

Circle Oak Equine

Petaluma facility offers performance horses the best in rehabilitation and injury prevention.

by Kim F. Miller

Reincarnation as an injured performance horse is not many people's fantasy. But that's the dream of *California Riding* sales rep Susan Nelson after a tour of Circle Oak Equine in Petaluma. Owners Sara and Ron Malone began developing their beautiful property five years ago and it recently opened its doors to outside horses as Circle Oak Equine Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation.

Initially, the couple planned to focus on comprehensive and cutting edge rehab, along with retirement, but that shifted when the chance arose to bring Dr. Carrie Schlachter's sports medicine focused veterinary practice into the fold.

The result is a one-stop shop for performance horses seeking the very best in injury diagnosis, treatment and recovery, and care targeted at injury prevention, comfort and success in each horse's specific sport. "There are a lot of rehab facilities and incredibly talented vets throughout the country, but I think you could count on one hand the number of places where diagnosis, treatment, rehab and return to fitness are all done in the same place," comments Ron Malone.

Circle Oak recently received state certification as a veterinary facility, a reflection of the owners' commitment to the highest-level professional practices in its services and staff.

The facility offers a remarkable range of services. "The biggest advantage from the horse's perspective is that, whatever their injury, we have something to offer," says Schlachter. Services range from the simple, like hand walking, to the most advanced and complicated, including regenerative therapies IRAP, PRP and stem cell.

State-of-the-art equipment includes an ECB spa that uses 35 degree salt water to suck inflammation out of an injury, accelerating the healing process. It is also effective in preventing various leg injuries. The Hydrohorse™ is an

underwater treadmill that enables a horse to burn off energy and get back into fighting form in a mode that greatly reduces the load on joints and healing injuries. A covered, free flow exerciser, 70 feet in diameter, is another asset in returning horses to work.

In more traditional rehab settings, often a trainer's or owner's barn, formerly fit show horses are cooped up for days on end. "You can have a mental case on your hands," Schlachter notes. "The Hydrohorse allows a horse to burn a lot more energy, doing something that is new and engages their mind, without putting the same stress on joints, tendons and the injury." It typically eliminates the need to sedate horses during rehab. "It's not that sedation is bad," she notes. "But it does put a damper on what you can do with the horse."

Prevention Is A Priority

Schlachter is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's Veterinary School and New Bolton Center. In addition to her VMD, she is certified in veterinary chiropractic and acupuncture, has won several awards and formerly served on a U.C. Davis Veterinary Hospital advisory board. Beyond that, adds Ron Malone, "She can see things in a horse that aren't visible to me or most people."

Equine sports medicine has been Schlachter's specialty since vet school. The field includes treating injuries, but preventing them is its overarching priority. Analyzing each horse's gait and conformation and the demands of its discipline are part of a whole-horse approach that is the foundation idea of this increasingly popular area of veterinary medicine.

Schlachter estimates that lamenesses account for only 40 percent of her practice, formerly known as Animals In Motion. The rest are horses

whose owners believe they could perform better if they felt better and those who suspect physical issues are causing behavioral problems. Better conditioning, chiropractic, acupuncture, massage and other complementary therapies are among the many approaches likely to improve such cases.

"One example might be an owner whose horse stopped doing lead changes to the left," Schlachter relays. "The owner says their vet has looked at the horse and determined he is not lame. The next step is to figure out why the horse won't take that lead change. You start looking at the horse's body, but sometimes it comes from the rider. It may be that they are riding crooked."

In short, equine sports medicine appeals to owners who want their horse to be comfortable performing at its peak. "I have not met many devious horses," the veterinarian observes. "I think most want to do what they are trained to do, and if they are not doing it, there is a physical issue. Especially if it is something the horse used to do. My job is to find the discomfort and talk about options. Not everything is fixable, but we can help 80 to 90 percent of the time, whether it is returning the horse to full function or to full comfort."

A Healing Place

Circle Oak Equine started as a facility for Ron Malone's top notch cutting horses, some of whom sustained significant injuries. "While staffing up to rehab them I became very interested in the veterinary aspects of diagnosing and treating them, and bringing them back to their peak," he says. "What Dr. Schlachter does and we try to support is understanding and dealing with both the injury and its root causes, then making sure the horse gets

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the rehab it needs and the proper return to fitness.”

Circle Oak has 50 oversized stalls and various pasture arrangements and is equipped and staffed to handle approximately 40 rehab clients. A staff of three full-time and five part-time veterinary technicians will grow as the business does. Circle Oak's goal is to combine the professionalism found in a veterinary hospital with the personalized attention of a premier spa. Schlachter supervises all cases, but clients are welcome to work with their own veterinarians as well.

Last but not least of Circle Oak's amenities is its location. Set in a landscape of rolling hills, green pastures and abundant trees, the facility houses its high tech equipment in beautiful rustic-looking barns designed to complement the pastoral and serene environment. It's hard to quantify the surrounding's effect on its equine inhabitants, but if human reactions are an indicator, the setting is a powerful part of Circle Oak's healing process.



For more information on Circle Oak Equine Rehabilitation and Sports Medicine, visit www.circleoakequine.com or call 707-766-8760.

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