



Hitting the spot: Jim works on loosening the shoulders and forelimb of this coloured pony, above, and locates a point on the inside of the knee that, with timely pressure, can help encourage the horse to "let go" when asking for forelimb stretches, right. Far right, Jim stretches the neck of former racehorse Jim, who was very stiff

Pictures: Kate Edser

Masterson of relaxation puts method to the test

By Kate Edser

GENTLE, sensitive and empathetic are words we all wish to be worthy of when riding and handling our horses. Add to this list confidence, perception, observation and skill and the result is a person around which horses are inevitably comfortable.

In this case, these qualities are applied to US-based Jim Masterston, a self-taught equine massage expert who was persuaded to hold two clinics in the South West earlier this month, one at West Wilts Equestrian Centre and the second at the Bristol-based equine charity HorseWorld.

Jim's skill, developed over the past 10 years to the point where he now treats many horses competing at international level, is called the Masterston Method – integrated equine performance bodywork – which uses the horse's response to touch as a guide.

In a nutshell, the correct touch will encourage the horse to relax, letting go of stress, so the muscles can be massaged and manipulated.

Using the principle that less is more, Jim begins with a very light touch, with an "air gap" between horse and hand. He describes the increases in pressure thus: what it would take to squash an egg yolk, a grape, a soft lemon and a hard lime. In response to these stimuli, the horse will react in several ways to indicate an area of the body that needs some work – through blinking, twitching the lips, shifting weight and fidgeting. When "letting go" or relaxing, the horses might sigh, lick and chew, roll the eyes, snort, shake the head or flex to scratch a foreleg.

Horse participates in the process

Jim applies his methods to the poll, the neck, the point where the neck, shoulder and wither connect, and the sacroiliac and lumbar areas – "the key junctions of the body that most commonly are pulled out of alignment in performance horses".

He says: "It is a method in which the horse participates in the process. He tells you exactly where the stress is, how much pressure to use, and when it is released."

"It applies a combination of techniques to release tension in the muscles and connective tissues that restrict comfort and movement in the skeleton."

To explain the process quickly, Jim uses the words search, response, stay and release and with these words still fresh in our minds, we set off for a practical session using six of HorseWorld's residents.

A good place to start, Jim explained, so we could tune in to the initial process, was the bladder meridian. This is an acupuncture meridian that connects to other major meridians. It starts above the eyes, travels between the ears, alongside the top line, over the rump, down the muscular groove on the quarters either side of the tail, in the groove between the flexor tendons, over the fetlock and finishes on the back edge of the foot at the coronary band.

Unlike almost everyone else on the course, I had never been trained in any kind of therapy, but I found it easy to detect in the horse's face (search and response) reactions at various points along the meridian. As Jim had taught us, I kept my hand over these points (stay) until the horse showed a relaxation (release) response, then I moved on.

Next, we focussed on unlocking the shoulders, neck and head with a series of exercises, closely observing the horse's reaction at all times and allowing them time to show their response by stepping away periodically. Almost without fail, after every successful limb stretch (when the horse will relax into the movement) there fol-



lowed licking and chewing, yawning or some other sign of release.

Interestingly, Jim has a theory that most of the tightness he sees in the front end of horses are caused by pain in the feet. One of our guinea pig horses was 13-year-old Jim, a former racehorse with a lot of miles on the clock and a multitude of scars on his body, including the tell-tale signs of bar-firing.

He also had brittle and flat feet typical of many thoroughbreds. Not surprisingly, he was tight

everywhere, but particularly in the neck. At first he resisted, fidgeting badly, and held himself against any attempt to ask him to bend "let go", but once he started to relax he could not stop licking and yawning. And I could feel an obvious improvement in his mobility.

By the afternoon, when we got around to learning how to release the back end, again with simple exercises, the horses had endured several hours of our attempts at the Masterston Method, and were all beginning to dose off.

■ Jim's visit to England was arranged by Penny Gunter, a McTimoney-trained equine sports therapist based in North Somerset. Penny and Jim are hoping to run more clinics in the area in October this year. You do not have to be an equine therapist to attend, the clinics are aimed at horse owners and trainers as well as professionals.

If you'd like to register your interest, contact Penny on 07974 250098 or email her at pengunty@aol.com. You can order Jim's DVD from his website at www.masterstonmethod.com.

Weekend for dressage fans

TICKETS are on sale this month for a weekend of dressage at The Hand Equestrian Centre near Clevedon.

The modernised venue is again the venue for a charity dressage to music gala evening on Friday, November 16, and a lecture demonstration by German coach Conrad Schumacher the following day.

Entries are now being taken for the charity contest, which has a £500 first prize. Proceeds from the evening will be divided between BBC Children In Need and Penny Brohn Cancer Care, based in Bristol. Organisers Helen Griffiths and Celia Gadd are hoping to exceed the £7,500 that last year's event raised.

Riders will be asked to perform a freestyle dressage to music test of their choice from Medium level upwards. After each test the judges (List One judge Isobel Wessels, Olympic trainer Conrad Schumacher and a professional musician) will give their comments, but it is the audience that decides who wins, so riders are encouraged to be as entertaining as possible.

There will also be an auction of promises and sponsor Sprout Rocking Horses will be selling tickets

for a raffle to win a rocking horse. The closing date for entries is October 15.

However, places will be limited so riders are asked to send their entry with a short biography of themselves and their horses, stating how they think they can entertain the audience. For entry forms or tickets, either email celia@equinecanineandcountry.co.uk,

or send an SAE to Celia Gadd, Westside, Bow Farm, Badgworth, Somerset. BS26 2QA.

Conrad Schumacher and Aderro Productions will be presenting a dressage workshop on Saturday, November 17.

Conrad has been training dressage riders since 1977 and has been involved with team riders for Germany, the United States, Holland and Great Britain. In total he has trained more than 4,000 combinations and his students have won over 40 international medals.

Conrad, assisted by Isobel Wessels and British Olympic rider Emile Faurie, will demonstrate his system of training, warming up and test riding with combinations from Novice to Grand Prix.

For more details, visit www.aderrodressage.co.uk or email rhaganwhite@btopenworld.com or Celia Gadd, as above.

Tickets will cost £40 and the day will run from 9.30am to 4.30pm. There will be an informative booklet, filled with tips from Conrad with space for your own notes. Tickets will be available from August 1 from the website above or by calling Rhagan White on 07831752791, or Celia Gadd on 07779 716826.



In the spotlight: Last year's charity dressage to music winner Matt Frost, aboard the stallion Donnersong

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On course to harmony

IF you would like to be more in harmony with your horse, to iron out "kinks" and "blockages" in his way of going, then you might want to sign up for a course being held in the area in September.

Essentially, it's about creating balance between horse and rider and, according to Cat Wilson, who is organising the course: "Connected Riding is a holistic approach to classical riding principles that bio-mechanically enhances freedom of movement for the performance, health and longevity of both horse and rider."

The clinic, being held at a farm near Radstock, north Somerset, is to be taught

by Peggy Cummings. Peggy was one of the first Tellington Touch Equine Awareness Method practitioners and, over years, she has created her own method into a system she calls Connected Riding.

The clinic is being held from September 7-9 and costs £330 for the three days, excluding stabling. Those who attend without their horse pay £35 for one day, £60 for two days or £85 for all three. To book, call 01761 233319, 07921 259758 or email catwilson@hotmail.com.

For more information on TTEAM and Connected Riding, visit www.tteam.co.uk and www.connectedriding.com