

Sound THINKING

Ex-racehorses have a reputation for fragility — but is it deserved? **Catherine Welton** separates fact from fiction and shares expert advice on keeping a former racehorse happy, healthy and sound

WHEN IT COMES to soundness, former racehorses don't have the best reputation. In fact, it's a common perception that their owners have the vet and farrier on speed dial. Concerns about fragile legs, poor feet and the lasting impact of a racing career can make them seem like a higher-risk option than other types. Yet many ex-racehorses transition successfully into new disciplines and remain sound for years with the right care. So is this reputation well-deserved? And what can you do to help keep your ex-racer sound?

Treat them as individuals

The first thing to consider is the horse's racing background.

"The level of wear and tear you might see in an ex-racehorse varies considerably depending on how long they raced, how they were trained and managed, and the individual horse itself," says Ali Dane, National

Development Officer at Retraining of Racehorses (RoR). "Some come out of racing with very few issues, while others may show signs of cumulative strain."

Amanda Mills, of Mills Stables Retraining Racehorses, has retrained hundreds of racehorses over the years, and agrees it's important not to make assumptions. "A lot of older racehorses will only have the same wear and tear as that of a horse who has competed all their life in dressage or showjumping."

Mark Johnston is director of Johnston Racing and one of the UK's leading trainers. He's also a vet and is keen to dispel the myth that Thoroughbreds are inherently 'fragile', pointing out that they have to withstand the rigours of racing.

"Racehorses are perceived as having more injuries, which is probably true but only because of the speed and the job they're doing. We don't keep them sound by wrapping them in cotton wool, or they wouldn't win any races. If you remember the programme *Inside Nature's Giants*, there was an episode on the Thoroughbred which showed that these are tough horses."

Manage the transition

Problems can occur during the change from racing to a new career and this is where knowledgeable management is so important.

"Many aspects [of a horse's race training regime] can and should be carried forward into retraining,



How well the transition to a second career is managed influences a horse's soundness

PHOTO: NIGEL BAKER PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK

particularly the emphasis on consistency and routine," advises Ali. "However, it does need to be adapted to reflect the different type of work the horse is doing."

Amanda says she's seen problems in racehorses when they retire from racing, largely because of a lack of understanding about their retraining.

"When a racehorse comes straight out of racing, their backs are not physically ready for a rider who will quite often be a lot heavier than the riders they are used to in training, sitting on them in small arenas and expecting them to work like a riding horse whilst the rider sits upright on their back," she says. "If we don't make sure that the ex-racehorse's backs are physically ready, we are only going to create other physical issues for them."

PHOTO: MICK ATKINS/SHUTTERSTOCK



Thoroughbreds are not inherently 'fragile' — they withstand the rigours of racing, after all

MAIN PHOTO: PIOTR ZAUDA/SHUTTERSTOCK

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British Horse Feeds

EX-RACEHORSES | STAYING SOUND



PHOTO: JACKTAMRONG/SHUTTERSTOCK



Thoroughbred hooves are typically not the best, and good farriery at regular intervals is essential

Best foot forward

If there's one part of a racehorse's body that has a particularly poor reputation, it's their hooves.

"It's widely accepted that they have smaller and flatter feet, and are more prone to foot injuries if riding and working on bad ground," says Mark, who has three farriers at his racing yard, looking after 170 horses.

Finding a good farrier, with experience of Thoroughbreds, is key. Ali also advises looking at the bigger picture when it comes to feet.

"Hoof quality and issues such as repeatedly losing shoes can often reflect wider factors, including asymmetries in the body, or even underlying nutritional or gut imbalances. In that sense, the feet can be a useful indicator of what is going on elsewhere in the horse."

Old injuries

Some horses retire from racing because they've been injured, but can still have a successful second career, with the appropriate management, as Amanda explains. "We've had horses that fractured a pelvis while racing and they went on to have very successful low-level eventing careers, never had a lame day and never had any back issues."

"Tendon injuries put a lot of people off racehorses but again, as long as they have had correct rehab and are brought back into work sensibly and looked after, there is no reason why they can't go on to have a competitive career jumping."

