

DRESSAGE, EVENTING, HUNTERS, JUMPERS

VOL. 17

PRACTICAL HORSEMAN

EXTRA

Julie Curtin
and Tasty

KEEP YOUR MATURE HUNTER FIT

How to Correct Crushed Heels

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TRAINING THE MATURE HUNTER

Like people, horses need to “use it or lose it” as they age.

By Julie Curtin with Tricia Conahan
Photos by Amy K. Dragoo

It's an inconvenient truth for all of us: Aging is not for the faint of heart. The hard realities of aging and the need to stay in a disciplined program of good fitness are just as true for the horses we love as they are for ourselves.

Most good show horses enjoy their jobs. But once they get

to be 10 or 12 years old, the normal wear and tear on their bodies starts to catch up with them. As show hunters mature, we start stepping them down to the lower divisions, from classes with 4-foot fences to 3-foot-6 and all the way down to 2-foot-6.

It's nice for horses in their mid to late teens to have a second career and it gives us steady, experienced mounts who are perfect for a new rider or an older adult. If we give seasoned horses the right care

and age-appropriate training, they can have many, many years of happily doing their jobs.

The key to this is fitness—keeping the horses active at least four to five times per week. As horses age, they tend to lose muscle fitness and jumping becomes harder on their joints. Standing in a stall is the worst thing for them. They need to stay fit and strong and keep the whole body working. The training doesn't need to be intensive but it needs to be active.

The following four simple exercises, when done regularly, will help you keep your mature horse supple, strong, balanced and interested in his job. And who doesn't want those benefits for their equine partner?



I am riding Tasty, who, for these photos, was a seasoned 17-year-old show horse.

About Julie Curtin

Julie Curtin is a well-known hunter rider and trainer on the Southeast circuit. She started riding at age 5 and was a junior catch rider in the late 1980s for partners Danny Robertshaw and Ron Danta, both successful trainers and judges from Camden, South Carolina. After college, she worked for Atlanta trainer Claudia Roland and then launched her own business in 2004. At her New Vintage Farm in Woodstock, Georgia, Julie's program includes a mix of young horses in development and mature show horses for her amateur-owner and adult riders. She is a regular rider and trainer on the indoor and derby circuits with several U.S. Equestrian Federation and zone Horse of the Year and championship ribbons over the years. Her hunter and equitation clients have also been consistently successful at the indoor shows. On any given day, she can be found at the barn or at a horse show with her cherished dogs Gus, Banana and Huckleberry.



Exercise I >> Active Walking Warm-Up

WHY IT WORKS >> Older horses can come out of their stalls with stiff muscles. Like older athletes, they need more time to loosen up. You don't want to immediately start pushing a stiff horse. This exercise gives you a series of incremental steps to warm up a mature horse.

GOAL >> A gentle but deliberate warm-up that creates a relaxed, attentive and flexible horse

1 Tasty has been an athlete his entire career, but he sometimes comes out of the barn a bit creaky, so I take care to warm him up slowly. I start by walking him around the full arena on a loose rein for at least two to three minutes, avoiding smaller circles. As I focus on staying balanced and sitting lightly in the saddle, I let him stretch out his neck. After a few minutes of walking, I ask him to engage his hind end by adding my leg in rhythm to his walk and to lengthen his step. As he reacts, I can feel more energy and purpose in his stride.

2 Still walking, I lightly take up the reins and turn down the centerline of the arena. I ask Tasty to move laterally off my left leg to the right so his whole body moves forward and on an angle away from my left-leg pressure. I squeeze my left leg as he engages his left hind leg, which is when his right shoulder moves forward. At the same time, I squeeze lightly with the left rein to take his nose and bring his focus to the left. You should see only the inside of his left eye when you move laterally to the right. Any more than that and you are overbending the front end of your horse. My outside aids—

Buying a Mature Hunter

There is an old saying, "Green plus green equals black and blue." If you are a novice rider, you should always consider buying a seasoned horse—a horse who has the knowledge to cover up your mistakes. Learning is easier when your horse knows his job.

