

THE MASTERSON METHOD

In his new book, Olympic massage therapist Jim Masterson introduces his targeted, interactive equine massage method. Here's his technique for relaxing a horse's poll area.

By Jim Masterson and Stefanie Reinhold

Pain and tension anywhere in the horse's body is reflected in the poll. Conversely, when tension accumulates in the poll, things start going wrong in the rest of the body.

Pain in the forelimb or foot, for example, can cause tension and pain through the muscles into the neck and into the muscles of the poll. Excessive loading or pain in one forelimb can cause more tension and stiffness on the same side of the neck, and eventually resistance to bending in that direction. This can also cause pain and resistance to bending on the same side in the area of the poll, which in turn can lead to problems with the respective lead and lead changes, as well as other difficulties such as restricted range of motion.

Conversely, when pain and tension accumulate in the poll, the brachiocephalic and other muscles connected to

the forelimb tighten, thus taking away the ability of these and other muscles to absorb concussion. This puts more stress and strain on the forelimb and foot, which can then lead to injury or lameness, causing more pain in the poll, and so on: a vicious cycle.

Similarly, pain in the saddle area or back can create tension in the area at the top of the poll. Tension through the muscles of the back and topline along the supraspinous and nuchal ligaments contract the back and create tension and pain in the poll. The same vicious cycle of pain and tension affects the poll and back.

The atlas—the first cervical (neck) vertebra behind the poll—and sacrum, which is located at the base of the spine, are connected. When there is tension on the atlas, there will almost always be tension on the sacrum, and vice versa: Tension on the sacrum means tension

LATERAL CERVICAL FLEXION: STEP-BY-STEP

Step 1. Place your left hand on the horse's nose, and your right hand or fingertips on the bottom of the wing of the atlas about four inches below and behind the ear. (Position your fingers on the bony part of the atlas, not in the groove between the jaw and the atlas.)

Now bring the nose slightly toward you with the left hand. Put very gentle pressure toward the opposite ear with the fingertips or palm of your right hand. Watch for the eye to soften, feeling for relaxation in the atlas and poll area.

Step 2. Soften both hands. Move your right hand two or three inches down the vertebrae of the neck, keeping your left hand on the nose.

Step 3. Bring the nose back farther, resting the fingertips of the right hand on the neck. Wiggle the nose gently, watching for the eye to soften. Soften both hands again and move the right hand farther down the vertebrae of the neck. Step back toward the shoulder as you go.

Step 4. Bring the nose back farther, resting the fingertips of the right hand farther down on the neck, stepping back as you go to make room for you to bring his head closer to the shoulder. Wiggle the nose gently, watching for the eye to soften. Soften both hands again and move the right hand farther down to the lower neck.

Step 5. Keep bringing the nose back farther toward the point of the shoulder, stepping back as you go. Wiggle the nose as you focus the bending of the lower neck with your right hand.

Step 6. Step back and allow the horse to release: lick and chew, yawn, sneeze, snort or "shake loose."

Adapted by permission from Beyond Horse Massage: A Breakthrough Interactive Method for Alleviating Soreness, Strain, and Tension, Trafalgar Square Books. Available from HorseBooksEtc.com; 800-952-5813.

