

## Behavioral Overcompensation:

### *The Greatest Hurdle for Efficiency-Of-Motion...*

By:

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Like its cousins running free in the wild, the horse was born to run – swift and magnificent. But one of the greatest obstacles preventing it from becoming a successful equine athlete is Behavioral Overcompensation.

What is Behavioral Overcompensation?

It is when the equine athlete alters its natural running style, due to a physical or an emotionally-perceived restriction, resulting in a loss of the athlete's efficiency of motion.

What causes Behavioral Overcompensation?

Footing surface and condition, blinkers, shadow rolls and even the tack a horse wears are a few examples of physical restrictions that can cause the horse to alter its natural running style. Emotional restrictions can stem from experiences on the racetrack such as when the horse has been banged and jostled about resulting in cautious or timid behavior.

The horse has to feel comfortable and have confidence in order to perform at peak levels. Even being asked to run in a race can sometimes cause Behavioral Overcompensation. The late world-renowned breeder and trainer Federico Tesio, in his book *Breeding the Racehorse*, gives a good example of this when he tells the story of a horse entered in the starting gate but when the gate was opened the horse refused to run.

Anything, physical or emotional, real or anticipated, that restricts freedom of movement can result in Behavioral Overcompensation and it is the toughest challenge for domesticated horses to overcome.

*The most important factor for the equine athlete is to perform with peak efficiency of motion. If your horse does not transition well, or swiftly, he/she is not being efficient, and you are not getting the most from their ability.*

Emotional Conformation can help you identify those areas where your horse may feel restricted and inclined to alter its natural running style.

### Behavior Overcompensation and Speed

There is a steep set of basement steps in my older home, yet I can swiftly traverse them without any fear of falling when all of my senses – vision, touch and hearing – allow me to safely navigate the stairway. However, on laundry day I cautiously walk down the stairs because my vision is obstructed by the basket full of clothes I'm carrying. I still make it safely down the steps but I have to overcompensate for the lack of vision by using my feet to help guide me to the bottom of the stairs. I complete the same distance from the top of the stairs to the washing machine, however, I do so in a slower *time in motion*.

### Behavior Overcompensation and Pace

When protracted *time in motion* is combined with speed, the efficiency with which a given distance is covered is ultimately controlled by focus ability; concentration. If you think of it like a relay race where a baton is passed from hand to hand, the first leg of the race will always be started by reaction and speed. Yet as the *time in motion* protracts and the burst of physical energy is waning, a different strategy is employed to maintain motion – the baton is handed over from speed to the hand of pace. Focus thus becomes the determining factor of the efficiency with which physical distance is covered. This means that during a race you can have two horses, side-by-side, covering the same distance of ground, each with exactly equal physical ability, but the two horses can have different time in motion. The determining factor between them, if indeed each horse is physically equal, is thus their individual ability to manage the time they are in motion. Over distance horses are less reliant on pure speed and more reliant on focus ability which determines pace. Mental training, mental nurturing and training forward the focus ability is the key to efficient motion.

### The Herd Dynamics of Focus and Concentration

The efficient transition from speed to pace is obviously different from individual to individual. The equine athlete's Individual Herd Dynamic determines this and can be found in investigating the Emotional Conformation of the horse. An evaluation of this determines the P-Type (*Personality Propensity Typing*) which is a system developed by the **Thomas Herding Technique** to indicate the horse's individual herd dynamic and range.

Once we determine the horse's naturally occurring focus agility we also get a gauge on its distance aptitude. The goal is not to change the natural equine athlete but to find ways to make it more efficient. Training for physical speed, getting the horse physically fit to cover a distance of ground is obviously necessary; covering that distance efficiently and with pace means negotiating the *time in motion*.

The ability to stay focused while moving determines the time at which the distance will be covered.

A good experiment to measure focus agility and how it affects *time in motion* is to go to a track where you exercise by walking laps and time how long it takes to walk a lap with a stop watch. You can easily see how concentration determines how *time in motion* and distance are anything but the same. The first lap you make an effort to concentrate on your motion. Smooth and relaxed you go; never losing focus you cross the line and hit your stop watch. The next day you repeat the exercise but you are not so focused because there are other people walking or running laps, your mind wanders a bit because of emotional distraction. Even though you are the same *athlete* covering the same *distance* your time is slower.

A key element to maximizing the potential in your equine athlete is within the effort to make them as efficient as they can be within their individual herd dynamic. Different emergent properties and behavioral tendencies showcase themselves in style of motion. Getting the equine athlete physically fit can only be fully maximized by an efficiency of pace within the *time in motion* required to cover a distance of ground. Mental Stimulus Training protocols can be developed as part of the overall process to elevate the individual athlete.

For me, I use this simple equation: *physical* energy (speed) + *emotional* energy (the ability to maintain pace) = *time in motion*.