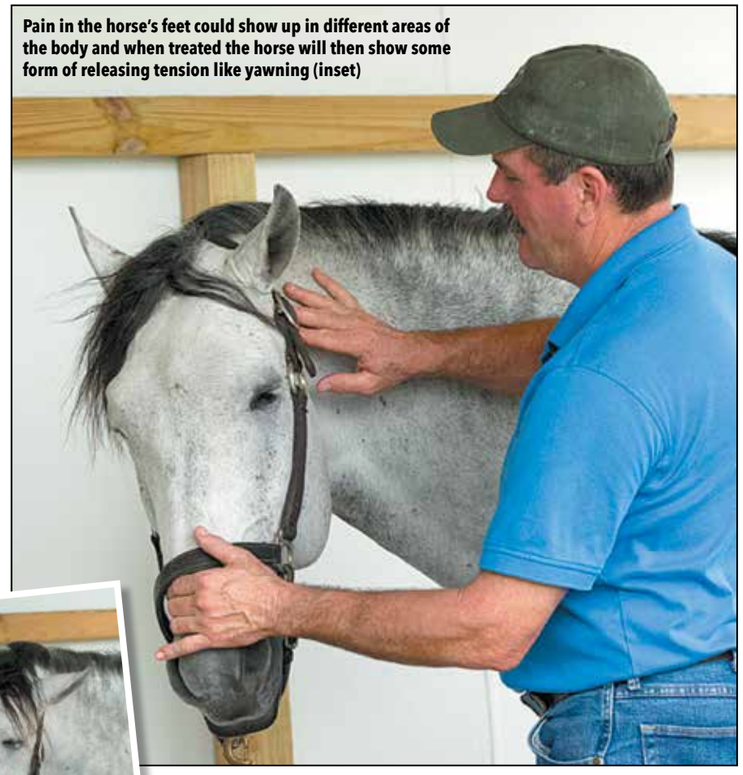
NO HOOF, NO HORSE: CHANGED FOOT, CHANGED BODY

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR HORSE KEEP UP WITH CHANGES IN THE FEET THAT CAN AFFECT HIS BODY



Pain in the horse's feet could show up in different areas of the body and when treated the horse will then show some form of releasing tension like yawning (inset)

Whether you're thinking of making changes to your horse's feet, transitioning to barefoot, or are experiencing foot problems with your horse, it's important to keep in mind that there is a direct connection between your horse's feet and his body. Whenever changes are made to the feet there are going to be changes to some degree in the way the horse moves and uses his muscles. Changes in the way the leg moves or the foot lands will cause the horse to use new muscles or use the same muscles to be used in different ways, or both. Compensating for a sore foot or feet also affects your horse's muscles and the way he uses his body.

The purpose of this article is to a talk a little about the why's and how's of the connection between the feet and the body, and to give you some easy, practical bodywork exercises that you as an owner or trimmer can use to help keep your horse's body up to speed with his feet. It only makes sense that you keep your horse as comfortable in his body as you are striving to keep him in his feet.

1) Changes in the feet in general.
Any time changes are made in foot balance or changes that affect break-over or flight path, there will be changes in stress on muscles in general. They may be small changes that the body can easily adapt to, or they may be more than the body can comfortably deal with. If after making changes you're feeling something different in your horse's movement, especially if it feels rough to you or uncomfortable for the horse, then it behooves you to do something to help. Pain and tension isn't going to help.

2) Foot soreness in general.
Compensation for pain in the feet shows up as pain in the body, which shows up in movement and eventually in behaviour. This can show up in the poll, neck, lower back, gluteals, and hamstrings. You can test this yourself by putting a small rock in your shoe for the day, and see:
a) where else it hurts besides your foot when you get up the next morning
b) how happy you are about it!
(The above exercise isn't necessary if you already accept the premise.)

3) Specific foot soreness.
Pain or tension due to compensation can show up in patterns in the body that can help determine where the primary source of the compensation might be. Sore front feet, for example, will create pain at a point on the ascending pectoral muscle at the girth line right behind the elbow. If he is sore on only one side, then the point on that side will be sore. If he is sore on both sides, then it's a possibility that both feet are sore. Often horses are girthy because they have sore front feet.

