

By ZOË SMITH

THE BIG INTERVIEW

Jim Masterson

Simple bodywork exercises help to release tension in the scapula

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What is the Masterson Method®?

Otherwise known as **Integrated Equine Performance Bodywork™**, the Masterson Method® is a method of interactive equine bodywork, where you learn to read and follow the responses of the horse to your touch, to help it release tension in key junctions of the body that most affect performance.



It’s unique in that it’s non-invasive and works on the premise that the horse releases the tension. Jim explains: “You are working with the horse’s nervous system to help him release the tension, you’re not mechanically separating muscle fibres. You’re finding the spots on the horse where he tells you there is tension and then you are allowing him to release it. Then you add movement to it in a relaxed state. And when the horse becomes aware of the tension, you soften, and he lets it go.”

With a client list that ranges from the US endurance team to showjumping champion Jessica Springsteen (yep, Bruce Springsteen's daughter), and fans from Dr. Heuschmann to Mark Rashid, Jim Masterson is one of the world's leading practitioners of equine bodywork.

IH Magazine Editor Zoë Smith discovers the Masterson Method and meets the man himself...

“It's Voodoo,” Jim Masterson tells me with a wink, when I ask him how his method – the Masterson Method of Integrated Equine Performance Bodywork® – works. He's joking, of course, but I might have been fooled if I'd watched this afternoon's demonstration without listening to the accompanying commentary.

Watching Jim Masterson at work is like watching any of the great horsemen (or women). He has a calm confidence about him that puts horses instantly at ease, and he's a master of knowing exactly when to move, when to wait, when to give, and when to ask a little more. Most impressively, he appears to be doing very little – a light stretch here, a flexion there, and a lot of standing around with his hands placed at strategic junctions (including some rather odd looking under-tail release points!).

But shift your attention to the horses and you'll see a different story unfold, one that reveals the depth of the changes that he's making. They blink pointedly as he brushes his hand over an area of soreness or underlying tension; they fidget, scratch at their legs, or look around at him as they begin to feel the changes. Then, as he softens his touch and waits, they begin to release – sometimes this is as subtle as a shift of posture, stretching out the neck, or licking and chewing. Other times it's a dramatic series of yawns, stretches, and shakes. As the horses find the release, they seem to melt into his hands, their eyes closing sleepily, bottom lips wobbling, in an almost meditative state. It's easy to be sceptical about a technique that is so unobtrusive, but the results are undeniable.

MASTERING THE METHOD

Thankfully for me, I'm not just here to interview the man himself, I'm also here to attend a two-day workshop and get some hands-on practice.

Our group is a mixed bunch – several equine physiotherapists, a BHS and Enlightened Equitation instructor, and a racehorse rehabilitation therapist from Newmarket, along with several passionate horse owners like myself and of course, a couple of IH Members (we always show up at the best places!).

The variety, even on this one course, points to the fact that equine bodywork is not only becoming more mainstream, but it's garnering the attention of professional therapists, vets and trainers. Vicky Devlin, Jim's UK Course coordinator (as well as an accredited practitioner in her own right) tells me: “When I first started, the percentage of people who were normal horse owners was quite large, whereas now we're getting a lot more people who are already therapists – people are taking it seriously. Even someone who has already trained in sports massage or chiropractic work, they often come on Jim's course and say it's transformed their work, because they learn the feel and how to read the horse.” There are currently over 50 Masterson Method practitioners in the UK and Jim visits twice a year to teach workshops and advanced courses.

WORKING WITH THE HORSE

As soon as we get started, it's easy to see why it's become so popular. The basic techniques are so easy to learn and you quickly build a bond with the horse that you're working on. “This is something we do *with* the horse, not something we do *to* the horse” Jim tells me.

This interactive component is key and anyone who has ever taken an IH course will soon find that the same skillset comes into play. Jim agrees: “It's kind of like natural horsemanship training in that you're reading the horse and you're working with the horse's natural instincts. You have to wait for the horse to get it, before you move to the next step. Physically, it's the same – you have to wait for the horse to show you some sign that he's letting go, before you move on.”

The element of choice also plays a part. When I ask him why his method is so effective, he says: “I think it's because the horse is the one releasing the tension. You're not making it happen, you're getting the horse's nervous system to release it.” It certainly makes a big difference to have the horse be a willing participant, but equally important is the lightness and softness with which the work is carried out. “The softer you are, the deeper the release will be” Jim assures me and while it might sound counter intuitive, I soon realise what he means.

