



***Consistency is the best preventative medicine.***

*by Nan Meek*

Who better to ask for advice about dressage horse healthcare at shows than the veterinarian who helps the owners, riders and grooms of high performance equine athletes navigate the high-stakes health and performance labyrinth of international competition?

C. Mike Tomlinson, DVM, MBA, is known worldwide for his expertise as an FEI veterinarian. From the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles through last autumn's hurricane of a WEG, he's been involved at the highest level of equestrian sport. He's been Chef d'Equipe for the USET Endurance Team, USET Team Vet for numerous international competitions, and serves as a Course Director for the FEI (Federation Equestre Internationale) teaching veterinary courses for vets who serve as FEI officials.

Although unexpected events prevented me from attending the California Dressage Society's January symposium "For the Health of the Horse, For the Health of the Rider," where he was a panel speaker, I caught up with him by phone recently to get his perspective on competition dressage horse healthcare. His sound advice was given with kindness, compassion and humor as well as unmatched expertise.

"The CDS symposium audience was a very well-educated group, and they asked extremely

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good questions,” Dr. Tomlinson remarked. “They certainly were not ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. Many of them had different ways of looking at the answers. We couldn’t just say, ‘well this is the answer’. We had to say ‘well, you could do this, and this would be the pros and the cons, or you could do that and those would be the pros and the cons’.”

He gave one amusing exception, however. “One person asked about using a certain medication and I simply said, ‘That’s not allowed’. But the vast majority of questions were very complex and involved. That’s what you want at a symposium because it stimulates discussion.”

I asked him about the issues he sees in his travels to horse shows all over the world, and his answer provided an entirely new perspective.



“Keep in mind that my viewpoint is very skewed, in that I see the horses when they get to the show. So if they have a problem, I don’t see them.” Contrast the horses he sees with your own vet, who sees horses at home usually when they have problems. Two different circumstances, both of tremendous value.

### **Most Prevalent Problems**

When I asked him about the most prevalent problems that he sees and how they can be avoided, his answer was surprisingly simple and relevant to any rider, at any level of any discipline.

“The number one thing that I see that can be improved is that people try to change things when they go to a show. The most important thing is, whether it is at a show around the corner from your stable or at your stable or at the Olympics, do the same thing. It’s a show. Your horse does not know the difference. Don’t make it know the difference.”

He rated that number one because so many people get excited about going to a show and their excitement causes problems.

“It’s generally not the horse’s fault when accidents happen,” he said. “Horses do hurt themselves, but they generally hurt themselves because we give them the opportunity.

You don’t leave a baby in a room full of knives, and you shouldn’t leave a young horse in a stall with a sharp edge on it. If you’re bringing a horse that’s absolutely crazy and climbing the walls to a show, then make doubly certain that the walls are safe! I rarely find that it’s the horse’s fault. Generally, it’s bad luck. Having a horse stick his foot through a door that was perfectly good when you got there but somehow the accident happened – you know, there’s an awful lot of just bad luck.”

Of the problems that can be prevented, he emphasized that it’s almost always because somebody changed something.

“What I want to be sure everybody understands is that most of the things that happen are simply bad luck. But, of those that can be prevented, they are almost always to do with somebody changing something. People think, ‘Oh, I’m only going to change this’ and then oops, something happens. Horses like it exactly the same today as it was yesterday.”

He advised, “If you haven’t tried it at home, don’t try it here. So if you like a new feed, try it at home. If you have new cookies, try them at home. If you have a new pad, try it at home. If you have a beautiful new white show pad, try it the week before and make sure that your horse isn’t allergic to it. No matter what you’re going to do at the show, do it at home first.”

What about the things he sees people doing at a show that he wishes they wouldn’t do? His rueful laugh hinted at a world of examples.

“It really depends which level we’re talking about,” he replied. “At the very low levels, I see

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horses being transported in various conveyances that I wouldn't want to ride in, in ways that I wouldn't want to ride. On the other hand, I sometimes see horses dressed to the point where they can barely see their way out of what they're wearing. I see boots and two blankets and a hoodie and on and on so you can't even see the horse. Neither end is good, is it?"

He recommended that riders work with somebody who knows what they're doing and to learn how to trailer properly. "Trailer accidents, believe it or not, are one of the top problems," he revealed. "People arrive with a horse that's already hurt. You want to prevent that."

## **Boots Vs Wraps?**

What about the boots versus wraps question? "I encourage people to use the right accoutrements for what they are trying to achieve. The number one thing, as far as splint boots are concerned, is people need to understand that splint boots are not capable of holding up the horse. So, if you are trying to use them to support the horse, then don't do that. You cannot do that. If you are trying to prevent the left leg from striking the right leg, use a good boot for that. If you're thinking his ligaments are a little loose or the footing is a little deep, don't use a boot for that. You can't fix footing with boots. The number one problem with boots is that people are using really nice boots for the wrong reason.

"If the intent is to keep the white lower leg clean, there's nothing better than a wrap. If the intent is to keep the leg warm, there's nothing better than a wrap. If the intent is to keep the bump on the splint from being hit by the other leg, then you want a split boot, a hard one. A wrap won't do it."

If the use of wraps versus boots is so clear, I wondered why this is still such an issue. "In general, a wrap is more appropriate for most of the things people are trying to do. The issue is that some people do not take the time to put the wrap on properly and then they get into trouble. A properly done wrap tells me that you're a much better horse person than an improperly put on boot."

There's a fine skill, and a world of experience, in doing wraps well, however. "The best grooms in the world do it all day long – they are just amazing, they can get a wrap on faster than I can. I want to say that those who can do it, and do it well, I respect – big time. But those who do it

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wrong, I get to see them, because their horses are the ones that I get to treat because of a wrap problem. Even if I see a horse for a wrap problem once a year, that's far too often."

Last but not least, I asked about how well (or poorly) the rules and restrictions about what is permitted at shows are understood.

"I would say that it is a constant struggle to educate people. It is a very difficult thing to understand," he replied. "The thing is – if something won't help, why would you use it? That's the catch-22. If something will change things, then you're not allowed to use it at a show. If a horse needs to be medicated, then what's he doing showing? He should be recuperating."

Calming an excited horse and dealing with intermittent lameness are two situations that face many riders at shows from time to time. "Generally, what we see is they're trying to replace training with chemicals," he said of the horses whose excitement results from inadequate preparation.

For a horse that has intermittent lameness issues, he recalled, "I showed a horse for years that was just a little bit off now and then, so I understand. You get to a show sometimes and think, 'with 2 grams of Bute he'd be fine'. But you know, I don't want to do that. It's very difficult to walk the fine line between what is appropriate and what isn't. So I totally understand when someone says 'Look, he was fine yesterday and he'll be fine tomorrow – can't I just give him a little something today?' Those are the toughies. When they're very lame or they have a cut or something, or some really good reason why they shouldn't be there, those are the horses that are so much easier just for me to say 'no'."

To sum up, Dr. Tomlinson's sound advice: If you have a sound horse going to a show, and the horse is perfectly fine when it arrives, change as little as possible.

*A lifelong horse owner, Nan Meek lives on the scenic San Mateo County coast where dressage courts and riding trails overlook the Pacific Ocean. She competed in dressage to the Prix St. Georges level with her late beloved Lipizzan Andy (Maestoso II Athena II-1), and now practices the discipline of dressage with her handsome Spanish warmblood Helio Jerez 2000 and dotes on the newest family member Mischa (Neapolitano Angelica II-1). Yes, dressage is embedded in her DNA.*