





A New Alternative

Going beyond massage, the Masterson Method is an innovative form of touch therapy that works with a horse's natural instincts. Even better—it's something you can do yourself.

BY JIM MASTERSON, WITH STEFANIE REINHOLD

Does your horse have a tendency to feel “off” sometimes, for no discernable reason? Does he often seem stiff, or resistant to training? Have the times or scores of your ordinarily good horse been trending in the wrong direction lately? Do you seek a way to enhance your horse's performance without resorting to medications?

These are some of the problems I help riders deal with through my alternative therapy called the Masterson Method. It's a unique, interactive method of equine bodywork in which you learn to recognize and use the horse's response to your touch, to find and release accumulated tension in key junctions of the body that most affect performance.

In contrast to most traditional treatment modalities, the Masterson Method enables the horse to *actively participate* in the process of releasing tension. It is something you do *with* the horse, rather than *to* the horse. In fact, *if you don't allow the horse to participate, it doesn't work!*

Although I developed this bodywork to improve performance in equine athletes competing in high-demand environments, such as show jumping, harness racing, endurance, reining, and barrel racing, its intuitive and interactive nature can do more than improve performance. It also enables you to access a new level of communication with the horse.

The results of this interaction are both *visual* and *palpable* (you can feel them with your hand). You'll note visual signs of release of tension in the horse's body; improved performance, suppleness, mobility, and comfort; and most importantly, the immediate bond of trust that begins to develop as a result.

The Masterson Method, which I'll explain further in this article, is a very practical, hands-on approach that you can

begin using immediately. You don't have to have knowledge of anatomy or massage to begin using the basic techniques, and the techniques themselves are easy to learn. They're covered in depth in my new book, *Beyond Horse Massage*, and in the accompanying DVD. I also teach the techniques at seminars.

How Does It Work?

One reason this method works so well to alleviate soreness, strain, and tension, is because of the horse's incredible awareness and sensitivity to outside stimuli. This is how he survives. Working *with* this sensitivity, you can access a level of the horse's nervous system that enables him to release deep stress in his muscles, connective tissue, and structure. To do this you must learn how to use touch, and how to read what the horse is telling you through his responses and body language.

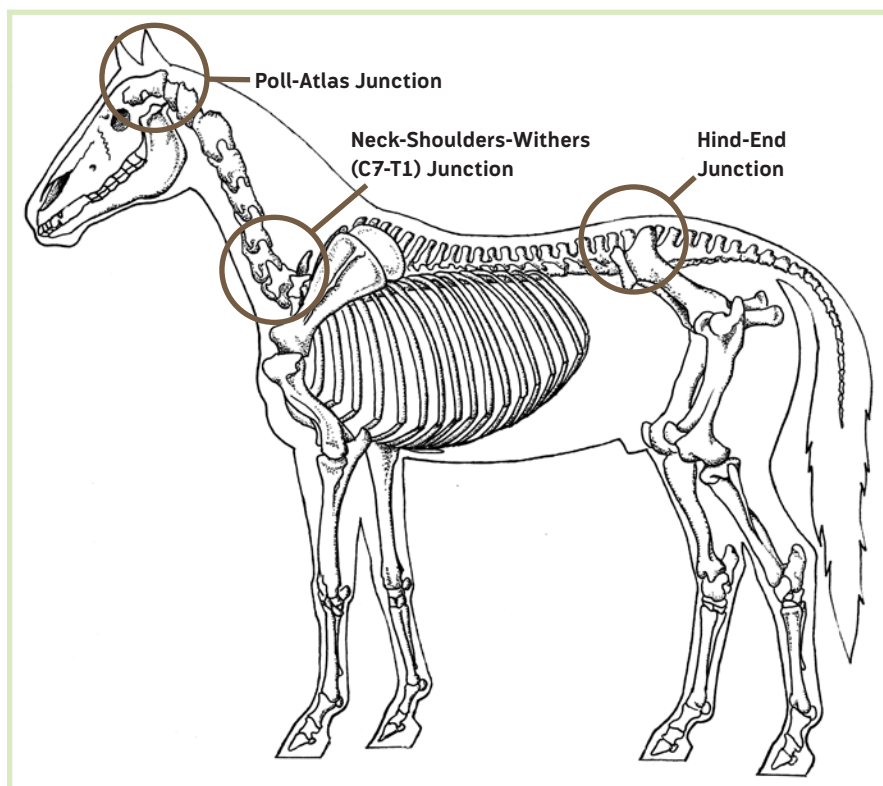
To fully understand this, you need to be aware of two underlying principles of the horse's survival instincts. First, he's a *prey animal*; second, he's a *herd animal*.