Some ex-racers may retire injured, but go on to be successful under saddle in other ways

PHOTO: SERGII KUMER/SHUTTERSTOCK



Ali advises finding out as much as possible about the horse's injury for the best long-term outcome. "We would always encourage owners to ask for visibility of previous veterinary treatment and management when taking on a new horse."

Getting on with the job

Warming up before exercise is essential for maintaining soundness, but Amanda acknowledges that this can sometimes be a challenge while the horse is adjusting from a racing career to their new life.

"Warming up is obviously very important, but when retraining we find a lot of horses just want to get on with



As with any horse, being mindful of the ground is vital

PHOTO: YOUR HORSE LIBRARY

the job, so we often have a short walk and then work in a steady trot as our warm-up," she says. "If the horse is tense when working, you are creating issues that could result in lameness over time, from

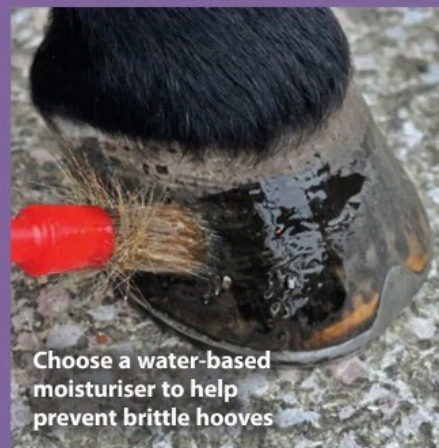
FOCUS ON FEET

Farrier Tom Hardy works at Johnston Racing and has former racehorses on his shoeing rounds too. He advises the following to keep hooves ship-shape:

- Take care to settle the horse into a new turnout routine. If they're running up and down a field or fence line, they won't keep a shoe on.
- Biotin is a good supplement.
- When the hoof is too brittle, that's when it loses flexibility and starts cracking. Use a water-based hoof

moisturiser, as it will be absorbed and fed into the horn.

- Be mindful of the amount of roadwork you do, as a lot will wear the shoes out and that can have an impact on the hoof. Just one day off the roads and in the school can be beneficial.
- Be mindful of frequent changes between wet and dry. If hooves get soaked every time the horse is exercised and washed off, that can lead to crumbling hooves that are hard to shoe.



Choose a water-based moisturiser to help prevent brittle hooves

PHOTO: PIAFFE PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK

EX-RACEHORSES | STAYING SOUND

“We don’t keep them sound by wrapping them in cotton wool, or they wouldn’t win any races” — Vet and racehorse trainer Mark Johnston



them carrying themselves awkwardly and uncomfortably.”

And don’t forget the cool down at the end. “Ensuring a proper cool-down after exercise, with plenty of walking, helps support circulation and recovery,” explains Ali.

Amanda says there’s a mental benefit too. “When cooling down, we allow them to take in what is going on around them and allow their mind to start processing the new things they are learning.”

Feeding for soundness

While in training, racehorses are fed high amounts of hard feed, which means their nutritional needs can be met with one complete feed, providing it is fed at the manufacturer’s recommended rate.

“Nuts, haylage and water. No supplements. Everything my horse needs is in the one bag,” says Mark — with one, notable exception. “We do occasionally use a hoof supplement to encourage hoof growth.”

Of course, a Thoroughbred that is no longer in race training will have different nutritional needs, according to what their new job might be. Fibre should always be the staple of the diet — as is the case for any horse — and a high-quality fibre mash, with a suitable balancer, is a good starting point (see box, page 58). As a mash is a soaked feed, it will also help to keep the horse hydrated.

