



Sammie Costas '09 (Valparaiso, Ind.) and Nick Steffen '09 (Avilla, Ind.) watch the eyes of their horse for a relaxation response while performing the touch-and-release massage therapy program. Culver photo/Jan Garrison

Giving four-legged athletes the treatment they deserve

Any athlete will perform better when his or her muscles are relaxed, joints are pain free, and everything is in alignment. It's true with humans, equine massage therapist Jim Masterson said, and it is true with horses.

Masterson, who works primarily with horses in hunting and jumping competitions, was at Culver to work with the honors in equine science students as part of his Montgomery Lecture Series visit on April 15-16.

"You don't just send the pitcher home after a game," Masterson said. The team's trainers will work with him to relieve any soreness or tension and prepare him for his next outing. He does the same for horses, he added.

Just like a human, a horse's muscles will continue to tighten over time until something is pulled out of alignment, Masterson said. By releasing the stress and tension in the affected muscles, the horse performs better, he added. This allows the rider to perform better than his competitors, and "who doesn't want that?"

Tension in horses builds up in the neck, shoulders, withers, forelegs, and hind legs. Generally, where there is a junction, there is probably some tension, he explained. And, like humans, the cause of the tension may be located someplace else. Just as poor fitting shoes in humans can cause pain in the knees or hips,

poor fitting shoes on a horse can cause pain in its shoulders or hips.

Other factors of tension and pain can be the horse's teeth and saddle fit. While riders will make several adjustments to get the right fit for them, they seldom think about the right saddle fit for the horse. "The horse just wants the same consideration," he added.

The secret to getting a horse to release that built-up tension is the level of touch. Masterson said he uses various levels, from using the strength to squeeze grapes to that of squeezing the juice out of lemons, to manipulate the horse's



Ashley Eberhart '09 (Downers Grove, Ill.) listens as massage therapist Jim Masterson discusses the different ways a horse might react when it releases the tension that has built up in its muscles. Culver photo/Jan Garrison

muscles. But, generally, horses require a much lighter touch than people might imagine.

Called the touch-and-release method, Masterson said simply running the tips of the fingers lightly down the horse's neck, back, and hind quarters can indicate where the tension spots are. The line followed is known as the "bladder meridian" by acupuncture specialists, he said. And simply holding one's fingertips on that spot is often enough to bring the blood to the muscle and get it to relax.

It's easy to see when you find a tension spot, Masterson added, because the horse will have a reaction, like blinking the eyes. As you hold your fingers on the spot, the horse will let you know when it begins to relax. It will start licking and chewing, blinking a lot, or fidgeting.

As the students worked with the horses, Masterson went around the group to help them find the tension spots. He said some horses will have very visible reactions and others will take some time since it against their basic nature. But every horse did show signs of relaxing, just as Masterson predicted.

A key factor is taking the time to really focus on the horse, he said. It really doesn't take a lot to get a reaction, he added, and the size of the horse doesn't matter. He has worked with Amish draft horses and found they take an extremely light touch. They will bow their heads while you are working on them, so their size isn't a problem.

But Masterson cautioned about trying to hurry through the routine. To be effective, you have to let the horse show you it is ready for you to move to the next spot. "Throw away the clock; you're on the horse's time now."

