Vet's Casebook

Brought to you in association with Frame, Swift and Partners

Attention to detail early in life helps avoid difficulties later on

Sam Galloway, of Frame, Swift and Partners, explains how limb deviation resulting in a non-straight foot flight can often be easily corrected in foals

I have always held that while attention to detail can be time-consuming, it always pays dividends in the long run.

The term 'vetting ' is often used in the press not in conjunction with animals or veterinary surgeons but to mean a thorough scrutiny of some procedure or person.

When we 'vet' a horse for sale the horse is assessed to see if it is 'fit for purpose'. Even when we can find no impediment for the sale to go through, there are usually a number of small points to discuss with the future owner. It is rare for any horse not to have some blemish or lesion.

One of the features I will always point out is limb deviation that results in a non-straight foot flight.

While not affecting soundness at the time, horses with less than perfect conformation are often the ones I see several years later with some form of degenerative joint disease or persistent tendon problem.

It makes sense that concussive forces will be transmitted unevenly up the leg if the footfall and break-over is not straight and true, thereby transmitting uneven stresses through joint surfaces.

One doesn't see many top athletes in either the equine or the human world without near perfect conformation.

The really regrettable thing about many of the limb deviations I see is that if they were recognised in the foal and acted upon they could be very easily corrected in the first few weeks of life. At this stage the bones are still growing and forces acting through the limb can be altered to bring the limb straight. It really is a most satisfying thing to do and quite magical watching a foal straighten up in just a few weeks.

Attention to detail: Left, x-rays can be vital in determining the extent of deviation and for detection of damage to the foal's bones; right, a new-born foal showing marked valgus deviation of the knee

Loosely speaking, there are two main types of deviation. Valgus is when the foot is set outwards, if one draws an imaginary line down the leg. This is usually accompanied by an outward rotation of the pastern and foot.

Most cases of valgus have the pivot point for the deviation somewhere around the knee.

Varus occurs when the foot is deviated inwards. This is usually accompanied by an inward rotation of the pastern and foot (pigeon-toed). Most cases of varus have the pivot point about the level of the fetlock.

Sometimes the deviations, particularly if the foal is slightly premature, can be due to weak ligaments. Very careful support can rectify this.

Sometimes it is a problem with the ends of the bone at or near where the long bone's growth plates are situated.

While in severe cases surgery is sometimes the only option, it never ceases to amaze me how a combination of box rest, careful trimming of the sole to keep it level and the use of plastic shoes with extensions to change the upward forces on the deviation can turn an ugly duckling into a supreme future athlete.

Even in cases where there is actual collapse of a small bone in the knee due to prematurity, trimming and hoof extensions can achieve a great deal.

We encourage everyone who has a new-born foal to let us check it out in the first 24 hours of life. An experienced eye can pick up on all sorts of congenital and early disease problems, not least limb deviations.