

# ABNORMAL BEHAVIOURS IN THERAPEUTIC RIDING HORSES

D. Li Destri Nicosia\*, S. Sabioni<sup>^</sup>, E. Facchini<sup>^</sup>, E. Ridolfo<sup>^</sup>, S. Cerino<sup>°</sup>, G. Giovagnoli<sup>°</sup>, M.L. Bacci\*

\*Department of Veterinary Morphophysiology and Animal Production - DIMORFIPA, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Bologna;

<sup>^</sup>DVM - practitioner; <sup>°</sup>Italian Equestrian Federation- FIS E, Roma; Italy.

## INTRODUCTION

Therapeutic Riding (TR) is a global therapeutic method considering the whole person as a subject of the rehabilitation. Human-horse relationship is central in TR intervention. The horse becomes an active component provided that his features are recognized and respected. Nevertheless as reported in our recent review, TR is recognized as source of potential stressors for horses.

**The aim was the identification/characterization of abnormal behaviours in TR horses.**

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

• Questionnaires were sent to 45 TR centres in Centre-Northern Italy, for a first evaluation of the consistence of the problem.

• Preliminary direct ethological observation of four TR horses in one centre in Emilia Romagna has been conducted (along a period of two months).

• Further ethological studies were performed comparing three experimental groups (n=4): TR (A), destined to sport activities (B) and semi-wild breeding (C) horses. The subjects were observed 25 consecutive days, at fixed time (20 min, twice a day) and at random time (once every 3<sup>rd</sup> day) period.

A data sheet of behavioural assessment was utilised, to establish, through analysis of social and maintenance behaviours, the basal behavioural patterns of the subjects, respect to referring ethogram and in relation to different environmental conditions. Behavioural answers to variable and unforeseeable environmental cues have been noted too.



**A tendency toward hypo reactivity with sporadic demonstrations of iper reactivity (particularly evident during some specific moments of activities) have been noted. Inappropriate attitude of operators toward the horse is observable too.**



**Feeding and giving care are important activities to both the subjects of the relationship: it may nevertheless be a source of stress for animals.**

MAINTENANCE AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOURS			
REACTIVITY		KINETITIC BEHAVIOURS	
Vocal activities		Type of Kinetic activities	
Reactivity to acustic or visual sudden cues		Times of exit from box	
Times and type of interactions with others horses		Times of put out to pasture or paddock and n. of animals in the same paddock	
Times of interactions with humans and their role (horse keeper, rider, groom, TR operators, patient, other)		Explorative behaviours	
Reaction to human transit (near box)		Use of space	
Reaction to horses transit (near box)		BODY CARE, RESTING AND SLEEPING BEHAVIOURS	
Reaction to others animals transit		Grooming activities (n. and type)	
Attitude at the entrance in the riding arena		Postures during sleeping, feeding, resting	
Attitude at the stair		Vet. Intervent.	
Attitude during stops in the riding arena		Farriers intervent.	
INGESTIVE BEHAVIOURS			
Composition			
Rationing, duration of intake, attitude during feeding			
Water assumpt.			
Others oral activities			

**Data Sheet utilised for behavioural assesement, directed to formulate basal behavioral pattern of each animal**

## RESULTS

Preliminary approach highlighted a late identification of stress related behaviours; frequent onset of physical and behavioural problems (due to features of activities as repetitiveness, constrictiveness, interference with horse motor dynamics and as precariousness of human-animal relationship). Such conditions, however, were often under-estimated or not declared, until these compromised the use of the horses.

Further ethological studies highlighted a prevalence of reactive type anomalies (tendency toward hypo reactivity, with sporadic demonstrations of hyper reactivity) in group A; in group B, motor/oral-ingestive anomalies resulted more frequent. Group C didn't show abnormal behaviours and behaviours observed resulted more consistent (in quality and variety) with specific referring ethogram, in agreement with what already prospected from others author's studies.

## DISCUSSION

Our results confirm previous observations and seem to reflect that specific and various stressors characterize TR setting, conflicting with horse's motivations and adaptive skills. These factors may determine the arise of disturbs related to a state of constraint or anxiety. Our achievements therefore highlight the necessity of animal welfare supervision by a vet and the request of more appropriate animal's management strategies.