During the weekend we worked with some horses that had clear physical issues, one whose entire body would tremble, and would pin her ears and lunge at us when we even tried to stroke her. My initial thought was that

she would never even let us try the techniques, but following Jim's advice – “before the horse can brace, you soften, then soften more, and when you think you can't get any softer... you can!” – we made huge breakthroughs. Another important piece of advice was to “always step back and give the horse space, see what the horse has to say”. When we backed off and allowed our horse a moment alone, she let out a huge snort, followed by yawning, shaking and stretching. Returning to work with her afterwards, she was much more receptive and softer with us.

THE MAN BEHIND THE METHOD

Jim explained later over a post-workshop beer, how he came to develop his method.

He grew up around horses, but it wasn't until 1997, while working as a groom at a hunter-jumper show barn, that he started to gain an interest in bodywork. “We had massage therapists and chiropractors come out to work on the horses and I started to notice these subtle changes in [the horse's] behaviour. The therapists might have noticed them, but they didn't really put two and two together, because they were trained to do a certain thing. I wasn't trained, I was uneducated but I was observant.”

There was one therapist in particular that stood out. “The vets would fly in this chiropractor from New Zealand to work on the horses and he was really good at reading the horse. I would follow him around and I learnt a lot from him. I even asked him to apprentice with him. [It wasn't possible because] he travelled too much, but he told me to keep practising and I did. I learnt [from him] the importance of the three key junctions >>

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Jim demonstrating the 'head up' technique, to release tension in the poll

Jim Masterton

>> (the poll-atlas, the cervical-thoracic and the sacroiliac); about the importance of the atlas; and to take the time to listen to what the horse is saying. And I just started messing with [different techniques] and I developed this method, which isn't so forceful and long-levered, for example, I discovered that you can go down the vertebrae in the neck and wiggle them loose, rather than do one big wrenching movement."

It wasn't long before those around him started noticing the results and, as the horses under his care began performing better, he soon found himself showing others his discoveries. "I knew I was onto something early on because I didn't see anyone else doing it and people wanted to learn it. They were kind of jaw-dropped about it, when they saw the changes in the horse."

In just a few years, he began building up clients as a bodywork practitioner and by 2005 he'd produced his first instructional video. As he talks me through his successes, he seems more surprised than anyone that these early experimentations have evolved into an internationally renowned method with a string of books, DVDs and big-name clients to his name. "It all kind of fell into place" he admits. "One door opened, then another door opened, and now I'm doing this. It's serendipity. I think you just have to be open to opportunities and go through the next door. You don't have to be ambitious and aggressive, you just have to be open to taking the next step."

THE MASTERTON METHOD IN PRACTICE

Perhaps one of the things that is so appealing about the Masterson Method is that it's an opportunity to not only help improve your horse's physical health and performance, but to connect with your horse.

Jim agrees: "A lot of natural horsemanship people are attracted to this because of the interaction with the horse, you're reading what the horse is telling you and you are actually following that as a guide to your work. As you practice more, you find [the horse] tells you where to go and what to do."

Having worked with trainers such as Mark Rashid and Richard Maxwell, Jim has seen first-hand the benefits of combining good horsemanship with bodywork. "Horses do everything for a reason, so if you're having a riding issue or a training issue, and it's consistent, or it shows up suddenly, or if it's more to one side or another, then that points to a physical issue. Your horse isn't going to decide all of a sudden to start bucking, or that he can't pick up a canter lead, or start swapping behind. There's something going on."

Jim tells me that he often sees physical issues that have been mistaken for training issues. Head-shyness can often hint to pain or tension in the poll or atlas, while a 'girthy' or 'cold-backed' horse might be experiencing tension in the pectoral muscles or even be sore on their front feet. "A smart trainer will recognise that if they can just release the tension, often the horse doesn't have the training issue anymore. And you can see the changes instantly.

Their whole posture changes, the neck releases, the back relaxes – that's the postural muscles (the core muscles) letting go – then the hip relaxes. Then the rider gets on and feels the difference."

Vicky (whose role as course coordinator has now morphed into waitress as she returns with another round of beers) chimes in: "We worked on a horse once and after the session the rider said 'what have you done to my horse, he feels like he did when he was four!' He was able to move so much more freely that she couldn't sit to his trot anymore!"