As a prey animal, the horse's survival in nature depends on his ability to flee from danger. Getting away from danger, intrusion, or discomfort is the horse's *first survival response*. If he doesn't have this option, as is normally the case when with humans, the horse's *second survival response* is to brace, push, or guard against intrusion, discomfort, or pain. By applying my techniques at levels of pressure that *don't* trigger this bracing survival response (whether it's internal or external), and knowing from the horse's responses when this is happening, you can bypass the bracing response and access that part of the nervous system that will release tension.

As a herd animal, the horse relies, to a large part, on body language for communication in the herd. This can be seen from the most obvious flattening of ears and baring of teeth to the slightest softening of the eye, shift of weight, change in breathing, and even subtler signs.

The horse will instinctively do its best not to show outward signs of pain or weakness, to prevent himself from being either picked out of the herd by a predator or kicked out of the herd as a weak link. This is why it's so often challenging to accurately evaluate lameness in the horse.

When you learn to follow the signs and responses the horse gives you, he lets you know when you're being effective, where he's holding tension, and when his body has released this hidden tension. A fascinating aspect of this is that when the horse begins to realize you're allowing



The Three Main Junctions of the Horse

him to release tension that he's been holding instinctively, he begins to take part in the process by more readily showing you release responses, and letting go of tension in his body more easily. *This creates a deeper bond of trust between you.*

Body Junctions

Repetitive work, pain, lameness, or compensation for any discomfort can cause tension patterns to develop in muscles and connective tissue that can restrict movement in joints and major junctions of the body. This accumulated tension and restricted movement can negatively affect performance and comfort, add to psychological and emotional strain, and result in behavior problems and a loss of willingness.

These restrictive tension patterns can themselves eventually contribute to lameness. Even after the primary cause of lameness is removed, the tension patterns and restriction often remain. A point has been reached where the horse can't completely release this tension without help.

With the Masterson Method, you begin by focusing on the *three main junctions* of the body that most affect performance. These are marked on the skeletal drawing above. When tension is released in any of these key junctions, tension is released in muscles and connective tissue in the larger areas of that

junction, and often in more remote areas of the horse's body.

The most important junction in relation to overall mobility and comfort in the horse is the *poll*. In my experience, tension, pain, or discomfort anywhere in the horse's body shows up as tension in the poll.

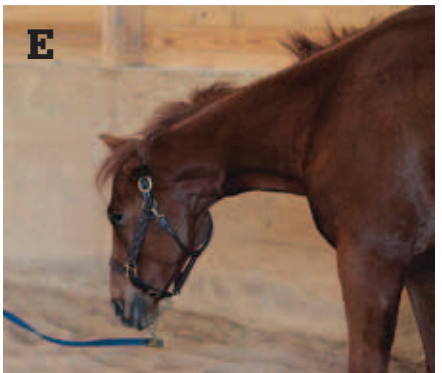
The other two main junctions are where the horse's limbs join the body. Here, forces exerted by the horse's limbs, as well as concussion during movement, are transferred to the body. Tension accumulates in these junctions as a result. When tension patterns begin to accumulate unilaterally, meaning more to one side than the other, forces are exerted in an unbalanced manner and performance problems can become apparent in bending, lead changes, and movement. This potential imbalance applies to all three main junctions.

Touch and response, when you get right down to it, are nothing more than *stimulus* and *behavior*. When you apply the correct stimulus (touch), you will get the correct behavior (response), which starts the process of *release* in the horse. When you use the correct level of touch and can recognize the responses that correlate to what you are doing, you can follow those responses to a successful release of tension by the horse.

Although this sounds scientific so



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Watch for these signs that demonstrate you're on a blocked area of tension, and are applying the right level of touch: A) blinking; B) dropping the head and softening; C) sneezing and snorting; D) yawning; E) shaking it out.

far, once you start to recognize the responses of the horse, and you get the correlation between what you're doing and what the horse is saying via body language, the horse begins to guide the process.

Less Is More

So how does this differ from traditional massage? One distinction is the role the horse plays in the process. With traditional massage, you're trained with your hands to find—then “go to work” on—tension and anomalies in the muscle, using levels of pressure that will break them up.