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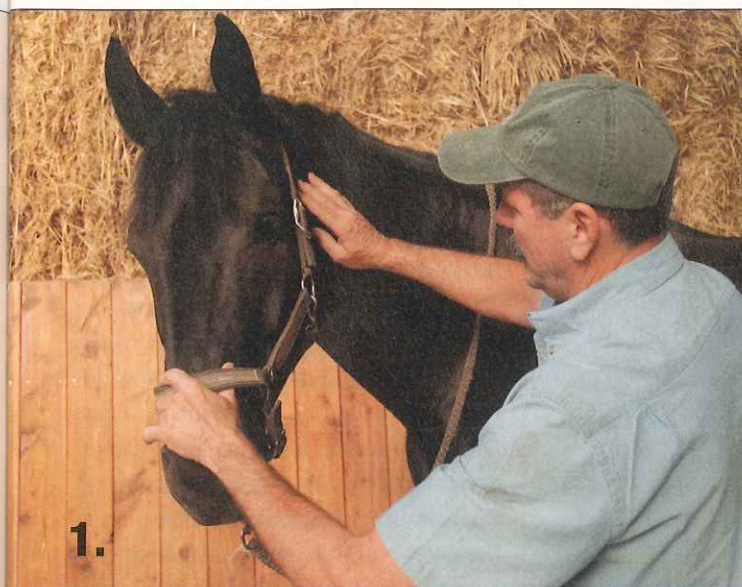
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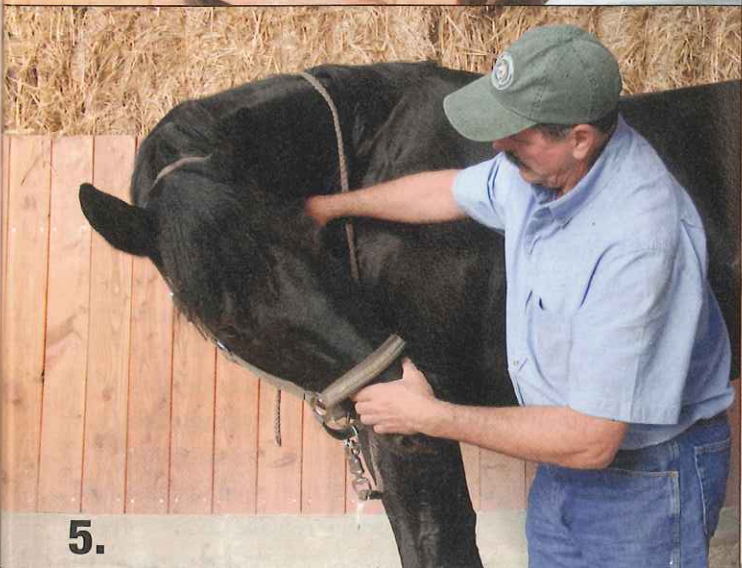
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Masterson asks for gentle movement using the “nose-hand” (above), while keeping his “neck-hand” as soft as possible.



MAIN PRINCIPLES OF RELEASE

These principles apply during the lateral cervical flexion exercise and in every other technique involving movement. When you move a horse's joint—or junction—through its natural range of motion in a relaxed state, tension is released in that joint or junction:

This is how you use the Masterson Method to bypass the horse's survival or bracing response and allow the horse to release tension in key joints and junctions of the body that most affect performance:

1. By staying under his survival or bracing response, you can move the joint or junction in a relaxed state.
2. By giving the horse nothing to resist, you stay under his survival or bracing response.
3. By staying soft and slow enough, you give him nothing to resist.
4. By following the horse's responses to your touch, you are able to stay soft and slow enough, which allows you to bypass the horse's survival or bracing response.

on the atlas. When you release tension on the atlas, you are also releasing tension on the sacrum, and when you work on the sacrum, you are also working on the atlas. How cool is that?

Lateral cervical flexion, which is demonstrated on page 69, is a technique for manipulating the poll-atlas junction. The goal of the technique is to get lateral movement of the poll and neck vertebrae. This, in turn, helps achieve improved bending and suppleness in the poll and neck, and extension and suspension in the front end. Release of tension in the poll will release tension in the entire body.

TIPS FOR DOING LATERAL CERVICAL FLEXION

When performing lateral cervical flexion, don't worry too much about the exact placement of your hand. As long as the horse is moving the muscles and vertebrae of the neck through his natural range of motion in a general way, you are doing it correctly. However, one horse will not give you the same range of motion as another. Except with very stiff or old horses, by the time you have worked your right hand all the way down his neck, the “nose-hand” should have guided the horse's nose to a point in the area of his shoulder.

When you properly administer this technique, you are circumventing the horse's flight-or-fight instinct by giving him nothing to brace against. Gently asking the horse to bring any part of the body voluntarily to you will be much more effective than forcefully initiating movement. Asking him to volunteer puts the horse mentally with you, and his nervous system automatically in the “release” mode, rather than the resist or “survival” mode.

