

## Life Behind Bars

(Konnyi mir (The Horse World), November/December 2004)



"Why 99 % of our young, talented horses with great potential become complete invalids with a pack of psychological problems in a couple of years? Though as a rule they start their career in a perfect shape and in good health, and they have every prospect of success.

However everything is simple.

Approximately 50 per cent of success depend on rider's and trainer's skill, ability and knowledge. But the other 50 per cent depend on the management – the conditions of horse care and keeping. Problems within both spheres ensure those lowest results of our sportsmen. Taking into consideration that its horses that pay for these results – and pay by their own pain, sweat and blood – I cannot ignore this issue and say nothing about it. I am sure that many people really wish their horses well, but simply do not know that are they doing.

I'll say nothing here about the harming effects of the equestrian sport; they're evident as they are. I won't discuss problems of dressage and training as well. But what I am trying to do is to draw your attention to one of the most important

aspects of horse's well-being, which is usually left aside in our country because of people's ignorance and egoism. I would like to note that all stated below is not only my personal opinion. All the competent horsemen think the same way.

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Horse care must always and everywhere meet the requirements of the civilized countries' code. So the situation will change only when you change the management rules at your stable and try to understand what your horse needs for a normal life.

You need to understand that horses that are kept at stables are deprived of the natural habitat, and that we demand too much of them. People curtail their rights, rarely try to learn their language and, actually, imprison them.

People use horses to suit their own selfish ends, in sport, in riding schools; they make money on horses or simply get pleasure from ownership, and never think that horse owes them nothing. If it turns out that no one will refuse using horses by his own will, then at least we must make their life happier and stop hurting them.

### **One day in the life of a horse**

Imagine that you're locked in a stuffy cage as large as bed. Locked there in for years. You have to answer the nature's call right there under yourself, it constantly stinks. But you have to sleep right in the same place; the ammonia smell irritates your eyes and lungs. Someone feeds you twice a day (note that in the natural habitat horses graze almost constantly). Most probably you're suffering from gastritis or cough, your legs hurt after the yesterday's training but the groom on duty will hardly understand your position. There's no one you may complain to. The stench and sultriness are horrible. The situation is hopeless. While being cleaned you are tied in the stable aisle without any possibility to move if you, for example, feel pain or it tickles. They cry at you and slap you with a curry comb.

Once a day you're taken out to take a breath of fresh air. But when squinting in the sun you decide to fill your chest with normal air, you feel sharp pain from a harshly tightened girth. And you go to work. During an hour they ride on your back without any break, picking your sides with spurs and punishing you with bits in the mouth for any resistance. I do not want to speak about the riding itself. The horse feels absolutely no pleasure in this. You can hardly meet a sportsmen or amateur who would understand anything in horse anatomy or physiology, muscle, joints, heart functioning etc. Almost all horses suffer from improper actions of an ignorant rider. 90% of saddle-horses have pathological changes in their muscular skeletal system - injured backs and joints. When they're under saddle they're constantly feeling pain.

So imagine that with all this going on you cannot say anything and have no right to complain. Your natural reaction to pain is looked upon as a rebellion and you're punished even more. After work you go to the same cage as large as bed and all your amusement for the day is over.

So you spend twenty three hours in a sweat-box and an hour is dedicated to tortures. Do you like such a day regimen? What is the name for such existence?

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However this is yet not the worst variant. Everyone knows how to cope with stable vices. If a horse being stabled for twenty three hours tries to make something inappropriate, it's punished for its bad behaviour cruelly and immediately. If a horse starts to wind suck they put a special collar on its neck. If it starts to weave – they get it tied on a short leash for all night.

No one wants to think about the reasons for such behaviour, that the horse is suffering physically and mentally and that's why it starts acting like a madman rocking on the edge of his bed in an asylum, trying to ease his mental pain a little bit.

In fact, if all sport horses were people they all would be already in a madhouse...

All stable vices are caused by simple reasons. You should understand this and improve the situation. It's not so difficult. Try to feel the emotional state of your horse. Just do it.

Before horses began to be used in sport and for pleasure riding they rarely had such stable vices as they had to work too hard and they were simply unable to do anything else and had no time for it.

These vices display mental suffering which is due to horse's imprisonment and social isolation. Horse's mental state and some aspects of its behaviour mostly depend on horse's way of living and environment. The best way would be to keep horses in small groups in a field, but taking into consideration the cost of many horses and the high possibility of traumatism in such conditions as well as the absence of nearby pastures, winter conditions, insects, greases etc., we keep our horses stabled 22-24 hours a day. Here we can see a certain regularity: the higher a horse's cost and the more "sporting" a stable is, the more seldom horses are allowed to communicate with each other and walk in paddocks, though it's these horses that need such rest most of all, they need this physiological relaxation in company of their congeners.

The cause of such substitute behaviours or stable vices is stress. A horse cannot drink Valerian drops or give itself an injection of Acepromazine. But the nature is wise and it gave the horse a possibility to ease that depressive state. That means to acquire stable bad habits.