Compensation for a sore front foot will also create pain in the poll and atlas. As with the girth, the pain will show up on the same side.

Of course, other things, such as over-cinching, ulcers, even poor saddle fit, may cause the horse to be sore in the girth area. Other things, such as dental issues, rider issues, bit, sore back, external trauma can cause the horse to be sore in the poll, so sometimes it takes some sorting out. If, for example, you have three things; sore at the girth on one side, sore at the poll on the same side, and sore gluteal muscle on the opposite side behind, that may be caused by compensating for the diagonal front foot, then there is a pattern of three signs that point to the possibility of a sore front foot on the indicated side. If, in the course of searching for the pattern he bites you when you poke him at the girth and he kicks you when you poke him in the gluteal, then there are two more indications that point to the possibility of a sore front foot on the horse.

The point here is that the horse compensates in the body for pain in the feet and it will show up somewhere and somehow.

4) Residual tension in the body due to compensation for foot issues.
The horse may be compensating for low grade soreness over a longer period of time without showing obvious signs of lameness in his movement. This can cause areas of the body to tighten that will affect the horse's movement, even after the primary source of the lameness is found and treated.

For example, pain in a front foot caused by a specific issue such as inflammation of the coffin joint, a navicular issue, or a long-term abscess can create a spasm in the junction of the lower neck and trunk at C7/T1 on the opposite side. This is a secondary issue that is created by the way the horse uses his body to compensate for the primary issue. You may have experienced that your horse has had a foot issue like this that was treated, yet the horse was not fully sound after the treatment, or possibly on again - off again. In this case the primary issue has been resolved, and the residual effect of compensating for the foot over time has now become the primary issue. When you release the tension caused by the initial issue, then the horse is sound.

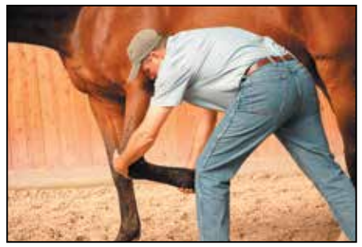
A similar thing can happen in the hind end with sore hocks. Tension in the hamstrings and other muscles that the horse uses to compensate for the hock can put tension on the sacrum. If you treat the hock and the apparent problem does not go away it's possible that the long-term effect of compensating for the hock has now created pain and tension in the sacroiliac that the horse cannot let go on its own.

In addition to being aware of the effects that the feet may be having on the body, there are some simple bodywork exercises that can do to help your horse deal with foot changes.

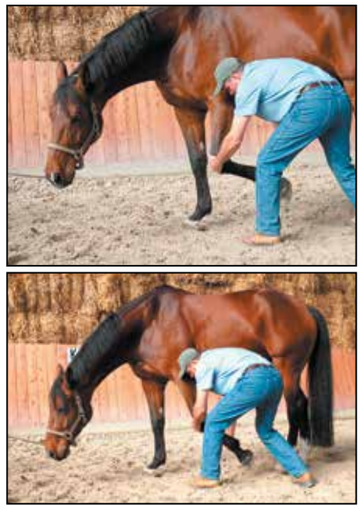
SHOULDER OR SCAPULA RELEASES

This exercise releases accumulated tension in the muscles that attach the fore-limbs to the trunk or thorax, by moving the scapula through a range of motion in a completely relaxed state. This is not a stretch, but a relaxed drop of the scapula forward, and back. It is based on the principle that when you move a joint or junction through arrange of motion in a relaxed state it will release tension in the muscles and connective tissue associated with the joint or junction.

a. Stand at the horse's left shoulder facing forward, and pick up the foot. Hold under the fetlock with your right hand, and under the knee with your left. Support the weight of the shoulder with the knee hand. You may have to lift up on the leg slightly to get the weight of the shoulder in your hand.