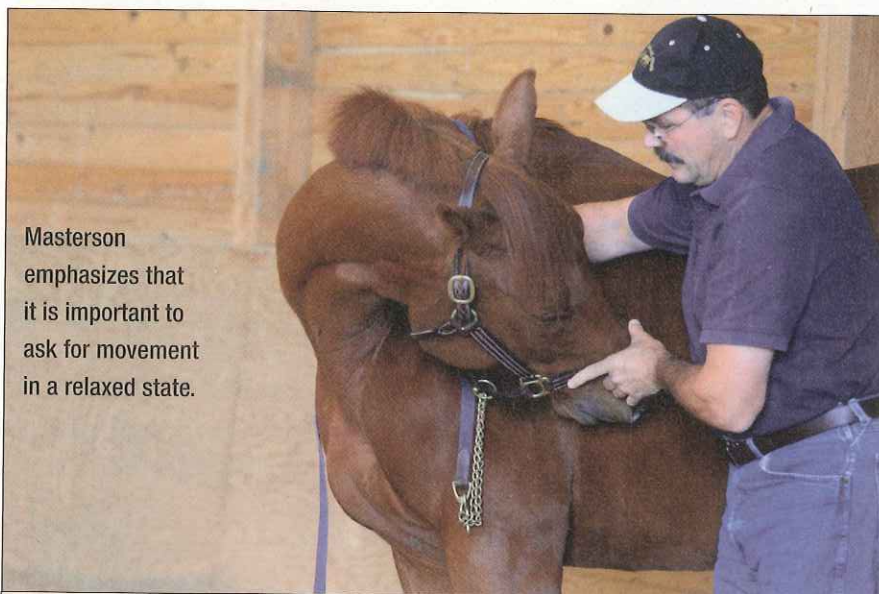
The way to get the horse to move with you—meaning to yield to your touch—is for you to soften when you run into resistance. Show him that the path of least resistance is to move with you, not against you. We humans tend to push, hold or pull when the horse resists what we are asking. We need to resist this instinct and—even though it may seem counterintuitive—release pressure instead. This way you get both the horse's mind and nervous system to work with you instead of bracing against you. Note: Avoid "clawing" the horse's nose, especially with fingernails. Keep your nose-hand soft and use the flat of your fingers.

Do a little on one side, and then the other. It's good to alternate side to side if you need to go over an area more than twice in a row. If you go over one area over and over, the horse will start just "going through the motions" rather than releasing. Go back and forth, from side to side. You can tell enough is enough when the horse stops giving you releases.

Be sure to step back periodically and look for signs of release. This is the fun part! Allow the horse to "shake loose" or give any other signs of release such as yawning, licking and chewing, blinking, shifting weight from side to side.

Note: When you step back to see what the horse has to say, step way back. Some horses need a lot of space before they're comfortable enough to show you the signs of release. We may think that by not touching them we are giving them enough room, but they're thinking, Get out of my space, man! in a silent, horse sort of way.

When you're not getting the releases you think you should be getting, step back into the corner and give him a chance to let go.



Masterson emphasizes that it is important to ask for movement in a relaxed state.

Don't force it

Some horses are more flexible than others. One horse may find it easy to bend the neck and follow your nose-hand, while another might be physically unable to reach around even halfway. Resistance may be caused by stiffness or lack of range of motion, or by soreness. In either case, go softly and don't force it. Your goal is to release tension in the soft tissues around the vertebrae by asking them to move in a relaxed state. If you find yourself bracing against the horse, it isn't working. Soften!

You are looking for only an improvement in range of movement. If you get an improvement or release response each time, you are getting results without the risk of harming the horse. You can then go over the area again, getting further improvement. Each time you go over an area and obtain releases, it's as if you are "peeling layers of an onion."

TROUBLESHOOTING: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

■ **What if the horse resists?** In general when a horse pulls away, your first impulse is to pull back. Here's a little tip: Don't pull back! Yield with the asking hand slightly, just enough so that he stops pulling, then immediately ask again. If you give the horse nothing to resist against, even for just a split second, he'll usually stop resisting. You can ask him to keep his head in the general area until he relaxes, but when he stops fussing, you must immediately

soften your hand before asking again. By doing this, you'll find yourself giving the horse a little room to resist and then relax while keeping his nose "in the neighborhood."

When the horse pulls his head away, it's almost always for a good reason, usually because of pain or tension in the poll. By softening, you're giving him a chance to release the tension.