If we look at the problem from the physiological side we'll see that with the help of stable vices a horse stimulates the excretion of endorphins what has a calming effect and damp down the feel of discomfort and suffering. Horses become addicted to this auto-excreted drug and it solves partly their problem.

I won't weary you with listing of all the stable vices here. I am sure that every person who was once at a stable could name a dozen of them. And it's a well-known fact that if a horse grazes in a field with other horses, all these bad habits disappear.

In our climatic zone a solution could be found in the American barn system of horse housing. Horses are kept in groups in a large barn. They are able to communicate with each other and live a kind of their own life, so they need not to acquire bad habits.

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Horses often come into conflict with each other and when they have no possibility to sort out their relationship with other horses and to define their hierarchic rank, they began to conflict with people: to establish the dominance. Here comes another type of vices: biting, kicking, bucking etc. Such behaviour is looked upon as direct aggression and a horse is severely punished though it only acts in accordance with its instincts.

A horse deprived of communication with other horses suffers as well from lack of tactile contact. When we prevent our horse from biting we suppress one of its instincts - horse's personality. You should understand that if a horse bites you aggressively or attacks you then your horse is a dominant leader and you are a subordinate. Try to gain its trust and respect, however you'll never succeed in it applying force. And don't you ever punish your horse. In your horse's eyes you're a predator. You may make him to be afraid of you but never to respect you.

It's good if your horse bites in a friendly way, however it may be quite painful. But never slap a horse on its face to break of that habit as many people do. Every time a horse will draw back its head as it won't understand why it gets that slap in response to a friendly movement. You'll never become its friend. We are responsible for our horses' physical and mental health. So we have to conform to the following rules.

1. Give your horse as much space and fresh air as possible, the best way it to keep it outdoors in a field.
2. Let your horse to have its own horse life, contact with other horses daily. If it is impossible then:
3. Let your horse see all that is happening at the stable and watch other horses (the upper part of the stall door should be always open), the more events, the better.
4. The size of a stall for a 163 cm (16 hands) horse must be no less than 4x4.5 meters.
5. Consider keeping your horses in winter time together in a large space, in a barn, combine the stalls of friendly horses.
6. Let your horse to be outside in a paddock as often as possible. The best variant is to let it out daily for not less than two hours.
7. Feed small amounts of food as often as possible - every two hours. A night break should not be more than 8 hours. The food entertains horses and prevents them from acquiring many stable vices and illnesses like gastritis.
8. Work with your horse properly and on a regular basis but never overload it. Try to diversify this work as much as possible.
9. Buy horse toys, hang an unbreakable mirror in your horse's stall.
10. Change the bedding in a stall daily, don't breed bacteria and stench.
11. Fresh air is essential. Keep all the doors and windows open till it's intensely cold outdoors. Horses endure the cold weather quite well. Cough is not necessarily a symptom of a chill, in 99 % of cases it indicates COPD, emphysema – an allergy to dust, mould etc. However when it's cold, put a warm horse rug on your horse.
12. Soak the hay if it's dusty and some horse at the stable is coughing.

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13. Choose a diverse diet for your horse; add chopped straw to grain supplements for a horse to eat it more slowly. Give your horse branches of non-poisonous plants and trees.
14. Give some feed supplements to excitable and nervous horses that suffer most while being at the stable. This could be supplements with vitamin B12, Magnesium or some herbs with Valerian.
15. Call a vet if you cannot define the reason of your horse's depression and stable vices. Remember that cribbing can be caused by gastritis along with stress. Horses never complain without a good reason. Check everything – state of health, dental and hoof health, etc.
16. If a horse has a day-off never leave it in its stall for the whole day. It may cause a life-threatening disease – azoturia (Myo-Haemoglobin Urea). A day-off in a stall is not rest but punishment.
17. Reduce your horse's daily ration at least by half before a day-off. It will help partly to avoid problems at the next day training.
18. A horse must use up its energy that it got with the food. It can't use it up staying in a stall. Don't overfeed your horse. If it performs only light work there's no need to give it concentrates (but hay must be of good quality). Overfeeding increases the threat of laminitis.
19. If there's no paddock walk with your horse daily in addition to work.
20. Groom your horse daily – scratch it with your hands. Put on some old and thick clothing, a fur waistcoat for example; come close to your horse facing its croup and start scratching the horse from the withers along the spine to the dock, imitating horse bites (a brush won't substitute a hand). I assure you that if a horse trusts you it will start to scratch your back in the same way in some minutes. Nothing brings a horse and its owner together more than mutual scratching. Do it at any spare moment and always after work, as nothing relaxes and calms horses more than it.

No one will do all this instead of you. You won't achieve any good results till you don't change your horse keeping rules. If you are unable to provide your horses with all the necessary things, why do you buy them then? To tell your friends about your sport achievements?

Or do you buy a horse and pay for its keeping just to work with it for an hour and then go away with a clear conscience leaving it locked in a cell for the rest of the day? Can you really feel pleasure from such love?"