Work with an established trainer whom you trust and look for a "Steady Eddie." Search for the horse who has had consistency in his training, day in and day out, over many years; one who has a good heart, who is a doer.

Be aware that buying a mature horse is not an investment. I always make it clear to the buyer that the value of a mature horse is going to decrease monetarily over time. But knowing that every time you get on him, you have a safe and knowledgeable partner in the ring is priceless.



right leg and hand—are neutral.

3 As we return to the straight track, Tasty is continuing to drift just slightly to the right and I am quietly correcting him

by sending him forward at the walk first, then using my right leg to correct the drift. I walk briskly forward with engagement on a straight line for several strides. Then I will ask Tasty to move laterally off my right leg: I apply my right leg and squeeze lightly with the right rein until he moves forward and on an angle to the left and bends. Then I'll come back to walking forward on a straight line for several strides. I'll repeat this exercise three to five times on each side, working to get Tasty's attention to my aids.

4 Tasty is lagging on my leg a bit so I need to remind him that my leg means business and when I apply it, he needs to react quickly. I ask him to move forward from my leg, and if he doesn't respond, I use a cluck and a light tap of the crop behind my leg. If he still doesn't respond, I repeat with another cluck and a firmer tap.

5 As Tasty and I warm up, our partnership is being created. We are beginning to communicate. As he responds, my aids become lighter. Tasty has loosened up his back and his shoulders. He has an active walk and has softened his jaw into my hands and moved up into the bit. His ears are forward. My heel could be down a bit more here, but I'm happy with his walk.

Exercise 2 >> Ground Pole to Vertical To Ground Pole

WHY IT WORKS >> Many mature horses are helping to bring along riders who need repetition to learn. But you don't want to "use up the jumps" in a mature horse. This simple exercise gives you practice seeing a distance to the fence and maintaining or adjusting the pace. But it's easy on your horse—the jump is low and he doesn't have to correct for bad distances. The repetition sets up both of you for success.

GOAL >> To create a consistent pace through the exercise, making the striding in front of and after the vertical match

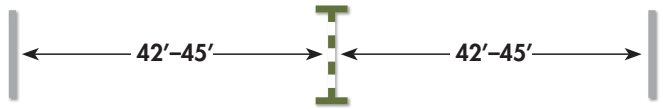
SETUP >> Set a simple vertical fence. Place a pole on the ground approximately three strides in front of the vertical and another three strides after the vertical—about 42 to 45 feet depending on the size of your ring and your horse's stride.

1 I picked up a medium-pace canter on a 12-foot stride and approached the first ground pole in a medium seat, hovering over the pommel of the saddle in a three-point position with my seat lightly touching the saddle. With my legs and a light contact on the reins, I made sure Tasty was straight. We are both focused on the jump. As Tasty begins to easily step over this pole, I maintain my medium seat. My leg-to-hand connection is intact and I still have contact with his mouth.

2 As Tasty jumps this little vertical, I keep my eyes up and forward, focusing on a point at the end of the ring. I still have my leg on him, but I am allowing him to quietly jump the fence. He is so athletic, he is just taking a big canter step over this small vertical. I've kept our pace consistent from the first pole to the fence and I will maintain it over the final ground pole, where I will make sure to look up and ride through the corner.

3 Once we are comfortable working on the distances for a 12-foot stride, I moved out the two poles by about 4 feet. I lightened my seat just a bit, loosened my arms and leaned slightly forward. That allows Tasty to open up his stride. We are cantering to this pole with more pace. Once we're over it, I will press him forward to create three longer but even strides to the vertical, then to the final pole.

4 To practice riding a tighter line, I move the poles in by about 3 feet from the original distance of 42 to 45 feet. I have compressed Tasty's canter stride by sitting up a bit and dropping my seat into the saddle. I am using both leg and hand to ask him to shorten his stride. To keep this shortened stride throughout the exercise, my leg-to-hand connection stays consistent.



Exercise 3 >> Land on the Correct Lead

WHY IT WORKS >> Seasoned horses usually have a pattern. They may always land after a jump on their left or right lead. But if only half the body of an older horse is working, you risk overloading certain muscles and that can create unnecessary injuries.

