

CONFORMATION AND SOUNDNESS IN HORSES

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The structural development of the limbs, size and body proportions that make up an individual horse's **conformation** can influence its balance and movement during exercise. The strength of its limbs and conformation in turn, can influence its overall **soundness** and ability to perform in competition.

Conformation and **soundness** are interrelated in determining the movement, performance and overall quality of a horse during its competitive lifetime.

Soundness can be classified in a number of ways relative to the horse's freedom from lameness, but it can also relate to the horse's suitability for a particular purpose, such as eventing, jumping, polocrosse, hack and dressage competition, which can include other measures of soundness for the purpose, such as boldness, temperament and flow of the stride.

Soundness can also be influenced by factors such as the type of working surface, shoeing, dietary balance, body weight and the exercise program, especially as a horse ages. Accidental injuries such as lower limb lacerations, excessive bone modelling responses and abnormal growth and balance in the hooves can all influence the relative soundness for the purpose. A horse with a minor joint or tendon injury, for example, may not be suitable for upper level equestrian sports, but its soundness as a hack will not be compromised. As horses age, natural 'wear and tear' and other degenerative changes, that are not always related or influenced by conformation, can occur and restrict its suitability for long term training and competition. It is always important to select a horse that is sound and strong if you plan to compete over a few years, rather than try to rehabilitate a horse from the race track which has broken down due to tendon and joint problems and carries the legacy of unsoundness into retirement and equestrian competition.

Splints

Ideally, splints should be appraised on an individual basis, taking into account the location, size and interference with movement, and the overall conformation of the front legs. Most splints in the lower or mid cannon area are 'accidental', resulting from knocks or bumps of everyday life as a horse.

However, in contrast, the majority of splints located on the inside of the upper cannon area which appear to blend into the knee outline, are caused by underlying conformational faults. These include the degree of offset in the cannon bones, the bulk of the shoulders and neck, and the amount of hard work the animal was given in its younger days.

Therefore, lower splints on the canon can be considered a minor 'blemish', but high splints in the knee region, or those found close to tendons, should be appraised in relation to limb conformation and risk of interfering with tendon or knee joint soundness.