinician who offers clinics, seminars and retreats and has been selected as one of the Top 50 Riding Instructors in America by the American Riding Instructor Association. She is the founder of Refined Performance Horsemanship, a training methodology designed to improve the performance and soundness of equine athletes and pleasure horses using a blend of mounted and unmounted instruction as well as groundwork. For more information, visit www.KarenOsoski.com or contact her at clinics@KarenOsoski.com.



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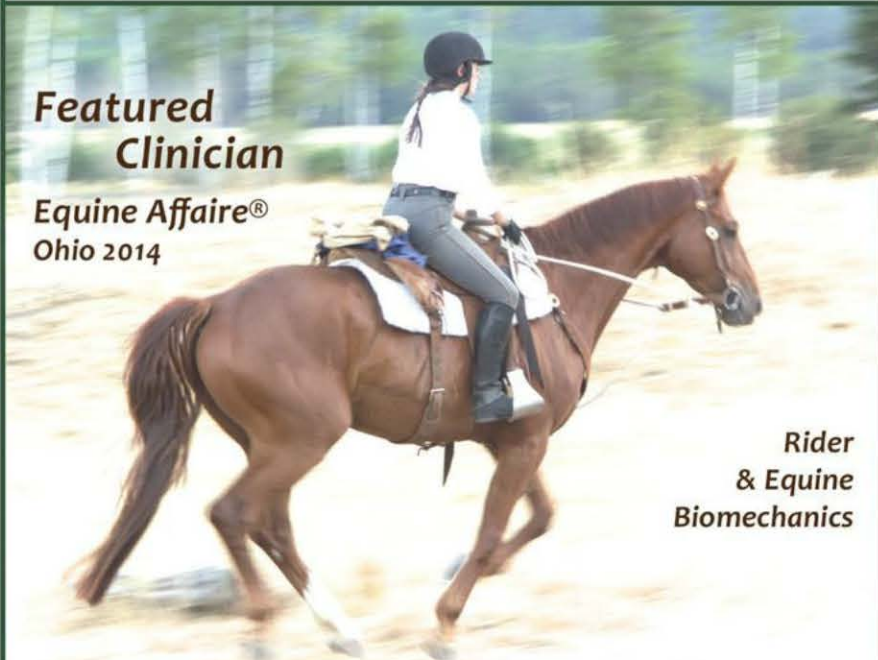
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