GOAL >> Encourage your horse to use both sides of his body by landing consistently on the correct lead.

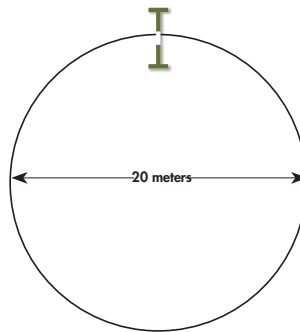
SETUP >> On the track of a 20-meter circle, set up a small vertical that can be jumped from either direction on the circle. The jump should be only about 2 feet high. If it is larger, your horse may revert to his dominant lead.

1 Canter to the right on a circle as I approach a small vertical, I have my inside leg slightly on Tasty to bend him and prevent him from falling in on the circle. I have a direct feel of the inside rein to bend him slightly to the inside. My outside aids are a barrier to prevent him from drifting out and my weight is evenly distributed in both stirrups.

2 I found a quiet distance, helping Tasty stay balanced. A long distance may cause a horse to reach for the fence and be thrown off balance, making it harder for him to land on the correct lead. I've turned my head to the right and brought my inside hip back slightly. Tasty is so scopey that he is just stepping over this small jump—I'm not worried about his jumping form in his exercise. He is clearly preparing to land on his right lead. Then we'll canter away and I'll apply my inside leg and maintain the bend as I circle and approach the jump again. We'll ride the exercise to the right three to five times, then reverse the circle and jump the fence on the opposite lead.

LANDING ON THE INCORRECT LEAD: In another pass over the jump, Tasty lands on the left (incorrect) lead, so I immediately ask for a downward transition to the trot by taking a feel of his mouth with equal pressure on both reins. Once he trots a few steps, I promptly pick up the right lead canter on the circle and head to the jump again.

THE FIX: If Tasty continued to land on the incorrect lead, I would drop the vertical down to a pole on the ground to encourage him to canter over it and maintain his lead. After cantering over the pole a few times, I would raise it up on the left standard only. This blocks Tasty's left side and encourages him to shift to the inside in the air and take the correct lead.



Exercise 4 >>

Add Interest by Jumping Bounces

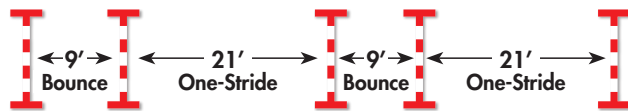
TIP

At the end of your training, do a couple laps of trotting around your entire arena. Ride your horse “long and low” —post to the trot on a longer rein with light contact. Let him stretch down before you ride a transition to the walk. And always make sure your cooldown includes several minutes of walking. A horse should never be taken in to the barn still breathing heavily or feeling warm.

WHY IT WORKS >> Sometimes when older horses get bored, they will trip or lose track of where they are placing their feet. We need to keep them mentally and physically engaged. The sequences in this exercise encourage the horse to pay attention to his foot placement.

GOAL >> Keeping your horse’s timing, balance and agility in play without wearing him down

SETUP >> Set up five simple verticals in a line: a bounce to a one-stride to a bounce to a one-stride. The distance between fences may vary depending on the size of your ring and your horse’s stride. Keep the height low—about 2 feet high—to reduce the impact on your horse.



A Long and Happy Career

Tasty is a perfect example of how a horse’s career can evolve. He was imported from Europe in 2007 and was successful as a Green Conformation Hunter at 3-foot-6 and 3-foot-9 and then as a 4-foot Working Conformation Hunter. Here he is ridden by trainer Hunt Tosh at the 2010 Devon Horse Show. His current owner, Rebekah Warren, bought the bay gelding the following season and rode him in the 3-foot-6 Amateur Owner division. He was then shown in the 3-foot-3 Junior Hunter. Rebekah’s daughter Charlotte rode Tasty in the 3-foot Adult Amateur division. “By now, this horse is part of the family,” Rebekah says. “He will always be with us.”



1 I picked up a medium canter and rose into a half-seat, keeping a light contact with Tasty’s mouth to ensure he is balanced and straight. One stride away from the first jump, I push my hands up his neck into a crest release. This allows him to focus on the exercise and the test we’ve set up for him. My job will be to stay balanced and centered in this position throughout the exercise and let him figure this out.

