

May 2016 - My Thoroughbred Makeover: Frustrating Month

Written by Emily Flaxman
Saturday, 30 April 2016 19:24

Rain, hoof hold-ups and a fixed end-goal date create challenges.

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It's not been a good month. We have a saying in England, "March - in like a lion, out like a lamb." And boy, didn't it just do that.

Starting with 10 solid days of heavy rain, everything got saturated and incredibly muddy. The horses' hooves never got a chance to fully dry out and I ended up with four of mine suffering abscesses.



Poor Merlin seemed to have the worst one and he was feeling very sorry for himself despite a hearty dose of bute. It finally burst last week and I can understand his discomfort - the entire left half of his sole is under-run. Which is kind of like the hoof equivalent of a blister, the sole you can see on the bottom of his hoof has a layer of pus and gunk between it and the new healthy sole growing in underneath.

Now that the pressure has been released, he is sound again, although he's living in hoof boots to protect the drainage hole and keep everything a little cleaner.

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I finally got back in his saddle and we've been out for trail rides on Mt Diablo. He's turning into a real trail professional. Nothing bothers him and he really seems to enjoy the sights, however he needs to learn to stay on the marked trails and not wander off!

Despite the easy workload and having hay in front of him 24/7, he hasn't been gaining weight. He would often start hay or grain and then seem to grow disinterested. He was also still sporting that tucked-up look in his flank area.

I'd wormed him when he first arrived, and given his teeth a quick look to make sure there were no obvious sharp edges. Given that 97 percent of racehorses show stomach ulcers when scoped, I figured that he was a very obvious candidate, especially adding in his above symptoms.

Sadly, I'm not in a financial position to have him scoped and then follow the very expensive treatment protocol recommended because that can run into the thousands of dollars. So I went with the generic drug, Ranitidine, rather than a name brand. He has been on that for 10 days now and I feel like I'm seeing an improvement. He has let down in the belly area, his appetite has increased and under saddle he is much more willing to be forward. Before I was kicking almost every stride.

He will stay on a full dose of 3000mg per day for a little while longer. Then to avoid acid rebound (where the body goes into overdrive to make up for not producing normal amounts for a time) I'll start to decrease the dose gradually making sure he maintains his appetite and attitude.

What also helps is to make sure the horse has access to forage for as much time as possible, either by free choice feeding or putting their normal ration in a slow feeder. Horses constantly produce stomach acid, so if their stomach is empty for a few hours the acid will start to eat away at the lining, which causes the ulcers. Alfalfa is also great to feed ulcer-prone horses as it has a low pH level. Plus, it's good for weight gain, which should help

Merlin gain a bit of a show "bloom."

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There isn't much progress to report on Louie. His rain rot is finally gone and he's now bald in patches but the spring coat is growing through so hopefully he should look normal again soon.

The boys are both out with the main herd now to encourage them to move around more. Louie's feet are still not strong enough for me to consider riding him, but he is starting to land heel first when he is wandering around the pasture, so I am hoping to start some light lunging work in the next week or so.

Crisis of Confidence

I've had more than a few crisis of confidence this month with Louie. Shoes weakened his hooves to the point that even they weren't making him comfortable, and barefoot he is too sore to justify leaving him naked. I'm so grateful a friend had some tiny hoof boots to lend me as they are the key to making him happy enough to start walking normally, which is what he needs in order to start building up his internal structures.

You can see a new hoof growing down at the top and once that reaches the ground I think he'll be a totally different horse.

I'm feeling incredibly behind on my progress compared to other competitors I'm seeing on social media posting about their project horses. When you have an end goal in sight, it's very hard not to work backwards and feel the pressure to achieve certain goals every month. But as we all know, when you start to do that with horses, things inevitably go south quickly. There is a saying in classical horsemanship – "the longest way is often the quickest."

At the event I have to compete in Training Level test 2. The stated purpose of that test is "To confirm that the horse demonstrates correct basics, is supple and moves freely forward in a clear rhythm with a steady tempo, accepting contact with the bit." Sounds easy, right? A good training level test should look simple, boring even. The horse's frame shouldn't change between movements or gaits, the circles should flow and the straight lines should be, well, straight. Harder to do than you would think on an OTTB!

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Transitions don't have to be on the marker at this level, which allows the rider to set the horse up and find the perfect moment without losing valuable marks. The coefficients (movements you get double marks for) are for the canter circles and the medium walk, so it pays to make sure these are solid when you train them. The coefficients are often placed on movements the judges think are important to focus on at a certain level to enable a smooth progression to the next, so be aware of them. Walk carries a double mark at every level up to Grand Prix, so never think that it's not important. Really make your horse stride out and use his neck and topline!

I think the organizers got it totally right choosing this test. It has enough difficulty to prove that the horse has been restarted correctly but not too much that it would force trainers to push harder than a lot of the horses would be capable of. It should give all of the horses competing in the dressage section a good strong foundation to be able to move into any career, or even to climb the dressage ladder.



Columnist Emily Flaxman uses dressage as a foundation for training OTTBs and other breeds from her base in the East Bay Area's Clayton. She trained Go Wheeler Go to top finishes in her first Thoroughbred Makeover last year (California Riding Magazine, January 2016). Emily is detailing her preparation for this year's Thoroughbred Makeover, in late October in Kentucky, in our pages. To learn more about Emily, visit www.emilyflaxman.com. For more on the Thoroughbred Makeover, visit www.retiredracehorseproject.com