But using the Masterson Method, you listen to what the horse's body has to say and adjust your pressure to get result you want: the release from the horse. If there's any question about whether you're using the correct amount of pressure, the answer almost always is “less is more.”

The levels of pressure you use can range from almost nothing to about as much pressure as you can apply, depending on which area you're working on and what the horse is telling you. To avoid the use of technical terms (pounds/square inch, for example) in describing what level to use in any particular exercise, and to make it easy to visualize, I've developed the more palpable descriptions below. The key is to let the horse's initial response, or lack of response, let you know if you're using too much pressure.

- **Air gap:** Barely touching the surface. If you were to run your hand lightly down your arm, you'd be barely brushing across the hairs on your arm. →

4 Steps, In Practice

To apply Masterson Method bodywork to your own horse, follow these four steps—search, response, stay, and release. Here's how.



Softly search with a light touch, closely watching the horse's response.



Look for a response, in this case, the blink, as you go over a spot or area of tension.



Stay on that spot or area—continuing to watch the horse's responses—at a level of pressure that doesn't trigger an *internal bracing response*. This may take as little as a second, or as long as several minutes, until...



...your horse shows a release response that signals release of tension in the spot or area of tension.

• **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.)

It's easy to misjudge or miscalculate how much pressure you're using, particularly at first. Practice your levels of touch on a friend who can give you feedback. Even here, your mantra should always be "less is more."

This doesn't mean that you won't use

any pressure or strength. It only means you'll need to keep in mind that, contrary to our human way of doing things, you won't meet resistance with a more insistent touch. Instead, when you run into resistance to whatever level of pressure or touch you're using, you'll soften or yield to that resistance, allowing the horse to release his tension.

Types of Responses

The correct level of touch will put your horse in a relaxed frame of mind, enabling him to more easily tell you through his responses when you've successfully helped him release tension. Below are the visual responses to look for. They range from the subtlest responses to responses that are more obvious.

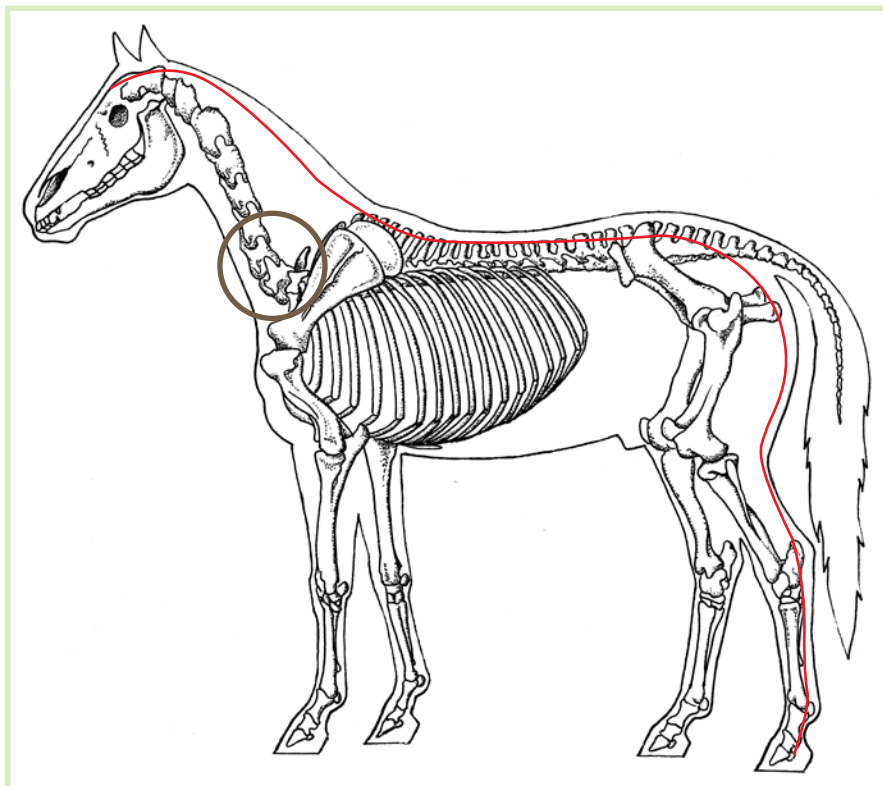
Subtle responses are usually ones that

demonstrate you're on an area of tension that the horse is blocking, and you're successfully using a level of pressure that's bypassing the horse's bracing survival response. These responses include blinking or twitching of the eye; twitching or quivering of the lips; change in breathing (holding breath, breathing faster); sighing, or letting out of breath; dropping the head; softening of the eye, or facial expression.