■ **What if the horse tries to get his nose out from under my hand?** Some horses just do not like your hand on their nose. When this happens, you can either use the halter's noseband instead of his nose, or hook your thumb under

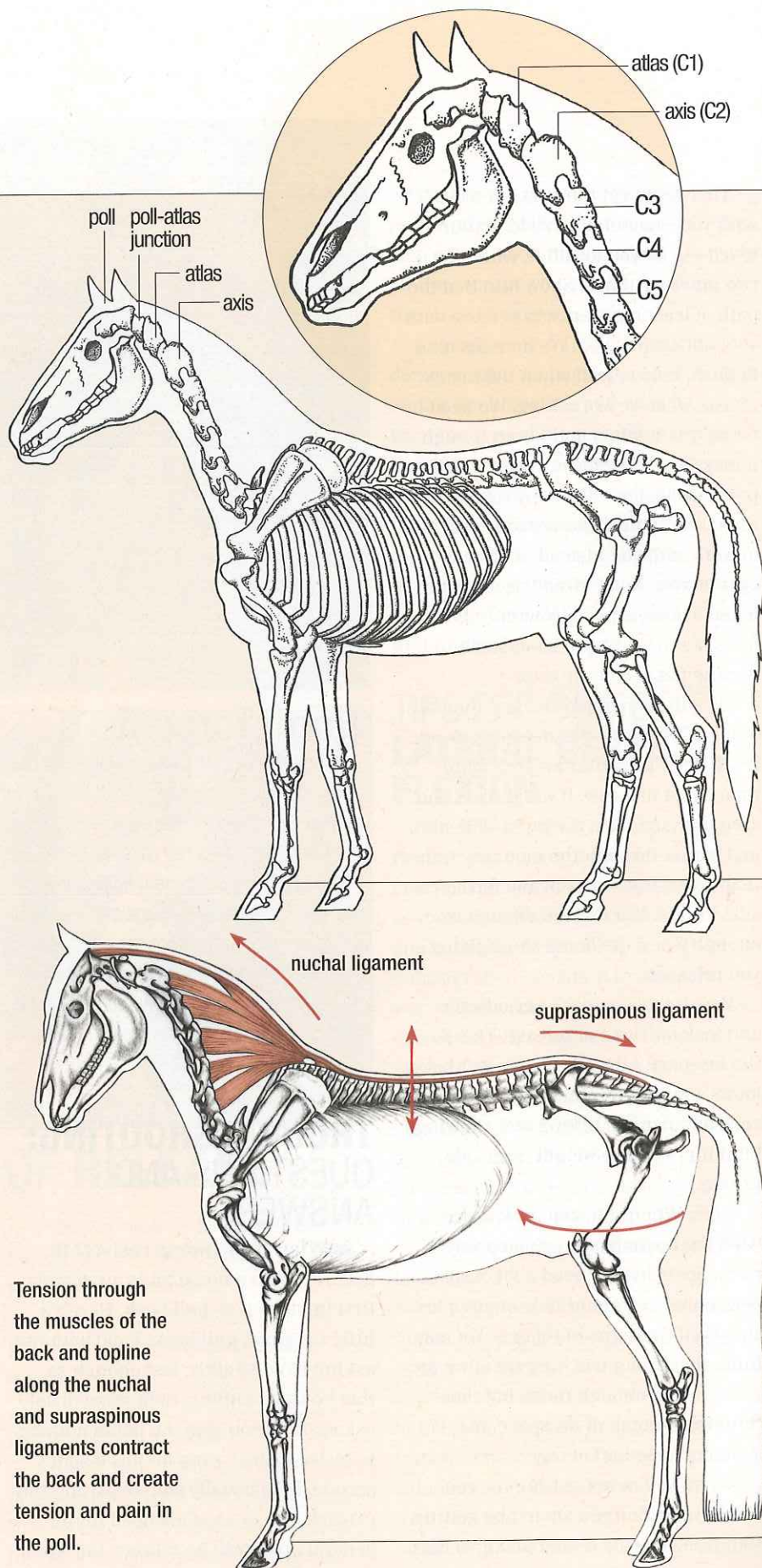
ANATOMY OF THE POLL AREA

Poll: In describing my techniques, I refer to the poll as the area extending from the top of the horse's head (occiput) to the first vertebra of the neck (atlas).

Atlas: The vertebrae of the horse's neck are called the cervical vertebrae. The atlas is the first cervical vertebra, behind the poll. It is also referred to as C1. To find the atlas, stand on the left side of the horse's neck and feel behind and to the side of the poll: You will feel and see a hollow space one inch behind the horse's jaw, and just behind that a bony bump or ridge. This ridge is the wing of the atlas.

