

# Overuses of Equine Acupuncture

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Our philosophy in equine bodywork is that we must get the horse out of pain, so that the body can heal. In our experience as Equine Performance Consultants, we see that acupuncture and especially electro-acupuncture are highly effective ways to get horses out of pain.

Unfortunately, many owners and practitioners are relying upon acupuncture as a way to get by with ill-fitting equipment and poor training methods. Here are two cases that demonstrate this point.

**Case #1** The first case was a barrel racing horse. The mare presented to us with all over muscular soreness, muscular atrophy of the neck, withers and back and a bad attitude. The owner informed us that the mare was racing almost every weekend and was often a winner. We questioned the owner and found that she had been competing the horse in a treeless saddle for over 3 years. The owner was not doing any cross training with the horse and was relying upon the weekend races to keep the horse fit. During this time, the mare received chiropractic, acupuncture and homeopathy every month.

**Case #2** We were asked to do a pre-purchase evaluation on a dressage horse and its saddle. The horse was performing at the Prix St. Georges level and according to the seller just didn't have what it takes to make it to the Grand Prix level. One look at the saddle prepared me for what I would find on the horse's body. The saddle had a point billet and the gullet was too narrow under the rider's seat. Looking at the horse, there was atrophy at the withers and all along the thoracic and lumbar back. We expected to find muscular pain in these regions. Surprisingly, the horse did not show any pain reaction when we palpated the back. Our acupoint evaluation did show that the horse had bilateral hip joint pain. In speaking with the owner, we found that she had owned and trained the horse for 6 years. When I asked if the horse had ever received any acupuncture, the answer was yes, every 2 months for the past 6 years. And the latest treatment was 2 days ago. Mystery Solved. End of evaluation. The horse was not demonstrating any back pain because of the pain relief provided by the acupuncture treatments. With acupuncture every 2 months for 6 years, the horse was able to attain the level of Prix St. Georges, despite the restriction of an ill-fitting saddle. It makes you wonder that if the horse had a properly fitting saddle, could he have made it to the Grand Prix level.

Some lessons for us all: Use acupuncture to help your horse when it has a problem. But don't rely on it continuously. If a horse needs acupuncture on a long term basis in order to perform, there is something wrong with the training program and/or tack or the horse. If you are considering purchasing a horse, make sure that it has not received any acupuncture within 1 month of your pre-purchase rides and evaluation.