



Advances in amputation and prosthetic devices offer a viable alternative to euthanasia when a horse's limb is damaged beyond repair.

The past two decades have seen remarkable progress in equine orthopedics. Improvements in surgical techniques and equipment as well as breakthroughs in drug therapy are preserving the lives of horses whose leg injuries once might have been seen as so severe that euthanasia was the only option. Yet for all that can be done to repair and rehabilitate equine limbs, some equine afflictions still seem beyond the reach of medical treatment. Aggressive arthritis can quickly cripple a once-healthy athlete. A bone-eating infection can destroy a joint in days. And laminitis remains a baffling, painful and deadly condition. How can horses so stricken ever return to comfortable and relatively productive lives?

Largely through the efforts of a small group of veterinary surgeons, amputation and prosthetic limbs are beginning to emerge as a reasonable option. "Horses can live quite happily with a prosthetic limb for years and years, running, bucking, breeding and acting like a horse in every way," says Barrie Grant, DVM, of San Luis Rey Equine Clinic in Bonsall, California. An equine surgeon, Grant has performed more than 25 amputations, and one of his patients has had a prosthetic limb for 20 years. "We've conquered many of the problems we faced in the past and continue to make breakthroughs," he says. "In fact, one of the biggest hurdles we still face is convincing people that it can be done."

Historically, horsemen have regarded amputation and prosthetic repair as extreme options of last resort that, at best, offer only marginal success. It is commonly believed that a horse with an amputated limb will develop laminitis in his opposite "good" leg—the result of its having to bear more than its fair share of weight—or that he will hobble pathetically for a few years, living a life that

doesn't suit a horse and requiring heroic care.

Not so, say the surgeons who have been working to modify and improve the procedure. "It's an option for owners, and one I wish more would consider," says Ted Vlahos, DVM, an equine practitioner from Sheridan, Wyoming. "But they have to know what's in store for them and their horse if they make that choice. This isn't a minor procedure. It's no more benign than a person having his leg amputated." In short: Removing any portion of a horse's limb and replacing it with a prosthesis requires a significant commitment of money and time and no small measure of personal fortitude. There are ample opportunities for catastrophic complications, and a horse with a prosthetic limb can never be ridden. He can, however, maintain a reasonably good quality of life.

Likely candidates?

Horses who experience sudden catastrophic injuries and those in the early stages of a chronic condition are the best candidates for amputation and prosthetic repair.

"A horse who suffers a sudden, serious breakdown is usually an athletic horse with nothing else wrong with him," Vlahos says. "He's in pretty good physical condition, aside from the injury itself, and typically, he has three other very good legs." Such a horse, according to Vlahos, usually has the physical reserves to handle not only surgery, but the prolonged recovery period and adaptation to a new way of life. Ric Redden, DVM, of the International Equine Podiatry Center in Versailles, Kentucky, agrees: "An athlete that shatters his cannon bone, totally destroying the blood supply to the lower limb, would be the perfect candidate because his body and mind are quite healthy."

In contrast, a horse who has lived for months or years with laminitis or severe arthritis isn't going

By Joseph and Carol Berke with Christine Barakat

PHOTOS COURTESY, RIC REDDEN, DVM