

TAKING A HORSE TO WATER

Tomm Dowling discovers the miracle of hydrotherapy

RED RUM started it all. At least, for most of us of a certain age, television pictures of the legendary racehorse being exercised on the beach at Southport was our first exposure to the benefits of hydrotherapy.

Rummy's trainer Ginger McCain claims to this day that were it not for the benefits enjoyed by his pride and joy at the seaside, the triple Aintree Grand National winner would never have raced at all, let alone carved a unique place in racing history.

Red Rum was plagued by a potentially crippling foot disease but McCain discovered that his own peculiar brand of beach therapy was bringing about spectacular results.

Things have moved on since then and the equine spa business is now booming, making trips to the beach no longer necessary!

More than half of a horse's total body weight is muscle and muscle problems in horses are a constant source of frustration to owners and trainers. An increasing number of professionals have turned to equine spas to treat leg injuries and the popularity of these revolutionary machines is phenomenal.

Based in Maddenstown on the Curragh, Hettie Rowcliffe entered the business earlier this year. "I used to ride out for different racing yards and came across equine spas on my travels. A friend of ours has some horses and he sent them down to the spa in Holycross. We just saw great results from that and decided this would be a good

business to go into really. So we started up around last March."

Many benefits

According to Hettie, the benefits are many. She says the treatment works wonders for tendon and leg injuries, bone damage, sore shins, joint condition, fractures and splints, jarred-up horses, concussion, laceration and infection of lower limbs, post op complications, healing wounds, increased hoof growth and soft tissue damage.

"If we have one with tendon or ligament damage, we would usually have the horse in here for about four to six weeks, staying with us for livery and treatment.

"The actual treatment involves the horse going into the spa every day, once a day. It

only takes about half an hour at a time. We walk him into the unit and bring the water up to just over the level of the knee and then turn the blowers on him. After a while we lower the water level and the horse comes out."

The unit Hettie uses is an Australian one and she favours this model over the UK version. "Ours is quite different to those manufactured in Britain. For one thing it actually looks different and the tank is attached to the side. Ours fills up and empties quicker than the English spas so the entire process only takes about half an hour from the moment a horse walks in until the time it walks out again. The water temperature is set at two degrees Celsius."

She continued: "The treatment does many different things and I still find it amazing. In my experience it's great for cuts and heals them up very well because of all the salt that's in the water. Red Rum loved the sea water but we use an even higher concentrate of salt in the water and that really works wonders."

Ordinary cold water hosing cools the surface of the skin but because the temperature is uncontrolled it is just not cold enough to help those areas most often affected by injury. Cold hydrotherapy however, never overrides the beneficial effects of the healing process.

The last quarter of a century has seen major leaps forward in the design of equine spas. Throughout the 1990s a large volume of evidence was gathered on the excellent results

achieved in treating leg injuries this way. Studies showed conclusively that hoof growth was stimulated, laminitis responded well, as did tendon difficulties and so on.

Cools

"It cools down the affected areas and settles the animal," explained Hettie.

"It is very good for sore shins and splints, a common problem. It is great for a horse that you are trying to get a run into.

"You could bring him here for a few days before he is due

to race. I also find that it is wonderful for joint conditions; it keeps inflammation out of the joints and tightens up everything in them.

"Many of the horses that come here return to their yards sound and that can be a very satisfying experience. I have seen some with great big holes in a tendon but by the time we send them on their way the hole is gone!

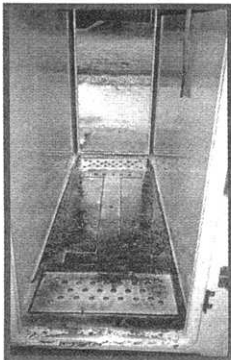
"We walk them every day as well so the treatment lines all the tissue as well and makes it stronger. Then, when people take the animal home they just keep walking with them and the

problem is solved."

When equine spas first started to emerge, the veterinary profession was not easily convinced. But following trials, hydrotherapy now has almost universal acceptance.

Few vets would dispute the claim that equine spas achieve fast, long-term healing through the combination of cold water, aeration, salt and different depth options.

Clinical trials have demonstrated that these elements together produce an unusually high level of oxygen in the water which is a big help towards healing.



• Walk in, walk out - there's no danger to a horse's safety



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