While ‘overweight’ and ‘Thoroughbred’ aren’t words that you typically hear in

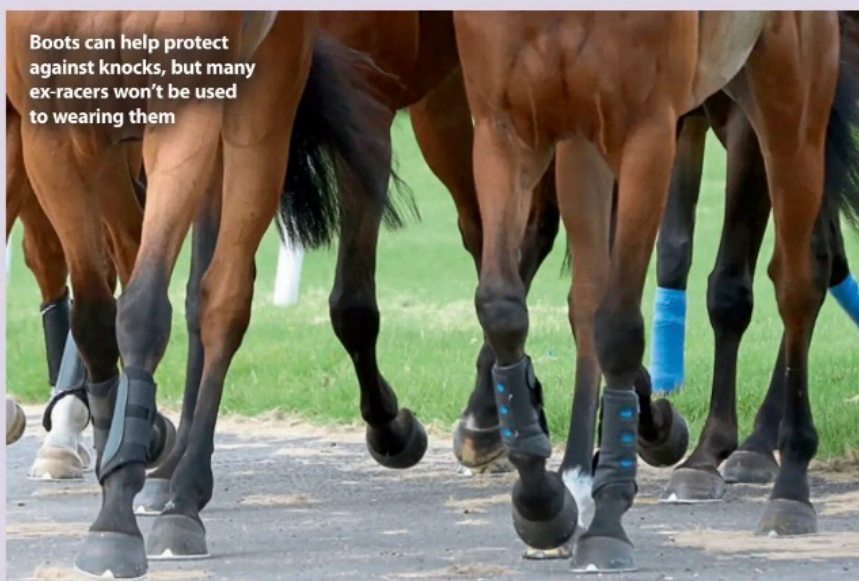
the same sentence, obesity does have an impact on the soundness of an ex-racehorse — so keep an eye on that waistline.

“I do see overweight Thoroughbreds,” warns Amanda. “We have to remember that these horses were athletes; they were lean and fit, and we have to make sure when we transition them to riding horses that their bodies aren’t putting more stress on their legs or other body parts than they’re ready for as we start changing their shape.”

Above all, be consistent

“Looking after an ex-racehorse’s legs comes down to consistent, attentive management. It’s important to monitor the legs closely on a daily basis for any signs of heat, swelling or change, as early detection of an issue makes it much easier to manage,” concludes Ali.

“Overall, it’s about being proactive and consistent rather than reacting to problems once they arise. And remember, supporting the horse’s mental state is just as important as managing their body.”



Boots can help protect against knocks, but many ex-racers won’t be used to wearing them

PHOTO: MICK ATKINS/SHUTTERSTOCK

TO BOOT OR NOT TO BOOT?

Boots can be useful, particularly for providing protection against knocks.

■ Over-reach boots can help prevent front shoes being pulled off.

■ Make sure boots are well-fitting and appropriate for the type of work being done.

■ Don’t leave them on too long as any build-up in heat can be detrimental to the leg’s internal structures. Tendons naturally heat up with work, so look for boots with good air flow to help prevent overheating while wearing them.

■ And remember, they’re not a replacement for good training. As Mark says: “You’ve got to deal with the cause of the knocking rather than cover it up.”

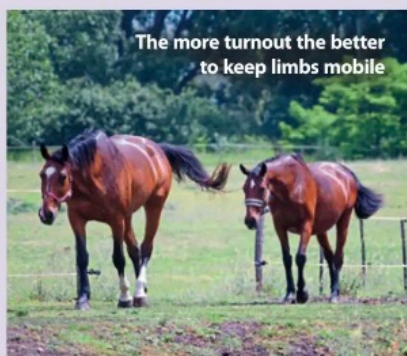
Ed comment: Bear in mind, too, that many ex-racehorses will not have worn them previously and so need time to get used to the feel of wearing them. I had two ex-racehorses — Armageddon and Classication — who were happy in boots, until they got wet after riding through a water complex while cross-country schooling. Both would become fidgety, repeatedly try to itch their lower front legs with their heads, and stamp their feet. I learned to save going into water until last wherever possible, so that the boots could be removed. Neither horse was ever able to wear travel boots on their hind legs either!

PREVENTING PUFFINESS AND STOPPING STIFFNESS

To help avoid issues such as puffiness or stiffness, stick to consistent routines.

"Regular, appropriate exercise is key, as long periods of inactivity followed by sudden work can often lead to stiffness. Free-choice movement [turnout] is vital for keeping the limbs moving and reducing fluid build-up," says Ali.

