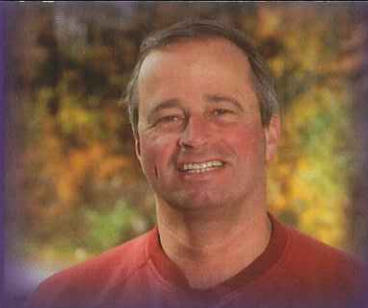


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*Breakfast with O'Brien
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FIT FOR A QUEEN

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By Dorothy Pedersen
Health Editor



Sometimes it's the simple things, but things we don't think of, that can bring a fading horse back to full performance. Take, for instance cranio sacral (C-S) therapy. As an equine natural health option, C-S is almost unknown in Canada and only beginning to gather momentum in the U.S., but is popular in New Zealand where practitioners are plentiful.

C-S is considered beneficial for many ailments including head and spinal injuries, an off-bite, lameness, emotionality, and a host of other maladies.

The C-S system starts at the

cranium or skull, and extends down the spine to the tailbone, or sacrum. It includes the cerebrospinal fluid and membranes that run the length of the brain and spine. As cerebrospinal fluid is secreted, circulated and reabsorbed, a wave is produced, the cranial wave. This wave is believed to emit throughout the body. It is identified as a slow rhythmical movement, actually the opening and narrowing of the cranial bones. The speed and energy of the wave gives information on overall health and body tensions.

The therapeutic aspect comes

Letting Loose

Why cranio sacral therapy is an affordable, low-risk option for relieving muscle tension in the sensitive standardbred.

in the form of a lightly placed finger, or fingers, on specific body parts. The response of the horse indicates to the practitioner how to proceed (whether to continue lightly, deepen the touch, or how long to continue). The intent is for the horse to convey to the practitioner what it needs, and the practitioner to provide it, until the horse obtains a level of relief and relaxation that would astound most horsepeople.

There are various forms of C-S therapy. One method involves simply the placing of hands and visualizing the problem. But many believe that Jim Masterson's methods are superior to those of other practitioners. His is not a cure-all, but his help may be something worth considering if your horse needs a leg up.

One of Jim Masterson's first horses was a former winner now falling behind the

pack. She had a sore knee that caused the muscles in her shoulder and neck to tighten up so much that they were pulled out of alignment. After Masterson treated the mare's stiff neck and shoulder, she won her next race.

Masterson went on to refine his technique, which has become known, and taught, as the Masterson Method. He is probably the most respected cranio sacral equine therapist in the U.S., was the performance bodyworker for the 2006 U.S. Equestrian Team at Aachen, Germany, spends winters treating performance horses of all kinds in Florida and California, and has workshops and training seminars booked through until December of this year.

So, how does it all work? If a horse's right leg is sore, its neck muscles may tighten. Because of the tension, the left

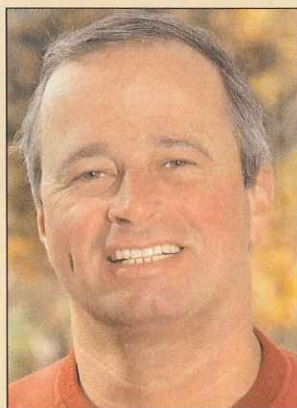
neck and shoulder won't absorb shock, and the horse will become sore on that side as well. C-S pursues the tension and depletes it, enabling the horse to get rid of the compensating stiffness and pain, and regain proper, relaxed, physical balance.

"Some horses are solid. Most aren't that bulletproof. They're sensitive creatures," says Masterson. "Any time your horse becomes difficult to steer or bend, there's a reason for that," he says. "If something's painful for them, they're not going to want to do it." Masterson acknowledges that we're all just a little bit off balance (physically, of course), but says, "... standard-breds take a beating. It's not just the concussion, but the repetitive movements that create a tension pattern in the horse that's not always symmetrical. So the horse is a little out of balance to start with and heavy work starts to pull the skeleton out of line,

inside the pylons



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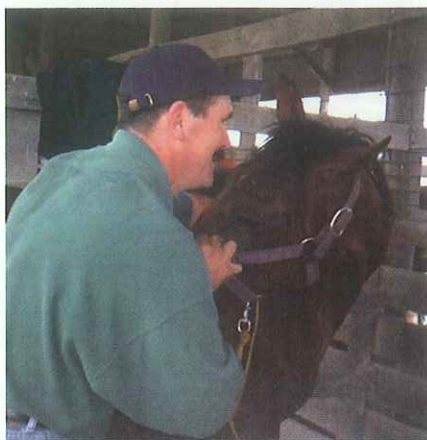
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horses, in nine out of 10 cases, have tension in the poll, and once released, they're not going to be head-shy anymore," he says. In addition, horses with tension or pain in front of the ear, in the forehead area, may have a headache - a true headache just like human tension headaches. "When you get rid of the pain, the behaviour improves," he says.

Without access to a professional, you may wish to learn the procedures from Masterson's DVD on training methods. It's a means to some basic skills and a way to recognize symptoms before they show up as pain. You can learn to read the horse's responses to your touch so you know if he's telling you something is wrong before he's in pain. If you get good results with that, you may then want to take one of Masterson's workshops or training seminars. However, if you work on a horse and there's no improvement, admit your limitations and find a pro.

If you want to try C-S on your horse there are a few things you will need:

1. Patience - "You need patience," says Masterson. "You don't need to be strong because you're asking the horse to release tension, you're not making him do it. But you do need to be patient."
2. Time - You need the time to teach yourself the basic skills, and then you need the time to work on the horse regularly. In the bustle of barn chores, it's easy to sideline the hour or ninety minutes that you need to give a treatment. "If somebody really enjoys doing it they'll make the time," says Masterson.
3. Responsiveness - "As people become aware of how sensitive and responsive the horse is, they start recognizing it's not just a brute to be beaten into submission," says Masterson. "They're adaptable and sensitive creatures."

Whether you're a skeptic or advocate of holistic practices, Masterson and his methods may be worth checking out. For more information on his DVD or workshops, go to www.mastersonmethod.com. It looks as if there's little to lose, and maybe a lot to gain.



they develop tension in the body.

"They cover up the pain because of the predator risk. The wolf will go after the weak looking horse," says Masterson. But once the horse has started to protect itself from pain it forgets to let the tension go, even after the pain has gone. This is why Masterson says practitioners need to learn to follow the horse's responses. If they do, they'll be rewarded when the horse shows the tension has been released. Horses do this in a variety of ways, by eye twitches, blinking, yawning, licking - and these disclosures are what Masterson delights in producing.

Furthermore, Masterson believes that most behavioural problems stem from some level of discomfort. "Head-shy