2 This different view gives the feeling of the exercise. Tasty jumped up to me nicely over the first bounce in the ex-



Building a Baseline Of Strength

The treadmill is a critical piece of equipment at New Vintage Farm. I bought one five years ago and found that with consistent use my horses became stronger through their core and hindquarters with a much more developed topline. Every horse in the barn now walks on the treadmill five days a week for 30 minutes.

This type of conditioning lays a foundation of strength for a horse to more easily do his job. The idea is for the horse to push himself along rather than pull himself along. We preach “leg to hand” and everything is generated from the hind end. So the hind end is the starting point for engagement—in most horses it needs to get stronger and this is particularly true as horses age.

We start with the horses walking on the treadmill on the flat, then progress to walking on a slight incline. Over time, the core and back become so much more developed. The range of motion through the shoulder improves and the horses step up underneath themselves more easily. That type of strength-building is hard to replicate with riding.

If a treadmill is not available, the next best thing is a consistent program of gently increasing hill work. The footing has to be good so the horse is taking consistent strides. Start with five to 10 minutes of hill work and you can build from there.

You should be up in a half seat, off your horse’s back with a light feel of his mouth. Have him walking at a reasonably fast speed to get him to engage his hind end. When you turn around to walk back down the hill, keep your horse tracking on a straight line to make him continue working his hind end. Sit deep in the saddle with your shoulders back and eyes up. Keep that light feel of his mouth.

ercise. Over the second fence of the bounce, my weight is in my heels, my eyes are up and my focus is straight ahead. For both horse and rider, the second fence of the bounce will come up quickly, so you need to be careful not to get ahead of or behind the horse’s motion.

3 Canter the one-stride, Tasty is focused and alert. He is balanced and interested in the task at hand. I keep my leg on him to encourage him to jump through the combination at a steady pace, but otherwise I am a passive partner. If

you need to grab a little mane to steady your position as you go through the exercise, that’s OK.

4 Like the first bounce, this second one comes up quickly. I focus on staying with Tasty’s motion and not getting left behind. It’s my job to be a consistent, balanced partner for Tasty as he navigates the elements of this exercise. He’s relaxed and looking to finish the last two fences of the exercise—the out-fence of the bounce to the final one-stride. We’ll practice this exercise three or four times to let him figure out the puzzle and rhythm. 🐾

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How do I correct “crushed” heels?

Q I have a Thoroughbred with bad feet—mostly crushed heels that cannot seem to be corrected—so he’s often unsound. Are there any types of therapeutic shoes or shoeing you could recommend that might help correct my horse’s feet?

R. VANCE GLENN, CJF

A First of all, I need to ask if your horse really does have a heel problem. “Crushed” or “underslung” heels occur when the weight-bearing surface of the heel has grown too far forward underneath the foot. To see this, stand your horse squarely on all four feet and observe his hoof from the side. If the angle the heel makes at the back of the hoof—looking from the coronet band to the ground—looks like it cuts under more (is more sloping) than the angle of the front of the foot, he does have crushed heels. This means that the straw-shaped horn tubules on the sides of the heels are bearing too

