



BEHAVIOURS OF THE RIDDEN HORSE IN PAIN

There can be many reasons why each individual behavior may occur. However, a total Ridden Horse Pain Ethogram score of 8 or more indicates the presence of musculoskeletal pain. Some lame horses may have a score of less than 8.¹

FACIAL MARKERS



5+ seconds



1

Ears Back

Ears behind vertical position
for 5 seconds or more.



2-5 seconds



2

Eyes Closed

Eye lids half closed or closed
for at least 2-5 seconds.



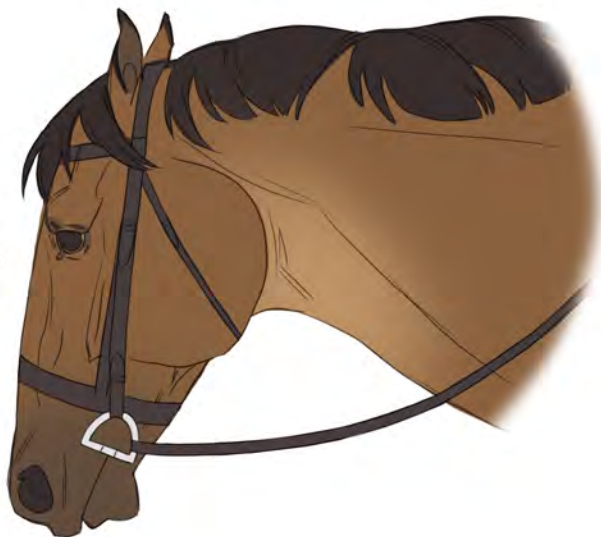
3

White of the Eye *

Repeated exposure of the sclera
(white of the eye).



5+ seconds



4

Intense Stare

Glazed expression ('zoned out'),
or staring intensely for 5 seconds or more.



5

Mouth Open/Close

Mouth open with separation of teeth for at least 10 seconds, or repeatedly opening and shutting mouth with separation of teeth for at least 10 seconds.



6

Tongue Out

Tongue hanging out or moving in and out more than once.



7

Bit Pulled Through *

Bit pulled through to one side
of the mouth.

BODY MARKERS



8

Head Up/Down

Repeated up and down head movement
not in rhythm with trot.



9

Head Tilt

Repeatedly tilting head.



10

Above Vertical

Head in front of vertical (more than 30 degrees) for 10 seconds or more.



11

Behind Vertical

Head behind vertical (more than 10 degrees) for 10 seconds or more.



12

Head Side to Side

Head tossing, twisting or swinging repeatedly side to side.

A.



B.



13

Tail Position

A. Crooked tail (held to one side).

B. Tail clamped to the midline.



14

Tail Swishing

Swishing tail repeatedly.

GAIT MARKERS



15

Rushed Gait

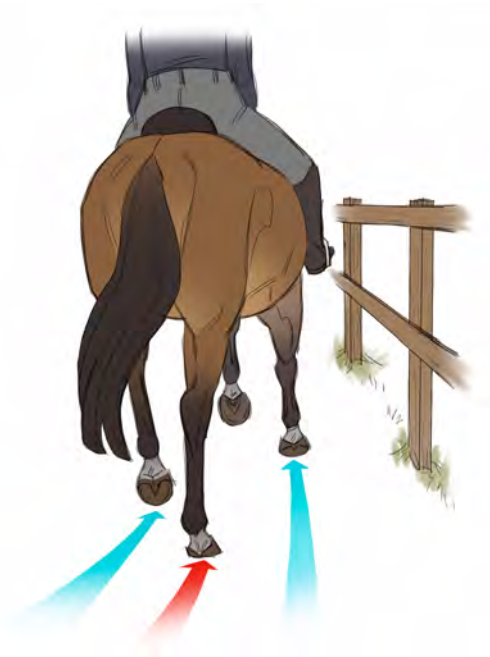
Frequency of more than 40 trot steps per 15 seconds; irregular rhythm in trot or canter with repeated changes of speed.



16

Slowed Gait

Frequency of fewer than 35 trot steps per 15 seconds, often appearing as a passage-like trot.



17

Moving on 3 Tracks

Hindlimbs do not follow the tracks
of the forelimbs
(moving crookedly on three tracks).



18

Canter Dysfunction

Repeatedly striking off with incorrect forelimb leading; disunited or cross-cantering; changing leg in front and/or behind.



19

Spontaneous Change of Pace

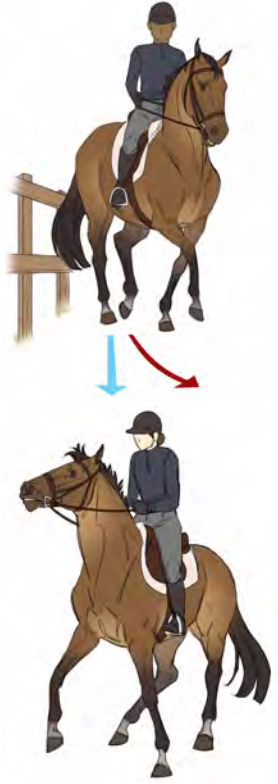
Breaking from one gait to another,
for example from canter to trot.



20

Stumble, Trip, Toe Drag *

Repeated bilateral hindlimb toe drag disturbing the ground surface. Stumbling or tripping repeatedly in front or behind.



21

Changing Direction, Spooking

Suddenly changing direction against the rider's cues; spooking.



22

Resistant

Reluctant to go forward;
needing repeated physical or verbal
encouragement. Stops spontaneously.



23

Rearing



24

Bucking

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Horses should be assessed performing their full repertoire of movements for approximately 10 minutes after a period of warm up.
- When applying the Ridden Horse Pain Ethogram the horse should be assessed from the side, from behind and from the front.
- **White of the Eye** Some horses have a blue eye or a small iris in one or both eyes, so the sclera (white of the eye) is visible at rest. The criteria for this behavior cannot be applied to these horses.
- **Bit Pulled Through** If the canons (mouthpieces) of the bit are too wide for the horse's mouth, it will be difficult to evaluate this behavior.
- **Stumble, Trip, Toe Drag** If the horse is being worked in an arena with deep footing or in long grass, it may appear to have a hindlimb toe drag, so this behavior cannot be evaluated.

This Field Guide does not constitute diagnosis, nor suggest specific treatment. If you suspect that your horse is experiencing discomfort or pain, seek help from a veterinarian.

¹ Adapted from Dyson, S., Berger, J., Ellis, A., Mullard, J. Development of an ethogram for a pain scoring system in ridden horses and its application to determine the presence of musculoskeletal pain. *J. Vet. Behav.: Clin. Appl. Res.* 2018, 23: 47-57

Illustrations by Melissa Cho, based on photos by Dr. Sue Dyson



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