Amanda cautions that stiffness is sometimes a natural part of a former racehorse's 'let down' process. "A lot of what people see as stiffness in racehorses straight off the track,



The more turnout the better to keep limbs mobile

PHOTO: MELINDA NAGY/SHUTTERSTOCK

comes from their tight muscles. This is where getting the retraining right is so important — we need to teach the horse how to relax their frame."

CASE STUDY

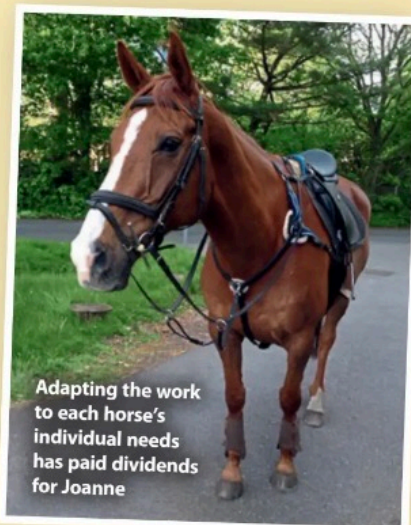
Two five-year-olds with 'tired' legs

"A vet once told me that a common time for a horse to go lame is within 12 months of buying it, because a new rider rides them in a different way," says Joanne from Devon. "I've always been mindful of this with any new horse, including the numerous ex-racehorses I've had over the years.

"The biggest issue I've found is their flat feet and being prone to bruising and punctured soles. Correct shoeing — and a blend of iodine mixed with sugar pasted on the sole of the hoof once a day, at the request of my farrier Rob McIntosh — really helped.

"All of my racehorses came straight out of training, and I would say knowing their full background is the biggest concern, rather than age. I've had two in their teens retire with injuries after years of success on the track — one a tendon rupture and another a fractured sesamoid — but both went on to hack and do Riding Club activities for over 10 years.

"On the other hand, two five-year-olds arrived with 'tired' legs after a short but busy racing career and required careful management. Things



Adapting the work to each horse's individual needs has paid dividends for Joanne

like avoiding too much fast trotting on the roads or cantering and jumping on hard ground, as well as strengthening work in the school. They both stayed sound and went low-level eventing.

"I think that getting to know what you're sat on and adapting the workload accordingly is the key — and that applies to any type and breed, not just former racehorses."

SUPPORT FOR AN EX-RACER'S STOMACH

Reports indicate that up to 93% of racehorses have gastric ulcers during their racing careers. This susceptibility is rooted in a combination of factors inherent to training and management.

> Intense exercise increases stomach acid production and pressure, stressing the stomach lining. The stress of racing and travelling further disrupts their digestive system.

> Energy-dense, high-starch diets are common in performance feeds and prolongs high stomach acidity, which can exacerbate gut issues.

The physical presence of fibre is crucial for digestive health. Chewing fibre stimulates saliva production, which acts as a powerful buffer for stomach acid when swallowed. Fibre also contains soluble pectins, an ingredient abundant in beet pulp, which reduces stomach acidity.

■ British Horse Feed's Fibre-Beet is a conditioning feed with a carefully formulated combination of Speedi-Beet and alfalfa supplemented with biotin, sodium and calcium. With all the benefits of Speedi-Beet's high level of easily digested, soluble fibre for slow energy release, along with low starch and sugar, Fibre-Beet provides a balanced combination of essential amino acids and minerals for optimal health and muscle support.

Fed wet, it slows eating, increasing the time feed spends buffering acid in the stomach compared to high-starch feeds, reducing stress and promoting healthy gut function. In short, Fibre-Beet, with its blend of alfalfa, pectins and emulsifiers, is an excellent dietary choice for ex-racehorses in retraining and in their new career.



The UnBeetable Conditioning Mash



Superior fibre blend of alfalfa and beet



5% sugar, 3% starch



Condition without the fizz



Suitable for horses & ponies prone to gastric ulcers*

*When fed as part of a balanced diet



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