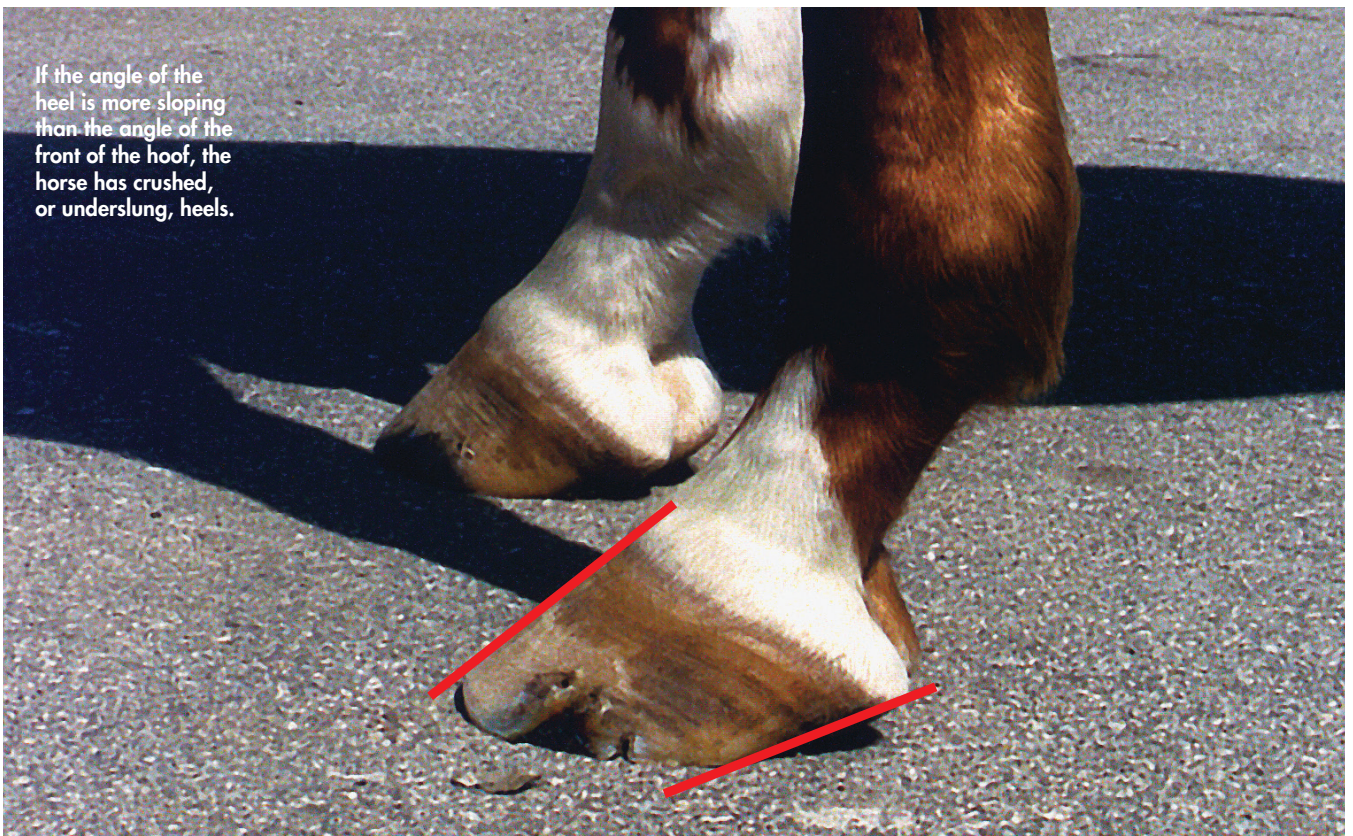
much weight, which forces them to bend. The resulting compression of the soft tissues inside the foot causes pain.

To treat crushed heels, rather than trying to raise the heels (with wedge pads, for example) as some people do when they suspect the horse has “too little” heel, it may be better to trim the heels shorter. This will help angle the horn tubules downward again, which will put the weight directly onto the bottoms of the “straws,” making the forces go straight up through them.

Nine times out of 10, though, heel pain in typical Thoroughbreds results from different mechanical problems: mismatched pastern-hoof angles and too-long toes. Centuries of breeding have given Thoroughbreds very long, sloping pasterns. When the hoof is shod to create an angle that doesn’t match this sloping pastern angle, added stress on the joints, tendons and ligaments results. To check these angles, stand to the side of your horse again and visualize a line running through the middle of his pastern and continuing through the middle of his hoof. It should be straight. If it is not, your farrier needs to lower the heel or toe as necessary to restore the correct angles.

Unfortunately, because Thoroughbreds have such long,

If the angle of the heel is more sloping than the angle of the front of the hoof, the horse has crushed, or underslung, heels.