Axis: The axis is the second cervical vertebra (C2). From the atlas, slide your fingers a few inches farther down toward the shoulder, and you will feel a flat area. The axis itself cannot ordinarily be felt, but it is located underneath this flat area.

Additional cervical vertebrae (C3, C4, C5, C6 and C7): To find the cervical vertebrae, start at the atlas and run your fingers down along the thickest part of the neck. You will not feel the axis, but in a few inches you will feel a bump, which is the third vertebra (C3), then the fourth bump (C4), the fifth (C5) and the sixth (C6). You probably will not feel the seventh (C7) because it is usually underneath the shoulder blade (scapula). If you cannot feel any of these bumps, find a skinnier horse to explore this part of the anatomy.



Tension through the muscles of the back and topline along the nuchal and supraspinous ligaments contract the back and create tension and pain in the poll.

and your index finger over the noseband while keeping your hand on the nose. This way, when he tries to shake you off you are able to keep your hand on his nose without having to grab.

Note: You can be firm with the horse when asking him to do what you want but you have to remember to soften your hand immediately when he yields to you or he will continue bracing. If you find yourself bracing with the horse, it isn't working. Remember the principle of nonresistance.

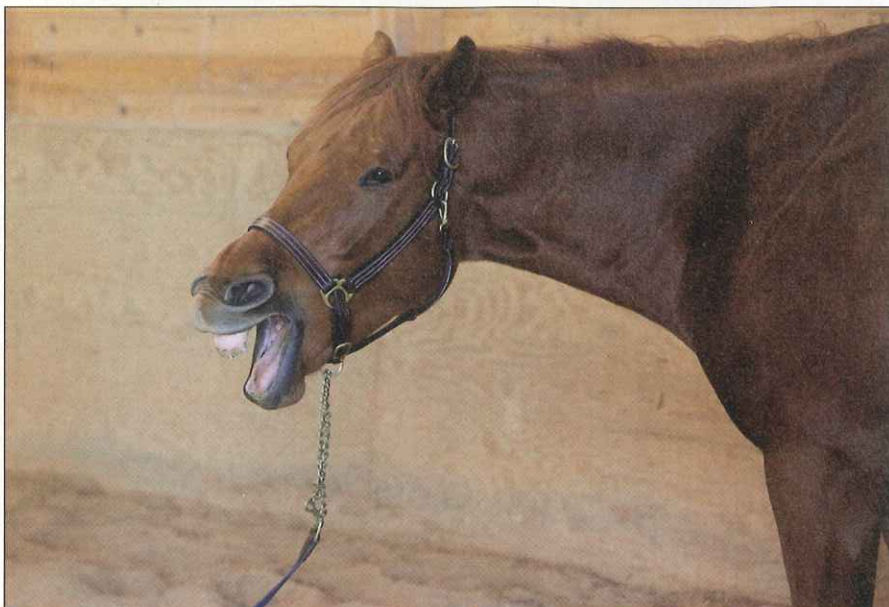
■ **What if he pushes his nose around to his shoulder immediately?**

The horse is bracing by anticipating what you'd like him to do and "performing" the task ahead rather than staying with you. Ask him to bring his nose back out to the front, relax there and then ask for movement again.

■ **What if he "corkscrews" his head sideways or "flattens his head" as I bring the nose around?** The horse will turn his head sideways or flatten it if the vertebrae of the upper neck are restricted or not able to flex laterally (sideways). He is trying to do what you are asking (bending the neck sideways) but since those vertebrae are restricted laterally, he brings his nose around by twisting his neck.

You can help him release some of this restriction by gently lifting upward on the nose as you bring the head around. Lift a little and soften a little ... lift a little, and soften a little. Remember not to force it. You are just looking for an improvement.

■ **What if he throws his head and absolutely refuses to relax?** When this happens it may be an indicator that there is a lot of discomfort in this area. You are now bringing the horse's attention to it and any contact at all is too much. When he absolutely won't soften, move to an area of his body that is more



Periodically step back and look for yawning, licking and chewing or other signs of release.

