



Ask the Vet: Fixing a Broken Tail

Q: My 3-year-old filly fell while out in the pasture and broke her tail. She has no use of it, and it just hangs. How does this affect her future as a performance horse? Will it be counted against her if she is shown?

A: The type of tail injury that you describe is the result of nerve damage to the muscles of the tail and may have been caused by a direct injury to the nerves or may be the result of a fracture of one or more of the bones of the tail, known as the coccygeal vertebrae. Nerve damage that results in muscle paralysis or weakness may be temporary or permanent depending on the severity and type of injury. A condition called neuropraxia is a temporary paralysis that is reversible as the nerve repairs itself. The return of normal function depends on the ability of the nerve to reconnect severed ends, repair damage and reinnervate the muscles required to cause movement. The amount of time required is dependent on the length of nerve that is damaged since the nerve repairs itself at a rate of 1mm per day. If the body of the nerve is damaged or destroyed or if the severed ends are prevented from reconnecting by scar tissue or bone callous formation then the paralysis may be permanent. Neuropraxia in the tail area of the horse can occur with or without bone fracture and if this is a recent injury in your filly (less than 6 months) there may still be hope of some return of function.

In order to determine whether or not a fracture of the tail bones occurred, a radiograph can be taken by your veterinarian. While most of these bones are located in the tail dock itself, the first several are embedded in the heavy musculature along the croup at the tail head area of the rump and are difficult to palpate. Lifting and manipulating the tail slowly and feeling for crepitus (the grinding sensation of fractured bone ends) can assist in diagnosing a recent fracture. Coccygeal fractures commonly cause tail paralysis because the nerve endings that serve the muscles of the tail leave the spinal canal through spaces between these bones. Fractures may sever or compress the nerve endings or the bone produced during healing may put pressure on the nerves or prevent severed ends from reconnecting. Without treatment these fractures will heal with the tail hanging in a limp down position. Horses with this condition cannot lift their tails to urinate or defecate and have soiling problems on their buttocks and tails. If your filly did actually fracture her tail head and if the healing is incomplete, you can treat the fracture to minimize urine and manure soiling and inherent contamination problems and at the same time improve her ultimate appearance for the show ring.

Purchase or borrow a tail set (used most commonly on Saddlebred show horses that have the muscles on the underside of their tails surgically severed to allow an upright tail carriage) with a padded donut ring to be placed under your filly's tail. If you are unfamiliar with tail sets or their proper use and fit, ask a local Saddlebred or Walking Horse professional to give you some help. Wrap enough soft, cushiony padding around the ring to lift the tail to a natural Arabian tail carriage position and have your filly live in this tail set until the fractures are healed and stable. The set should be removed daily for cleaning, repadding if necessary to remove soiled material and to adjust pressure points from potentially sore areas. Over the course of 12 to 18 weeks the tail bones will heal by callous formation in an upright position; the musculature along the top of the tail will shorten and the muscles on the underside of the

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tail will stretch. These changes will allow her to have a lifted tail when not wearing the set. The mildly elevated tail will more closely approximate an Arabian tail carriage.

If it is too late for you to affect her tail appearance, I would refer you to the Arabian judge's panel for its impact on her show career. Since high tail carriage is considered one of the important characteristics of Arabian type, halter competition might be affected while Half-Arabian halter should not. The impact of a down tail in performance divisions may be dependent on individual judges and the divisions that you choose to show her in. For example, a working western horse might consider a low quiet tail an advantage while an English, park or driving performance might be enhanced by a high proud tail carriage. Either way I hope that her injury is only temporary or that you can improve her appearance by the use of a tail set.

If you have a question you would like to see Dr. Crowe address in this column, contact Editor at AHA, 10805 East Bethany Drive, Aurora, CO 80014 or email Editor@ArabianHorses.org

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