

San Francisco Chronicle

Game Ready's Cooling Therapy Works Well for Humans & Horses

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Friday, July 28, 2006



Chronicle / Lance Iversen

Dynah Korhummel likes to joke that Game Ready, a therapeutic device popular with professional athletes to treat sore or strained muscles with a powerful combination of cold and compression, was tested on humans before it was used on animals.

Now that 90 professional sports teams, 160 universities and 500 professional athletes routinely apply these form-fitting, flexible wraps to reduce swelling and boost circulation, Game Ready has adapted the technology for horses.

The equine market is increasingly attractive to companies because horse lovers will go to such great lengths and expense to keep their charges healthy, particularly sports horses that experience the same aches, pains and injuries as their human counterparts. And companies are aiming to tap that vast market.

There are 9.2 million horses and 2 million horse owners in the United States, according to a 2005 study commissioned by Washington lobbying group the American Horse Council. The California horse industry produces \$4.1 billion in goods and services, the study found.

After a hard ride, trainers and riders usually hose down a horse's legs with cold water, put on ice boots or massage the legs with ice in a Styrofoam or plastic cup, said Korhummel, 45, a rider with 20 years of experience and a contender for the 1996 Canadian Olympic team. She was recruited 2 1/2 years ago to head up the Berkeley company's initial equine efforts.

Now, Game Ready and a Texas company, ThermoTek, offer an easier, albeit more expensive, solution: wraps that cool and compress a horse's leg evenly without the risk of laminitis, the painful tissue inflammation that threatens the life of Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro. Both devices also treat injuries from muscle tears to strained tendons.

Korhummel brings first-hand knowledge of technology and horses to her job: She left a career in software sales to run a feed store in Brentwood so she could spend more time with her New Zealand thoroughbred, Ben, and two retired horses. She and Ben compete in three-day events that are a triathlon for horses: dressage, endurance and jumping.

Treatments Effective

Last week in a stable in the Contra Costa County township of Knightsen, Korhummel pointed to Ben's ankle that had been punctured. After treatments with Game Ready for 30 minutes three times a day for two days, the swelling had all but disappeared. Two more days of treatments enabled the pair to ride again.

To show how the Game Ready device works, Korhummel filled the reservoir in the control unit with 5 pounds of ice then added 2 cups of water. She wrapped Ben's slender legs that support his 1,200-pound frame in the Game Ready sleeves and plugged in the control unit. She adjusted the temperature while the sleeves intermittently massaged his muscles and tendons. Ben, short for Benetton's Victory, licked his lips, dropped his head and seemed to fall asleep. "It's soothing," Korhummel said.

ThermoTek's ProThermo works in a similar way, but it uses a thermal electric chip that can cool or heat the water and does not require ice.

Korhummel tested Game Ready on 25 horses at Golden Gate Fields race track. Only one filly had to try it twice before relaxing. Now stables, veterinarians and therapists across the country are using Game Ready or ProThermo to prevent and treat injuries in horses that compete in events or races.

Portable, easy-to-use devices that deliver this combination of cold and compression "will be the standard of care for cold therapy," said Dr. James Orsini, associate professor of surgery at the New Bolton School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, where Barbaro is being treated. The veterinary school has two Game Ready units.

Medical and therapeutic advances developed for people are increasingly being used on horses and other animals because of the physiological similarities, said Sonoma County physical therapist Wendy Albrecht, who switched from treating humans to horses.

Missteps are common, and only the best treatments survive the scrutiny of horse lovers, who are notoriously demanding and discriminating when it comes to therapies that lessen pain and speed recovery, said Lexington, Ky., equine business consultant Kimberly Brown. In Kentucky, known as the horse capital of the world, owners are experimenting with such cutting-edge technology as hyperbaric oxygen therapy chambers.

"The horse industry is unique from all other industries in that it is full of passion at all levels," Brown said. "When they say the horse comes first, they really mean it. The horse industry draws people in with the most amazing passion I have ever seen. It's a lot different from dealing with an inanimate product that doesn't live, breathe and feel."

Game Ready's cost, between \$3,200 and \$4,900, is just a drop in a bottomless bucket for horse lovers, Korhummel said.

Sales back that contention. Game Ready Equine, which started in 2004 with \$250,000, had sales of \$1.2 million in 2005 and is on track to \$5.4 million this year, Korhummel said.

"A Great Need"

ThermoTek, which sells control units for \$1,499 to \$2,995 and wraps for \$40 to \$200, focuses on treating people after surgery and not on the equine market, which accounts for about 10 percent of all medical product sales, said President Tony Quisenberry. "We discovered a great need there" for people and, increasingly animals, said Quisenberry, whose company also makes products that lower the temperature of computers, lasers and X-ray equipment.

Albrecht and Cindy Krout, owners of North Coast Equine Physical Therapy, a mobile treatment business in Penngrove that averages 135 treatments a month from ultrasound to cold therapy, are converts. They say ProThermo has proven to be an invaluable tool in preventing and treating injuries in horses. "It's pretty dramatic," Albrecht said. "We're really happy with it."

ProThermo also won over Lexington equine therapist Mimi Porter, who said she is always on the lookout for the latest in equine pain relief. Porter, who was the first equine therapist to serve as a member of the Olympic staff in Atlanta in 1996, has a Game Ready device and two ProThermo devices.

Barbara Ellison, ex-wife of Oracle Chief Executive Officer Larry Ellison who keeps dozens of sport horses at her Wild Turkey Farm in the Woodside hills, is bullish on Game Ready. She and her Grand Prix trainer Mandy Porter have been using it for two years.

"It's better than anything I have ever used before," Ellison said. "Moving the cold hose around is a boring job. This takes the worry out of it. I know the horse is getting iced and iced all over, not just in one spot."