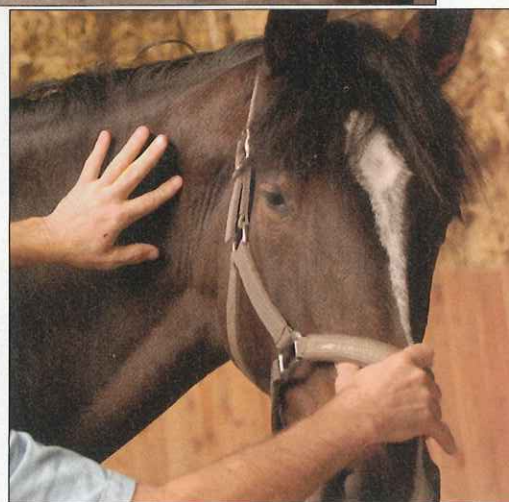
comfortable and work your way back to the poll. Try starting on the opposite side or, if that is too reactive, at the lower neck, working your way gradually up the neck to the atlas.

If this doesn't work, try holding the palm of your hand an inch away from the poll and soon he will stop throwing his head and start to release. You don't even need to touch him. In most cases it won't take a horse long to realize that you aren't hurting him and he will start releasing. From there you may gradually be able to use "air gap" or "egg yolk," if you need it (see "Types of Pressure," page 74).

Note: The most common mistake in this exercise is to use too much pressure with the hand on the neck. If this is where the horse is sore, he will brace against it or resist. Keep this hand as soft as possible and still be able to wiggle the nose.

Soften the hands even more until you see the eyes soften or blink. When you see that, then you are soft enough.

Remember to step back from time to time to give him a chance to release. Give him at least 30 seconds—more if you think he needs it. Then step up and continue the work.



Place your thumb under the noseband and your index finger over the top so that you can keep your hand in place without having to grab if your horse shakes his head.

■ **What if my horse walks forward or keeps moving his hind end away from me to keep from bending in the neck?** Some horses do this to try to avoid bending in the neck. Some try to walk forward, others simply move their rump around in a circle until you get dizzy and quit.

The first thing to do: When in doubt, soften the hands. Try to "stay under the radar" by keeping the horse relaxed but still get the movement you want. If the horse still walks forward or moves his hind end away, every time he moves his feet, use your body weight to ask him to step away from you (move laterally)

When a horse moves his feet, use your body weight to ask him to step away from you.



If the horse braces, raises his head or fidgets, soften your hands and yield, just "keeping him in the neighborhood."



TYPES OF PRESSURE

The following five terms are used to describe the different levels of pressure you apply during the Masterson Method bodywork exercises:

air gap—Barely touching the surface. If you were to run your hand lightly down your arm, you would be barely brushing across the hairs on your arm.

egg yolk—This is the amount of pressure it would take to barely indent a raw egg yolk with your fingertip. It might be a good idea to break an egg in a bowl to see how light this actually is.

grape—The amount of pressure it would take to indent a grape.

soft lemon—The amount of pressure it would take to squeeze a soft, ripe lemon.

hard lime—The amount of pressure it would take to squeeze a hard, unripe lime. In some cases this can be just about as hard as you can push.

with each step he takes. This will do three things:

- It keeps him from spinning around you.
- It will eventually have him standing against the side of the stall, where he can't spin around.
- When the horse moves laterally, he tends to let go of any bracing.

■ **What if the horse fidgets?** If you are doing the exercise properly, meaning softly and under the horse's radar, then the fidgeting comes when he is feeling some tension about to release. This bothers him just a little bit and he fidgets as he lets it go. In this case, the solution is to soften your hands slightly and ask the horse to stay with the exercise for just a second longer.

Then step back and see what he has to say. Often, staying with it just a little longer helps him to let it go.

The horse will also fidget if the pressure you are using is too much and you are bringing his attention to the tension in an uncomfortable or even painful way. In this case, the solution is also to soften your hands and wait for him to relax. Then you continue what you are doing, asking for movement in a relaxed state. When his eyes are soft or blinking, you are soft enough. If you feel even the slightest bracing, it will be difficult for him to release.

In either case, the solution is to soften your hands so that the horse softens, and then continue gently with the movement. 🐾

Jim Masterson served as equine massage therapist for the 2006, 2008 and 2010 USET Endurance Teams, and his equine clientele includes competitors in the FEI World Cup, Pan-American and World Equestrian Games. For more information about his massage technique go to www.mastersonmethod.com.