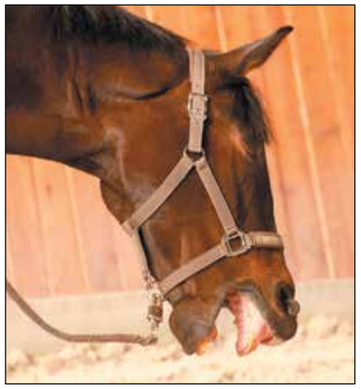


b. While using your knee hand to continue supporting the weight of the shoulder, slowly lower the foot down and slightly back. Do not pull the leg down, but support the weight of the shoulder in your hand as you lower the foot to the ground. The goal is for the horse to relax the scapula down in the back position.



c. When the foot is down, encourage the horse to rest in that position as long as he is able by keeping your hand on the leg or foot.

d. Step back and see what the horse has to say. If he has released tension in these muscles he may tell you by licking and chewing, snorting and sneezing, shaking the head, or yawning.



Hind End Release. With this exercise we're releasing tension in the sacroiliac, lower back, hamstrings and gluteals by asking the horse to drop the pelvis in a completely relaxed state. This is achieved by supporting the weight of the limb and pelvis as you lower the foot to the ground.

a. Stand next to the horse's hip facing rearward and pick up the foot, as if going to clean the hoof. Support the weight of the limb and pelvis by holding up under the toe.

b. When you feel the horse relaxed the pelvis, continue to support the weight of the leg as you slowly lower the foot down to the ground. Take your time with this. Note: Do not grab or pull on the leg if the horse tries to pull away.

c. Once down, keep your hand on the foot to encourage the horse to rest in this position.

d. Step back and see what the horse has to say. You may repeat both of the above techniques until you feel the limb - and the horse - has become more relaxed. Do both sides.

Hind End Release Points. This simple exercise uses very light pressure on two points under the tail that help to relax key muscles and ligaments that put tension on the hamstrings and sacrum. This may be almost too simple to believe it works. Be patient and try it anyways.

a. Stand on the left side facing forward. Rest your right hind on the right butt bone, with the tail resting on your arm.

b. Slide your thumb *gently* all the way up under the center of the base of the tail, and slightly on the right side.

c. Slowly soften your thumb, hand and arm so that you are putting no pressure on this point. Watch the horse's eye as you do this. When the horse blinks, stay at this level of pressure. There should be less pressure than it would take to indent an egg yolk. The goal here is only to bring the horse's awareness to the point in a way that his body cannot brace against it.

d. This is the hard part: Wait… and wait… and wait - maintaining this level of non-pressure - until the horse starts to show signs of relaxing the muscles that pull on the sacrum. These signs might be licking and chewing, shaking the head, yawning, or relaxing the leg. This could take 30 seconds, or two minutes. Be patient. You can continue this until you feel the horse is done releasing.

e. Change hands and sides, and repeat on the left side.

The following email from a horse owner is an example of how important it is to not only fix the feet, but then to fix the body:

Hi Jim
I was starting my day off by reading the MM newsletter (love the new format and read Jim's answer to the toe dragging question.

My mare was dragging her hind feet also, right more than left. I would get temporary stoppage after doing MM, but it would come right back. So I felt that there was an underlying condition that I wasn't getting too. My thoughts went to hooves.

This past weekend I took her to a barefoot trimmer. She shortened her toe length. But I didn't see the immediate results that I was expecting. The next day I could tell she was very uncomfortable so I did some light MM. You would not believe what went on. In fact it sorta scared me. But, immediately the toe dragging stopped!

Yesterday, we moved out in a fast happy walk, with a free swinging hip. To summarize, fix the feet then do the MM….perfect combination.
Connie Dozier
Edison, GA

ABOUT... JIM MASTERSON

Jim Masterson teaches an interactive method of equine bodywork in which the practitioner learns to read and follow visual responses of the horse to touch, to release accumulated tension in key junctions of the body that most affect performance.

He has used this method of bodywork on thousands of horses including FEI level competitors in Show Jumping, Eventing, Dressage and Driving, and was the Equine Bodywork Therapist for the USEF Endurance Teams from 2006 to 2014.

He is the author of the instructional books and DVDs *Beyond Horse Massage* and *Dressage Movements Revealed*, and the DVD *Light to the Core*.

To learn more about the Masterson Method® go to www.mastersonmethod.com