

your horse

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BRITAIN'S NO.1 MONTHLY HORSE MAGAZINE

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Massage **FOR** performance

Oh, the bliss of a comforting and relaxing massage! Horses too can luxuriate in the warmth of hands-on treatment and improve their performance as a result. The Masterson Method can deliver both...

Words: Hannah Roche • Photos: Matthew Roberts



Your expert

American Jim Masterson is self-taught in equine massage. The Masterson Method is becoming more widely recognised in the US and he was Integrated Equine Performance Bodyworker for the US endurance team at the 2006 World Equestrian Games in Aachen.

What is it?

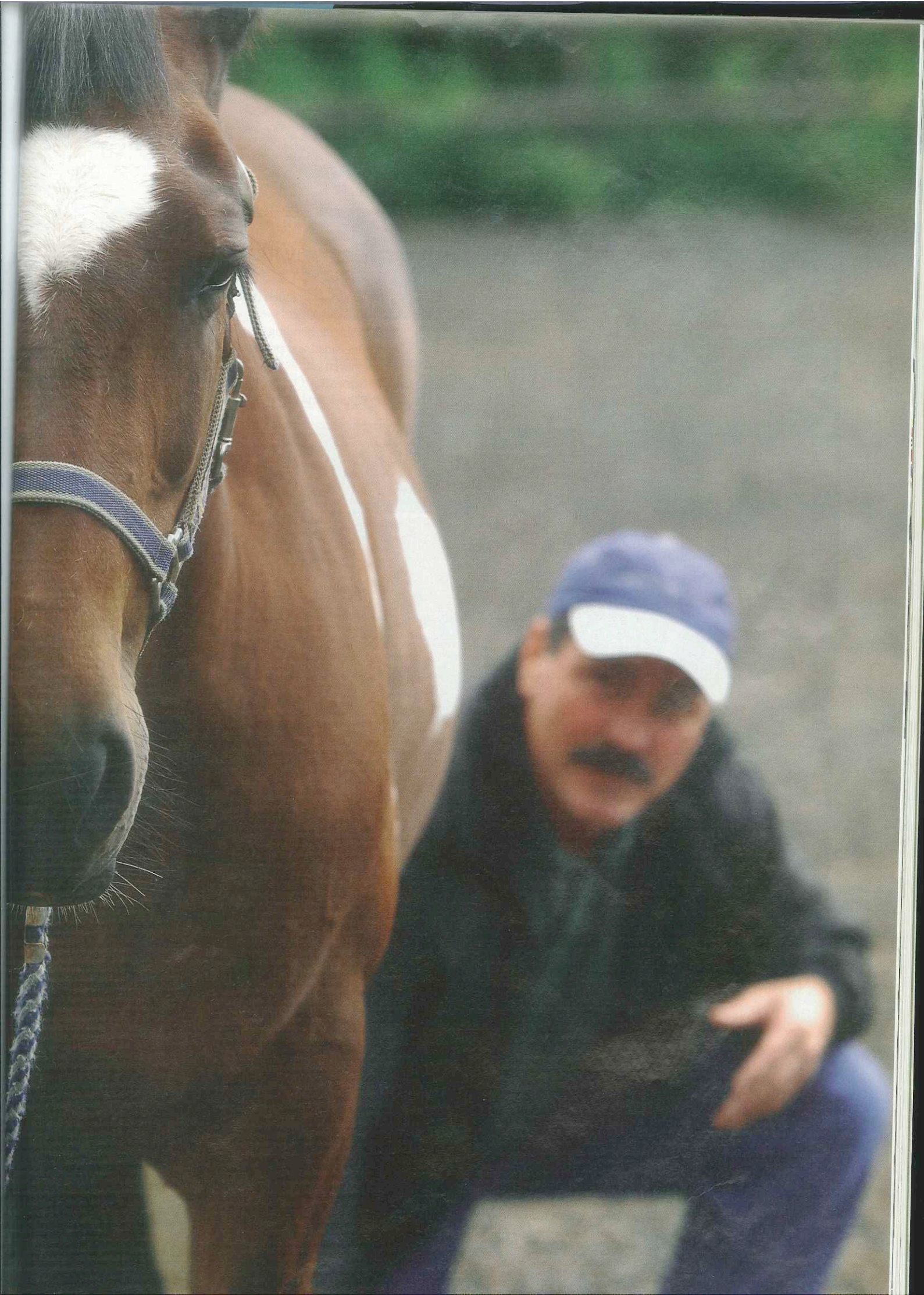
Horses can accumulate stress and tension in certain areas of their body and this can affect performance.

