

Gearing Your Horse For Better Performance

His Gear Will Make You A Better Competitor

By Andra Olson - AJ Horses

Perhaps you had a chance to see the Beijing Olympics last year, where sprinter Usain Bolt was one of the stars. He not only won both the 100 and 200 meter races, but he set records in both.

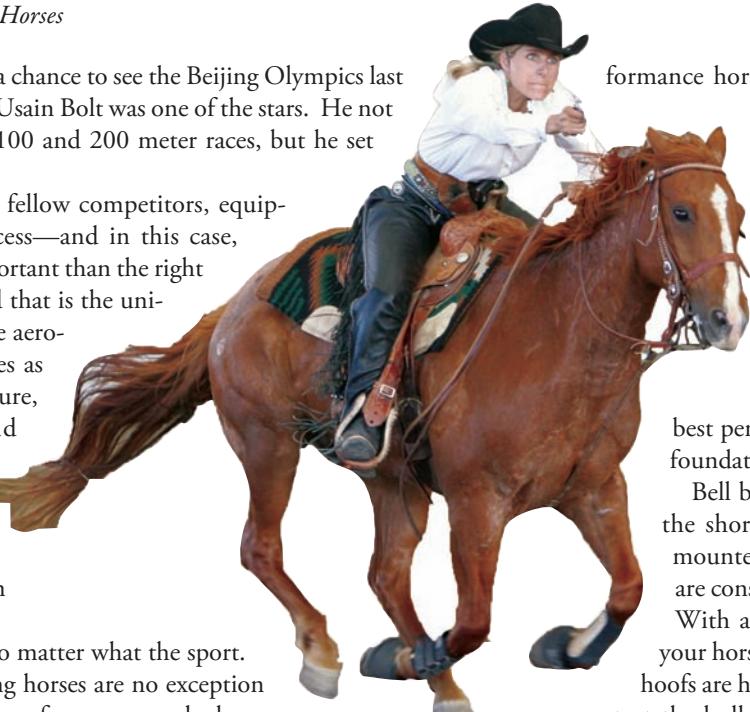
For Bolt and his fellow competitors, equipment is key to success—and in this case, nothing is more important than the right shoes. Right behind that is the uniform, which must be aerodynamic to cut times as much as possible. Sure, natural talent and hard work are essential ingredients in championships, but the right equipment can only help.

And that's true no matter what the sport.

Mounted shooting horses are no exception to this; their athletic performance can be hampered without the proper equipment. The right things can help prevent injury and boost their performance.

Equipment isn't the only factor that impacts the horse's physical condition, or course--diet and exercise come to mind. But let's put those aside for now and focus on the equipment that is beneficial for mounted shooting competition horses.

We will start from the ground up. We always believe in a solid foundation, so the logical place to start is the horse's feet. They should be a priority. We highly recommend that performance horses have their hoofs properly trimmed and shod. Active per-



formance horses need shoeing because it helps to protect them from the ground, and from the impact directly on their soles. It helps to prevent chipping, cracking, and uneven wear on the outer foot. But most importantly, with the aggressive stops, turns and running that are a necessary part of competition, it helps limit the amount of expansion that happens to the horse's feet. Again, for best performance your horse needs a SOLID foundation--good feet.

Bell boots and/or overreaching boots, with the short turns and aggressive running that mounted shooting horses are doing, their feet are constantly crossing over and reaching out. With all this intense riding, the chances of your horse clipping themselves with their other

hoofs are highly increased. We need to help protect the bulb of their heel and the lower pastern from any injury. When a horse injures his pastern, coronet band or heel it can bleed extensively and become very painful. And even if it doesn't bleed, bruising can be just as damaging, since both of them can cause lameness. Obviously if this happens your horse will not be performing to its potential.

