

Is your horse fit for the job?

by David Stubbs



Foto: Equerry

Good conformation is a key factor for performance horses as their careers could last for many years, not peaking until they approach their teens. There are many reasons why horses perform successfully and remain sound for years. Good conformation is very important, but other factors such as schooling, training and the ability of the rider and the stable manager must count. Sensible nutrition could also be a factor.

Poor conformation is not automatically a disaster. There are exceptions, such as horses that function perfectly adequately at the level expected of them. But these horses require expert and experienced stable management, and their working life is often limited. Many serious causes of lameness, such as navicular disease or suspensory ligament breakdown occur as a consequence of poor conformation.

Poor foot conformation will lead to altered weight bearing throughout the limb and will overload the joints and ligaments. In the short-term this may be of little consequence, but over the years could become chronic. Forced retirement could be the result, just when the horse has reached his peak. All this can be very expensive and distressing.

Most abnormalities are inherited, so it is vital that a horse used for breeding has as good a conformation as possible. This is especially true for stallions, which are likely to produce many more offspring than a single mare.

The conformation of the feet – especially the front feet – is of vital importance. The low heel and long toe (under-run heels syndrome) is the cause of much lameness. If horses do not have their feet trimmed regularly, or shod well, poor foot conformation can deteriorate rapidly. Once the foot becomes unbalanced, it leads to areas of overload. This not only causes pain, but will lead to degeneration of bones, cartilage, ligaments and tendons. In some cases there is no cure, as in navicular disease and pedal osteitis.

There are some conformational abnormalities that are not as serious: angular or incorrect line of the hock and fetlock, and slightly off-set limbs when seen from the front. A performance horse does not necessarily need to have “show ring”

conformation. Unlike racehorses, however, performance horses often peak in their teens and so conformational problems must be viewed less tolerantly.

A recent study published in a European veterinary magazine, and performed on 2000 Warmbloods that went through tests from four-years-old, demonstrated that horses with poor conformation scores had a significantly shorter working life.

So conformation is an extremely important factor for long-term performance. The ideal conformation for jumpers and dressage horses is very different to that for the racehorse. There is nothing to replace the attributes of years and years of experience and an instinct in choosing a horse, as well as continuous interest in conformation. A headline in an equestrian magazine caught my attention: “An unsound future for the Thoroughbred race horse”. Many of the problems are similar to those we experience with our own Warmblood industry.

Ian Balding, the famous farrier for the Queen, presented his evidence at the recent seminar for the ILPH. New veterinary technology has had a derogatory impact on the soundness of many horses racing (or performing) today, he concluded.

Corrective surgery in foals leading to horses that were inherently unsound going into training (competition) and being bred from, could be disastrous. Overfeeding to get quick growth (for sales) often causes problems at a later stage. He went on to say that many fashionably bred stallions that were not sound and had conformation defects, could be disastrous for the industry in the long run if they were bred from.

According to his statistics, in the 1960's and 70's, 95% of his going horses got to the racetrack. In contrast only about 80% made it during the 1980's. In the 90's this figure dropped to 65%! His reasons for this are as follows:

- Putting young horses into hard work too soon
- Racing young horses with poor conformation
- Surgery to correct limbs.

What I found most interesting was that Balding was critical of the methods used to get young horses fit in this day and age. In the old days, he



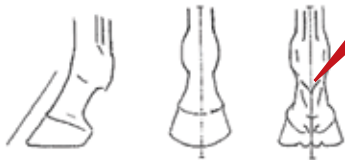
The British-bred Dutch Warmblood, Vainqueur, was the 2005 Supreme Champion at the Pretoria Show. This three-and-a-half-year old colt belongs to Sue Cullen from Bryanston, Johannesburg. Christopher Hammond is the handler
Foto: Equerry

Illustrations – soundness sketches



Limbs (fore)

- Straight – showing the correct plumbline as seen from the front
- Well-muscled long forearm with short cannon bone
- Flat, dry bone with a fluted appearance.



