

TAKING THE MYSTERY OUT OF BUYING YEARLINGS WITH OCD

Special Report

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Radiograph of a horse with an OCD fragment in a non-weight bearing area of the hock.



OCD Fragment Removal - shows the arthroscopic appearance during surgery.



Arthroscopic appearance of the joint following fragment removal. The prognosis following surgery for this type of OCD lesion is excellent.

The facility for vendors to present radiographs of their yearlings at Australian Thoroughbred sales has become commonplace. This 'repository' of radiographs gives the buyer the opportunity to add their veterinarian's interpretation of a yearling's radiographs to the decision-making process when assessing the level of risk with their purchase. The ultimate value of this advice is the ability to predict which radiographic abnormalities will have a significant negative impact on a horse's racing career. The predictability of radiographic interpretation is a function of the available scientific information on a specific condition and the clinical observations and experience of the veterinarian, both of which are continually increasing.

One of the more common conditions recognised on radiographs of weanlings and yearlings is osteochondrosis (OCD). This condition of the skeleton refers to an area in a joint where abnormal bone (osteo) and cartilage (chondro) development has occurred. The normal development of joints involves the transformation of cartilage to bone in late pregnancy and in the first few months after birth. Normal growth and development results in a solid bone base at the end of bones, which are covered by firmly adherent smooth, pristine joint cartilage. Aberrations in the development of the cartilage to bone process results in joint surface irregularities such as defects, fissures and segments of cartilage covered bone that are not firmly adherent to the underlying bone. With exercise these joint imperfections may progress to large cartilage flaps, free floating fragments and formation of cystic cavities, which may then cause lameness and secondary arthritis. The most commonly affected joints include the fetlocks, stifles and hocks.

As most OCD abnormalities are radiographically detectable by the time weanlings are 10 months of age, many breeders have taken the pro-active approach of dealing with those horses with OCD by undertaking preliminary

radiographs well in advance, generally 4-6 months, of sale dates. This screening procedure allows early detection, treatment and necessary convalescence before the sale, allowing the yearling to be presented in its best possible condition and also giving the individual the optimal chance of a healthy, pain-free joint throughout its racing career.

Weanlings identified with OCD lesions include those that can be resolved or improved to varying degrees with appropriate management procedures, medical therapy or surgery. As there is a diverse range in severity of OCD conditions and associated likely impact on racing performance, assessment of the radiographs in conjunction with a clinical examination should be carefully considered. The impulse to categorise all yearlings identified as having OCD or that have undergone surgery as unsuitable racehorses is unfounded. Many elite performing athletes have been successfully purchased with the knowledge they have mild forms of OCD or have successfully been treated with arthroscopic surgery prior to sale.

A buyer's decision as to the likely risk level of a specific type of OCD identified in a yearling should be guided by their veterinarian's interpretation of the radiographs, surgery reports (required by most sales companies) and clinical inspection. In general, the significance of a particular OCD defect or fragment is dependent on a number of factors. These include the particular joint that is involved, whether a direct weight bearing surface is involved, the amount of joint surface involved and the presence and severity of any secondary arthritis.

Prevention, management, treatment and prediction of athletic soundness of horses experiencing OCD has and will continue to improve. With current practices of early detection and treatment methods available for horses with OCD, buyers can purchase from a more informed position with carefully considered veterinary advice. **R**