Moving up the legs, you want to protect their tendons, ligaments, and ankles from injury. The splint boot protects the tendons and ligaments, whereas the full support boot will also cover the ankle. So if you are a very aggressive rider, you may want to upgrade to a full support boot. Both of these boots can also pro-



Bell Boots.

tect the limbs from any blows from their other legs due to hard turns, roll backs, and stops. When using splint boots or the full support boots, you need to make sure they fit your horse comfortably; keep the linings smooth, clean and free of debris. If they are too tight, circulation is cut off to the foot. The pressure should be even along the leg with no loose areas that could bind up or rub, causing sores. Remember: bad fitting boots can cause more damage than good.

Now for the horse's back. Saddle blankets and pads are a huge part of your equipment. It is so important that you make sure you have the right blanket and/or pads between your horse's back and the saddle. We strongly believe that "layers" are the key. They help to distribute and cushion the movement of the saddle. Using the layers and properly fastening the saddle limits the amount of saddle movement on or against your horse's back. The irritation of the movement and/or too much pressure in one spot for too long a time is what causes saddle sores, tissue damage and various sore back muscles.

The layers should be made of natural fibers. Natural materials provide a more comfortable feel for the horse; the pad or blanket breathes and absorbs sweat, helping to keep the horse's body temperature down and limiting irritations that can also hurt performance.

The saddle has to be comfortable for you and the horse, so it is essential that you find the proper saddle for both of you. For the aggressive riding in mounted shooting, we recommend a saddle with front and back cinches. The purpose of a cinch is to keep the saddle in place on the horse's back. It is VERY common to see the back cinch hanging below the horse's belly. Not only is this useless, it's

also dangerous (and it's doubly so if you use two cinches). When both cinches are adjusted and tightened properly, it secures your saddle for aggressive riding, and it's also more comfortable for you and your horse. It's easier for the two of you to maintain balance.

The breast collar is used to keep your saddle positioned correctly on your horse's back. When riding aggressively, your movements and those of your horse



Splint Boots.

can cause the saddle to slip out of position, even if both cinches are tight. If adjusted properly, the breast collar will prevent that. Not only does it improve comfort, but also it boosts performance.



Blanket System.

Let's move on to the headgear. For some reason, tie-downs have gotten a bad reputation, but if used properly they certainly are an effective piece of equipment. Adjusted properly, it keeps the horse's head in a safe and effective position, helping it to do its job better (especially in mounted shooting, where you and your horse are making aggressive moves). Again, if the tie-down is properly used it's a tool that you and your horse will find very effective.

As for your bridle, whatever you use must fit properly. This means adjusting the bit, hackamore bit and curb strap. It needs to be comfortable to be effective. This is very important to gaining complete control of your horse. If they are not properly fitted, there will be too much of a lapse between your cue with the reins and the actual response from your horse.

Lastly, remember the horse's earplugs. Earplugs are a very essential tool for mounted shooting. A horse's hearing is very sensitive; it is one of the main senses that they use for survival. And gunfire will damage the animal's hearing—if you don't think so, then have someone fire a .45 Colt off next to your unprotected ears. The noise is devastating, painful and irritating. A horse's hearing is much more sensitive than a human's, so it only makes sense to protect them with equine earplugs.

Horse earplugs are beneficial for many different situations. Several equine disciplines use them to help calm and protect their horses. Earplugs are also used for grooming and some veterinary care. But for mounted shooting it's extremely effective to use horse earplugs.

Getting the horse to accept the earplugs isn't always easy, but neither are a lot of the other things that you train your horse to do. Be patient, they will learn to accept them and they will appreciate it.

As a competitive athlete, your horse needs to be in top condition, and if there is discomfort it can cause your horse to quit working for you. Performance is everything. And good horsemanship starts with knowing what condition your horse is in, and how to help them maintain their top athletic ability. In the sport of mounted shooting, your horse is your teammate, but you are the captain. It's your job to do the right thing for your team, and using the right equipment in the right way will only help.



Horse Ear Plugs.