I can't help but wonder if these same principles can be applied while riding – many riders note that snorting and stretching are common

signs that the horse is beginning to relax and loosen up. Jim agrees: "Absolutely. You can [use the same principles] under saddle and ride so that the horse is moving in a relaxed way, rather than a tense or controlled way – and the horse will start to release tension. That's what is missing in modern dressage – the suppleness, it's all about strength, and the suppleness and fluidity is often forgotten".

He also points out other uses for the bodywork technique – using certain release points to calm the horse down for a vet or farrier visit for example (I'm definitely going to put this one to the test!). Performing scapula releases on endurance horses before they enter the vet gate is another one of his tricks. "They release endorphins, that's why a lot of horses lower their heads and look kind of sleepy. So it releases tension, but it's also a natural painkiller, which is both free and legal." The flip side of this is when working with stallions: "you do need to be careful, as they can get a little excited!" he laughs.

I ask Jim if he's ever had a horse that he couldn't help and he mulls it over for a while before saying "I've never had a horse that it didn't help make some improvement on. Sometimes you have a horse that is so jammed up and has been that way for so long that you have to work on it several times. But usually even after the first session there is some change. And sometimes the change

is worse – all of a sudden, you uncover something that their whole body has been blocking out and you let it go, and they feel worse. You have to give it a few days, and come back and work on them again."

He pauses and adds: "You can overdo it though. I've made mistakes [in the past] by doing too much. If you stay soft and you don't get in a hurry or have an agenda, you won't make any mistakes. But if you do too much, the horse will brace or tense back up, or get sore. Trust that 'less is more' – once you start to think you know more than the horse and you try to make it happen, you're in trouble!"

As we get to the end of the interview, I marvel at the wealth of knowledge he must have amassed over the years. "It's getting harder to find 'difficult' horses [for the demonstrations] because I've learnt how to soften before they become difficult!" Jim admits, but he makes it clear that there's still plenty to learn. "You get better all the time and you learn more all the time. It's endless. Horses are so multi-layered, you'll never stop learning."

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Top to bottom: Yawning is a classic sign of releasing tension; Teaching a student on an Advanced Course.

Helping a student learn the 'Head Down' technique



LEARNING POINTS...

- 1** Tension and physical issues can be the root cause of many common training problems
- 2** When the horse begins to brace, soften – it might feel counter-intuitive, but lightening your touch means the horse has nothing to brace against
- 3** Always step back and give the horse time and space to think about what you're asking
- 4** Learn to read the horse and let the horse be your guide

NOTE:
If your horse is recovering from an injury, on medication or pregnant, consult your vet before performing any bodywork techniques

i Masterson Method Equine Specialists

With the growing popularity of equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) around the globe, it was perhaps only a matter of time before someone discovered the benefits of the Masterson Method not only for its equine recipients, but for its human practitioners as well.

After hearing reports that the method was providing therapeutic benefit to workshop participants, the Masterson team set to work developing a program for therapists to learn and teach the method as part of an Equine Facilitated Therapy (EFT) program.

Since 2015, Masterson Method Equine Specialists have been using techniques such as the Bladder Meridian Technique to provide support to at-risk youth, veterans, and people with eating disorders or recovering from addiction. The unique approach offers a new dimension to equine-assisted therapy, not only empowering the participants, who are encouraged to connect with and be present with the horse during the process, but directly benefiting the horse as they work together to release neuromuscular tension.

• **Find out more at:** mastersonmethodequinespecialist.com

TRY THIS: RELEASING TENSION THROUGH THE BLADDER MERIDIAN

How to do it: The Bladder Meridian is one of the major acupuncture meridians used in Chinese medicine, running along both sides of the horse and roughly following the horse's topline. Using a very light touch (barely brushing the hairs of the horse's coat), slowly move your hand along the meridian line. Pay close attention to your horse's reaction, in particular a blink that corresponds to your touch. When you notice the blinks, keep your hand there and wait. Try to keep your touch as soft as possible. Look out for signs that your horse might be ready to release – fidgeting, bending down to 'scratch' a leg, looking agitated. Keep waiting and softening your hand, until you see a sign of release – licking and chewing, sighing, lowering the head, even yawning or shaking.

Why does it work? The theory is that by drawing the horse's attention to an area of tension or soreness, they will begin to focus on it, circulation will move to the area, and their nervous system will begin to release the pressure.



The Bladder Meridian line



Reading the horse using the Bladder Meridian Technique

• **FIND OUT MORE:** For more details of Jim's UK workshops and demonstrations, or to purchase books and DVDs, head over to www.mastersonmethod.com

