STOP!
Don't Shoot

by Angela Walsh BVMS MRCVS

Fractures in horses are often treatable these days

Historically a horse with a fracture was without question humanely destroyed. However with advances in veterinary medicine many fractures can now be repaired.

Fractures occur commonly in horses for many reasons; they are large and heavy yet have relatively spindly limbs but we expect them to perform at speed; a galloping race horse exerts 7 tonnes of weight through a single limb. They also have a habit of kicking one another and won’t rest a limb for the 8 weeks it takes for fracture healing to occur.

The type of fracture and how it is treated immediately after the fracture occurring will determine whether ultimately the fracture will lead to that horse’s demise.

**FRACTURES OF THE LARGER LONG BONES**...these have a worse prognosis. By long bone we mean for example a fractured tibia or radius. These fractures are difficult to treat and mostly require the animal to be immediately destroyed. For humane reasons it would be very cruel to transport an animal in this condition, as nothing you could do would immobilise the limb for the journey. Having said that, there are cases of expensive breeding stallions having the lower limb amputated and a prosthesis fitted going on to work for another 2 seasons. These cases though, are unusual, and one has to wonder if it is fair to the horse.

**FRACTURED PELVIS:** these often occur in racehorses in training and are regarded as ‘stress’ fractures, i.e., they have been building up for months and one day just literally crack. They can also occur in other accidents such as bad falls. These on the whole are treatable with box rest. The horse presents with a sudden onset severe hind limb lameness with no visible damage externally. Vets often do a rectal examination to palpate the internal anatomy of the pelvis to detect instability in its structure indicating a fracture.

**FRACTURED PEDAL BONE:** this is a fracture of the main bone in the foot often caused by kicking out at a wall or galloping over uneven ground. In the forelimb these carry a worse prognosis and often have to be operated on to insert a screw to stabilise the fracture fragments. Those in the hind foot can often only require box rest for a full recovery with the aid of a hoof cast or bar shoe. Any fracture involving the coffin joint would require surgery and can result in arthritis.

A catastrophic fracture of the cannon bone which caused this particular racehorse to be immediately euthanised. The horse was presented as a cellulitis with severe swelling and lameness.

This fracture of the pedal bone was on a hind leg and healed without surgery, unusually, since it involved a joint.
FRACTURED PASTERN or FETLOCK. These injuries again are often related to the ‘stress’ of repeated training. Fractures of the long or short pastern bones and of the sesamoids (back of the fetlock) or ‘condyles’ (knuckles at the bottom) of the fetlock can be fixed now surgically.

It is really important that these limbs are immobilised completely prior to travelling to the clinic with a bandage or cast by a vet and special care is taken when knocking them out and recovering them.

At our clinic we use a rope assisted recovery system to cut down on the chances of horses re fracturing the leg upon recovery which is common…..when the horse comes round it is disorientated and one leg is often in a cast, therefore it can stagger around and fall awkwardly again. This horse had a fractured fetlock which had a a screw inserted earlier in the year at our clinic and is now back in full training.

CHIP FRACTURES: these can occur within joints and can be removed arthroscopically, this occurs commonly in the knees of racehorses. Small fractures can occur after a kick to one of the long bones ,ie cannon bone. Pictured right is an xray of a horse who was kicked and subsequently went very lame. There was a small piece of bone (sequestrae) isolated from the parent bone and separated from its blood supply lying under the skin, and in effect, rotting. This was removed with the horse heavily sedated and standing in stocks. The horse is now about to go into training.

COMPOUND FRACTURES ie those which are open to the air often with sharp bits of bone sticking out have a very poor prognosis due to the fact they often occur in the larger long bones anyway but also due to the risk of infection. However they can now sometimes be treated with surgery and aggressive antibiotic therapy.

Lastly there are a whole category of other fractures which can heal with time, such as fractures to the head, ribs and even tail. Rest must only be done under strict veterinary supervision to ensure all is going well, shockwave therapy can help with stress fracture healing.

COMPLICATIONS
The downside of treating fractures in horses. There is a high risk of laminitis in horses who have one limb surgically ‘fixed’ as the extra weight on the opposite limb combined with any stress that horse may be under can cause laminitis, secondly the cost can be prohibitive unless the horse is insured.

On a positive note many more horses are going on to lead a useful life or even in the case of the horses above going back onto the racetrack which might once have been euthanised , advances in medical science are being made all the time and in the future more and more fractures will be treatable.

For more information please contact your vet or visit our website www.cornerhousevets.com

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