

HYDROTHERAPY

Options

Water helps condition and heal bodies. What can it do for your cutting horse?

by Michelle Anderson



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Applying cold water with a hose is the simplest form of hydrotherapy available. Today, there are many more options.

Water is an essential element of life found in every cell of every body, even our horses. So, it's no surprise that water offers healing properties beyond a simple sip from the trough.

For generations, owners, trainers and managers have used water to heal, maintain, cleanse and comfort our horses. From soaking feet in buckets of simple Epsom salt solutions to draw out hoof abscesses to flushing a wound or cold hosing a hot leg, horses have always and obviously benefited from various forms of hydro (water) therapy.

Now, we have even more options. Advances in veterinary medicine and equine rehabilitation have led to innovations to heal and condition our horses while saving time for those of us who usually hold those hoses. Here are some hydrotherapy options worth looking into for your high-end performance horses.

THE BASICS: Icing, soaking and cold hosing

If you've had horses for any amount of the time, you've probably run a cold hose on a leg or applied ice (cryotherapy) to an injured leg or post workout. The cold helps reduce swelling in soft tissue, decreases heat, relieves pain and promotes healing. This therapy is often prescribed for bowed tendons, suspensory ligament injuries and lacerations.

From the standpoint of simplicity and availability, soaking with a hose is a good choice. Every barn has a hose and a water hydrant. If you've planned ahead, you probably have some ice packs in the freezer and standing wraps in your tack trunk.

However, hosing is time consuming, with most lower-limb injuries requiring 15 to 20 minutes of cold hosing at least twice a day. And, ice packs don't always stay put or make contact with the injured area. How many times have you seen an ice pack fly across a stall? Plus, a horse's body heat can warm an ice pack in minutes, making treatment nearly useless.

Fortunately, creative individuals and companies have come up with ways to save you time and effort when treating or preventing injury.

Hosenomore. Hosenomore is an innovative unit that straps around the horse's legs, above the knee and hock joints. Hooked to a regular garden hose, water runs through tubes and trickles down the legs. You can treat just one leg or more at one time, all without holding the hose. A British company designed this timesaving product, which is not currently available in the United States. You can, however, order Hosenomore direct from Britain. The unit will cost you about \$150US, plus shipping. Visit www.hosenomore.com for more information.

Ice boots. To be precise, icing falls under the category of cryotherapy. However, anyone one who's used ice on horses knows it quickly melts to water! In general, ice is used as an alternative to holding a hose. Several companies make ice boots designed specifically for horses. Most are filled with a gel that, when frozen, stays colder longer than ice. Others are pouches that hold separate ice or gel packs. The boots are secured with Velcro and form around the leg or joint for treatment.

Whirlpool boots. These boots look like fishing waders for horses. Put your horse's leg in one (or more) and fill with water alone, or a mixture of water and ice. The compressor aerates the water, creating a Jacuzzi-like action around the leg. Whirlpool boots help reduce heat and inflammation and are soothing to the horse, says Megan Van Coutren, manager of Circle Oak Ranch, a rehab and retirement center in Petaluma, California. "It's especially good for treating laminitis," she adds.



Whirlpool boots swirl aerated water around the leg, similar to a Jacuzzi for horses.

The popular Jack's Whirlpool Boots cost around \$450 and are available through equine veterinary supplies catalogs.

Game Ready. This unit combines compression with cold therapy to reduce inflammation and promote healing. A popular choice for horses, Game Ready is also used in human therapy, especially for athletes.

With Game Ready, water does not actually come in contact with the body. Instead, the main unit is filled with ice and water, and the treatment



Game Ready machines are popular with both human and equine athletes. They offer compression as well as cold water therapy to help horses heal.

area is enclosed in a special wrap. The wrap then compresses and releases in set increments as cold air and fluid move through the boot. Several wrap options are available, including hocks, lower leg, full leg and back wraps.

Equine Game Ready kits start at around \$3,200. Additional wraps cost extra. For more information, visit www.gamereadyequine.com.

Mini-spa. If you can't afford an equine spa (more on those in bit), don't have access to one, or need something you can take with you, you can get a portable unit instead. Therapeutic Advantage produces an Equine Mini-Spa. Like the whirlpool boots, this unit has a vessel that treats individual legs. However, unlike the whirlpool boots, the Equine Mini-Spa has a filtration system and cooling unit, keeping the water continually cold. The Mini-Spa also allows for the added benefit of saltwater treatment.

BEYOND THE BASICS: Swimming and submersion

Several hydrotherapy options exist for more sophisticated injuries or sports conditioning, including swimming pools, underwater treadmills, and cold water/saltwater equine spas. While installing your own pool or unit might prove cost prohibitive, more and more private rehabilitation, veterinary and training facilities are offering hydrotherapy sessions at a per-use price.

Pools. Swimming pools are used to treat and rehab non-weight-bearing injuries and ailments (think laminitis

treatment or prevention), as well as to improve conditioning and lung capacity. (In equine surgical facilities, pools are also used for post-anesthesia recovery to protect the horse from injuring itself).

Equine exercise pools are generally set up as a circular or continuous channel. Before entering the pool, the horse is rinsed to prevent debris from contaminating the water. The horse enters the pool via a ramp, with an experienced attendant on each side holding ropes attached to the halter. The attendants are trained to recognize stress in the swimming horse.