Larger responses are usually ones that indicate some level of a release of tension in the horse. They include: snorting or sneezing—especially repeatedly—and sometimes grunting; shaking the head and body ("shaking loose"); yawning—especially repeatedly; rolling back the second eyelid; stretching and flexing; fidgeting. →

Of these, repeated yawning while rolling back the second eyelid is the biggest indicator of a large release of tension. And, you can expect a horse to fidget or move around. If you're using the method properly—meaning the horse is relaxed and not bracing—then when he starts to fidget, walk, or move, it's an indication that he is about to release. When this happens, stay softly with what you're doing for just a little longer. You may have to move with the horse. Almost always, the horse will then show you a release response.

So, you might say, "Horses always blink, yawn, lick their lips, fidget, and sometimes stretch. How do I tell if it is a response, or if my horse is just chewing food, blinking at flies, or scratching an itch?" The answer is that you're not just looking for these behaviors: *You're looking for the correlation between what you're doing with the horse in that moment, and the behavior the horse is giving you in response.* This is the key. All it takes is the patience to watch, wait, and see what the horse has to say about it, and the patience and willingness to go slowly and lightly with your touch. Remember, *less is more!*



The Bladder Meridian

Further Pointers

For the horse to participate in this process, you must allow him to do so on *his* own time. Let go of the element of time, or the horse won't respond. Throw away the clock. You're on the horse's agenda. Go slowly in the *Search*, watch for *Response*, and when you get one, *Stay, Stay, Stay*, until you get a *Release*, or until you're sure there's nothing there.

Note: Different horses have different personalities. Some respond more readily than others. Some are more guarded and give you hardly anything; then, after you've walked away, they'll show a release. But there's almost always some kind of response, and soon you'll get good at recognizing even the subtlest change that signifies progress.

Bladder Meridian

Initially, use a very light touch along an area of the horse called the *bladder meridian*. In Chinese medicine, there are 12 primary acupuncture meridians in the body. The bladder meridian is one of the major ones, in that it has a unique effect on balancing all the others.

The bladder meridian runs along each side of the body, parallel and just below the topline of the horse. It begins just behind the eye and runs over the poll between the poll and the ear, and from there continues down the neck about 2"

to 3" below the crest, alongside the withers 2" to 3" beneath the topline, until it reaches the croup.

From there, it "leaves" the topline, going over the rump toward the "poverty groove"—the crease between the *biceps femoris* and *semitendinosus* muscles. Follow this groove down the hind leg, over the side of the hock just off the hind centerline of the leg, down the groove on the side of the cannon bone, over the fetlock, to its termination on the coronary band, as shown in the diagram above.

In addition to giving you information about where the horse is holding tension, working along the bladder meridian establishes the sensitivity of the horse and the level of touch you'll use to start. It sets the stage for Masterson Method exercises that involve movement of different parts of the horse's body.

Non-Resistance

How you ask the horse to move is fundamental to the success of this method. If the horse isn't in a relaxed state when you ask for movement, then he is, in a sense, *bracing* as he moves.

Ask is the key word here. For example, when you ask the horse to bend his neck toward you, and he resists, your first impulse may be to pull harder to *make him* bend toward you. If you react to the resistance by countering it, the horse will

continue to resist, tense, or brace. Even if he's still bringing his head toward you, he's still, to some degree, resisting, tensing, or bracing as he's moving.

Apply the *principle of non-resistance*: When the horse resists, soften your hand slightly so when he feels *you* stop pulling, he'll let go. *You* then continue the movement. When you give the horse nothing to resist, he'll stop resisting, and you can immediately continue on with your move.

The following exercise will help you better understand the principle of non-resistance.

Using a halter and lead rope, ask the horse to move forward. Instead of using mechanical force, use the principle of non-resistance by applying the slightest pressure possible to the lead rope. As the horse yields the slightest bit, by moving his nose forward slightly or even shifting his weight, release pressure and ask immediately again for another yield. Ask, release, ask, release, until the horse shifts his weight completely and takes a step.

Once you get used to this counter-intuitive way of communicating with your horse, you'll experience the elation of discovering a completely new type of interaction with him. The results you'll see will increase effortlessly, and the new communication will spill over into other aspects of activity with him. ■