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▶▶ TIP

To find a farrier qualified to correct your horse's shoeing mechanics, consult your veterinarian. Good farriers work as a team with veterinarians to devise the best preventive and therapeutic shoeing strategies for individual horses' needs.

sloping pasterns, they also generally have inadequate heel support. You can evaluate this by looking at your horse's leg from the side again and dropping an imaginary plumb line down from the back of the fetlock to the ground. The farther this line falls behind the bulbs of the heels, the less heel support he has. We can't "correct" this natural conformation, but we can compensate for it, while also fixing another problem that puts more weight on the heels than they are designed to bear: too-long toes. The longer your horse's toes are, the more he'll rock his weight back onto his heels, compressing the inner structures and causing pain.

By shortening your horse's toes, your farrier can redistribute the

weight farther forward. This is what we mean by "moving back the breakover point." The breakover point is the forwardmost part of the shoe touching the ground when your horse is standing still. When he's in motion, it's the last point in contact with the ground before his center of gravity moves over the leg and he picks the foot up off the ground. The longer your horse's toes are, the farther forward his breakover point is and the harder the structures in his leg have to work to pick up the foot. Among other things, this mechanical problem unduly stresses the deep flexor tendon.

A good rule of thumb for positioning the shoe's breakover point correctly—for all horses, not just ones showing signs of sore heels—is to have one-third of the weight-bearing surface of the shoe in front of the point of the frog and two-thirds behind it. To view this, lift up his foot and lay a straight-edged ruler across the shoe, perpendicular to the frog, just where the frog ends in a point. Then measure how much of the shoe is in front of that line (in the direction of the toe) and how much is behind it (in the direction of the heels). If there is more than one-third of the shoe in front of the line, his breakover point is too far forward.

In most cases, farriers can change the breakover point dramatically in a single shoeing without causing any soundness problems. If your horse's hoof walls are very thin and he doesn't have enough toe to cut back, your farrier will need to explore other options to produce the same results. For example, he can "roll" the toe of the shoe, angling it upward in the front, so that the forwardmost point of the shoe touching the ground is set back from the toe. Or, he can leave some of the toe hanging over the front edge of the shoe. (This may look strange, but it

won't negatively affect your horse.)

Whatever your farrier does, be sure he gives your horse's hooves a nice "full fit" to provide adequate heel support. This means that there is plenty of shoe extending under and behind the bulbs of the heels. Contrary to popular belief, horses are not more likely to pull front shoes off by stepping their hind feet onto these extended heels. Because the set-back shoe corrects your horse's mechanics, he'll actually use his front feet more efficiently, lifting them out of the way before his hind feet can connect.

Whether your horse is suffering from crushed heels, mismatched pastern-foot angles or too-long toes, to alleviate his current pain while you're correcting his shoe mechanics, you may need to use bar shoes temporarily. These will shift even more weight from his heels to the other parts of the hoof. If he has a severe case, he may need heart-bar shoes or a bar shoe filled with sole-support material, which will distribute added weight to the frog and sole. As his mechanics improve, the pain should disappear and, eventually, you should be able to transition him back to regular shoes.

Most important, once you've corrected the breakover point, beware of it creeping forward again over time. (Some farriers aren't vigilant about this, so use the above rule of thumb to double-check it periodically on your own.) In between shoeings, hooves always grow toward a state of imbalance. Your horse's mechanics at the time he's shod will be very different two, three and four weeks later. Your farrier can counteract this trend somewhat by overdoing the breakover point by about one-sixteenth of an inch.

The longer you stretch the shoeing cycle, the more time your horse will spend out of balance. Shoeing on a regular four-week interval, therefore, is ideal. Stretching to five or more weeks can mean trouble.

Horses who seem sound now will eventually go lame if their mechanics are wrong for too long. Remember, money spent on a good farrier often saves even more money in the long run on veterinary bills. 🐾

Certified Journeyman Farrier R. Vance Glenn has shod sporthorses for more than 30 years. His clients include world-class competitors in eventing, dressage, show jumping and driving. Based in Chester County, Pennsylvania, out of his Advanced Farrier Specialties Inc., Glenn often partners with veterinarians on lameness issues that require state-of-the-art therapeutic shoeing.

▶▶ TIP

The most accurate way to determine your horse's ideal breakover point is with X-rays of his foot—another good reason for your farrier and veterinarian to work together.



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