While in the pool, the horse is completely submerged, causing it to swim to stay afloat. The horse can then exercise its body and mind without stressing its limbs, hooves and joints.

"Swimming has its role in rehabilitation," says Melissa Neal, of Cold River Equine Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation center in Cresson, Texas. But, Neal notes, swimming doesn't mimic the horse's anatomical position on land, nor does it promote an increase in bone density or tendon and ligament strength. It also tends to hyperextend the horse's neck as its hindquarters sink below the waterline.



After swimming, the horse is rinsed again and conditioner is added to the mane, tail and coat to protect it from chlorine damage.

Swim sessions at rehab and conditioning centers run about \$25 a session.

Underwater treadmill. Underwater treadmills are becoming increasingly popular, with several brands available on the market. These units have a moving treadmill belt. The horse enters the treadmill chute, and water, around 78 to 84 degrees, fills the unit just past the horse's belly, allowing the hooves to stay in contact with the belt. The motorized belt then moves, just like a regular treadmill, causing the horse to use its natural gaits.

"[Underwater treadmills] offer unlimited benefits," says Neal, who runs an Aquatred at Cold River.

First, the pressure of the water reduces swelling and increases vascular circulation as the horse exercises. The water displaces 40 to 60 percent of the horse's body weight, reducing concussion on the bones, ligaments, tendons and joints. Lastly, the natural motion of the horse helps prevent scar tissue, while the buoyancy limits impact on the body.

The resistance of the water also helps build a horse's stamina, making it an ideal tool for regular conditioning as well as recovery. We could experience a similar sensation by taking a water aerobics class. And since horses can't tell us when they have reached their limit, a heart-rate monitor is used to make sure the horse is getting maximum benefit without being overstressed or overtaxed.

"It doesn't substitute for cow work," says Ron Malone, who, along with his wife Sara, operates a Hydrohorse unit at their Circle Oak Ranch. "But, if you work cows two or three days a week and use the treadmill the other two or three days a week, you can keep a horse's mind and body in shape with minimal stress on the joints, muscles, tendons and ligaments."

The same goes for horses recovering from an injury, adds Neal. "The most awesome thing is the change in a horse's mental state, especially coming off of stall rest," she says. "Bring them into the Aquatred refreshes the horse's mind."

Getting a horse used to an underwater treadmill takes some training, but most seem to enjoy the work. "We have a mare who gets in there, puts her ears up and plays with the water," Ron says.

At Circle Oak, cutting horses come in for downtime from training, but work on the underwater treadmill to stay in shape. "They leave mentally relaxed and fit or fitter than when they got here," Ron adds.

Did you know legendary sire High Brow Cat enjoys his underwater treadmill sessions at DLR Ranch? Watch and listen to how the Aquatred fits into DLR Ranch's stallion management program at www.nchavideos.com.



Similar to swimming sessions, horses are bathed before and after working in the treadmill. Their coats, manes and tails are treated with conditioner to protect them from the chlorine. At Circle Oak, the horses also stand under infrared heaters to dry.

Underwater treadmills require regular maintenance, including draining, cleaning, changing filters and managing Ph levels. The benefits, however, outweigh the effort, says Van Coutren, who attends all underwater treadmill sessions at Circle Oak Ranch.

Price for underwater treadmills vary, but building a facility to house one and installation of the unit can easily run around \$250,000. Individual sessions at private facilities can cost anywhere from \$30-50 and last 10-15 minutes. At Circle Oak, a \$50 fee includes four trained attendants to keep the horse safe.

Equine spas. Imagine submersing your horse's aching joints and swollen soft tissue into a swirling vat of ice water. No standing for hours on end holding a hose or watching water waste down the drain as your horse dances a jig around you.

A horse spa—and there are several brands on the market—is basically a chamber in which the horse is loaded. The doors are then shut, and the tank fills with water or salt water just above freezing to cover the legs. The salt helps keep the water cold, draws out fluid and offers natural antibiotic and antimicrobial action. Because of the cold, water in the spa never covers the horse's major muscle groups. Jets aerate the water. Oxygen in the water promotes healing on the cellular level, while the massaging action moves built up fluid.

Center Ranch, a cutting facility in Centerville, Texas, uses an equine spa to maintain the health of horses in training and competition.

"The water basically acts as a brace before or after a workout," says Donna Marki, who manufactures and dis-



Courtesy Donna Marki

A horse relaxes during a spa treatment. Most horses find hydrotherapy to be an enjoyable experience, whether it is in a spa, swimming pool or an underwater treadmill.

tributes the Therapeutic Advantage Equine Spa line in the United States. Marki got involved with equine spas four years ago after her international jumper suffered a suspensory injury.

According to Marki, there are three ways to use an equine spa:

- For rehab and recovery of injury, including tendonitis, abrasions, lacerations and laminitis. The salt water, cold and aeration draw out inflammation help promote healing.
- To prep a horse before competition or training. The low-temperature water can help prevent injury and acts as an analgesic to treat any chronic pain.
- After a workout to reduce heat and swelling caused by concussion and impaction.

A full-body equine spa costs around \$80,000 and includes onsite personnel training. Individual sessions run \$45 to \$95.

Your cutting horse is an athlete, and athletes deserve the best sport medicine treatments available to optimize their performance. No matter your budget, there's hydrotherapy that you can use. ★



NCHA Photo by Stacy Pigott

A cutting horse enjoys a spa treatment at Bar H Ranche in Weatherford, Texas.