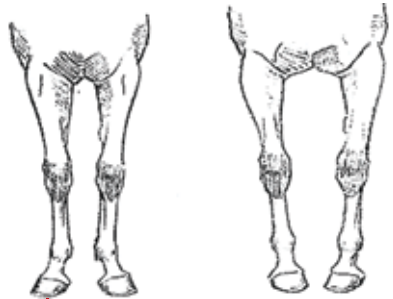
- Two identical feet, following a straight line to pastern as seen from the side, front and back.



Limbs (fore)

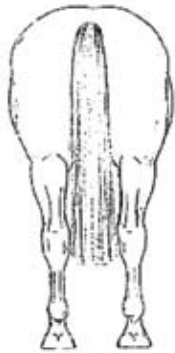
Faults:

- Long cannon bone, tied in below the knee, back at the knee, over at the knee.
- Boxy feet.
- Contracted heels, down at the heel.
- Pastern too long and sloping, pastern too short and upright.
- Soft bone, "apple" joints, poor quality of limb.
- Too narrow or base wide from the front.



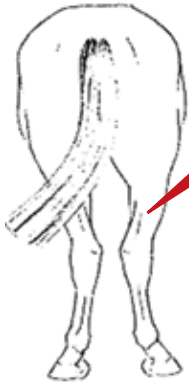
Splay feet

Pigeon toes



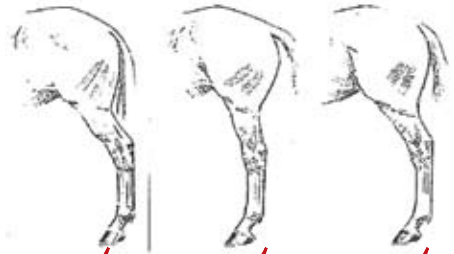
Limbs (hind)

- Straight – showing the correct plumline as seen from the back.
- Well-developed thigh and gaskin.
- Large, dry hocks free from curbs or spavins.
- Two identical feet. Low set hocks.



Faults:

Cow hocks – not too serious in the young horse

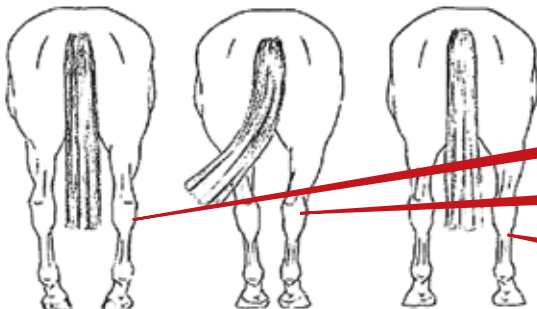


Sickle hocks

Excessively straight hocks

High hocks

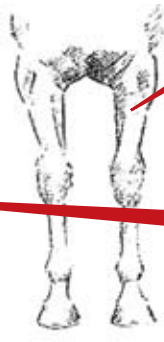
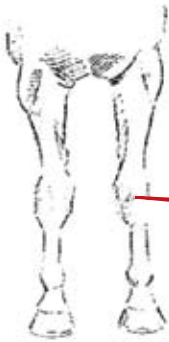
- Sickle hocks, hocks too far behind the horse, spavins or curbs.
- Too narrow from behind, base wide or bowed hocks.
- Hocks should not be too high (higher than the knee).



Bowed

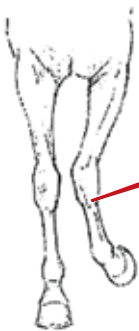
Too narrow

Base wide



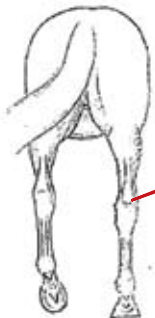
Short forearm

Benched knees



Dishing

Plaiting



Moving wide –
slightly bow-legged

Moving straight

said, his horses went out for a 10-mile road circuit (slow walking and trotting) on a hard, firm surface, before they did any fast work. These days this is not possible. After having a derby favourite hit by a car and killed, many trainers had to stop this form of exercise because of the increasingly busy roads.

The cost of labour is another factor against.

In the 50's and 60's, when I was involved in polo and showjumping, my horses went out for a 10 - 12 mile slow trot every day along the Sandown country roads. We had fewer problems with lame horses in those days ... SAH