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## Exercising early is beneficial, say vets

Published: 12/11/2004 (Sport) Howard Wright

EARLY training of thoroughbreds continues to attract support from leading veterinarians, according to two international experts who outlined the results of recent studies at the fourth Racing & Breeding Seminar held at Cheltenham racecourse yesterday.

Wayne McIlwraith and Roger Smith, who are part of a four-nation link-up known as the Global Equine Research Alliance, both highlighted work that strongly suggests early exercise may make skeletal tissue more resistant to injury in a horse's later life.

Smith, professor of equine orthopaedics at the Royal Veterinary College, concluded: 'Investigations suggest that tendon is able to respond to exercise during growth, and that early exercise is potentially the most important determinant of tendon development.'

However, he added that the response appeared to be dependent on the type of exercise regime used. Constant exercise appeared to work better than either limited, low level exercise, or higher level exercise mixed with box rest.

Smith said: 'The intensity of the exercise is critical - the young animal is also more susceptible to 'over training' and the studies show there is a window of opportunity for appropriate loading stimuli that will lead to improved tendon quality and strength.'

After the thoroughbred reaches the age of three, Smith said 'training regimes aimed at strengthening the tendon appear to provide little benefit'.

He added: 'Instead, training [after the age of two] should be directed at those tissues which do show continued response - muscle and bone - as well as those organs essential for overall fitness, namely the respiratory and heart systems.'

McIlwraith, professor at Colorado State University, spoke about the effects of training on bone and cartilage, saying it was important to make an 'early diagnosis before a problem becomes a fracture, because there is a consensus that all fractures involve a diseased bone in the first place'.

He added: 'The good news is that early bone change can be diagnosed, through bone scans and radiographs.'

McIlwraith also spoke about a study into conformation and its effect on soundness, which exploded the myth that yearlings 'out at the knee' - where the foot is farther out than the knee - must be avoided.

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