Through touch (stimulus from hand pressure/massaging) and watching for subtle reactions from the horse, The Masterson Method aims to locate and help release tension in these key areas.

The horse's awareness, along with the warmth and pressure of your touch, warms the circulation in the muscles and encourages them to relax.

This method is not about realigning the horse – its aim is to relax and release connective tissue in the joint to get a full range of motion.

It's a method anyone can learn and it can be very rewarding. Here we've chosen some exercises to do...



How can it help?

The Masterson Method can help release tensions in these key performance-related areas:

POLL

Can help front end pain, a strain injury, mental stress and/or prolonged flexion in this area.

NECK, SHOULDER & WITHER AREA

For front foot pain (such as navicular or laminitis). This might be the result of compensating for pain in another area and/or trauma to the shoulder.

LOWER BACK

Eases twisting in this area from pain in leg, compensating for muscle imbalance in another area, saddle problems.

Signs may include

- Head shy
- Sensitivity to touch (poll area)
- Flexion stiffness
- Problems bending
- One-sidedness problems like pulling one way
- Uneven gait
- Lameness
- Behavioural problems



There are three key areas of tension that affect performance.

Hand pressures and reactions

During these exercises you'll move your hand over certain areas, looking for a response from your horse to tell you you're in an area of tension.

The pressure of touch you use can vary but it's best to start off lightly – horses are very perceptive. Massage (circular motions with your fingers) is also referred to in this article – the types of touch also relate to the amount of pressure you use in massage.

1. TYPES OF TOUCH

Air gap – the lightest touch, best to start with. The hand gently hovers on the horse's hair. Using the flat tips of your fingers and/or thumb to create a light pressure it would take to squash an egg yolk

Grape

Pressure it would take to squash a grape



5 top tips



- 1 If your horse fidgets when your hand's at a certain point, don't be tempted to move away – it's usually a sign of tension he's about to release. Lighten the pressure and gently move your hand over that point.
- 2 All horses are individuals. If your horse is nippy/has a lot going on in his head, it may take him more time to release. Let him touch the back of your hand with his lips or put your finger into the side of his mouth to touch the tongue to stimulate licking/chewing to help him relax.
- 3 If your horse is worried, doing little circular massages with your fingers on his forehead can help him to relax – watch for the eye to soften.
- 4 Start softly and slowly with these exercises, he'll only tense up if you're prodding around for painful parts. Never push your horse to do something he's uncomfortable with.
- 5 You don't have to do these exercises every day but when you do, it's recommended you do them before you ride. They can, however, all be incorporated into your everyday grooming, as a way of checking for any problem areas.

Case study



"The Masterson Method helped my horse"

Danielle De Santi from Verona has an eight-year-old Friesian and 10-year-old Andalusian stallion. She went to a Masterson demo/clinic in Italy and was so enthusiastic about it, she flew over to the UK to take part in his first UK clinic at Badgworth Arena, Somerset.

She said: "Jim worked on my horses – my Andalusian suffers from lower back problems and could be short-strided in his back legs.

"Jim did a range of massage exercises and had some really visual responses from my horse. There were points where his back would spasm and you could see his muscles tremor as he started to release and the muscles relaxed. It was amazing to watch, I've never seen anything like it before.

"My husband rode him afterwards and he really started bringing his back legs up more – he even threw in a buck! It seemed like his back had freed up and he was more comfortable with it."

2. SIGNS OF REACTION AND RELEASES

Signs from the horse that you've reached an area of tension/or the horse has released that tension can be really subtle, so watch carefully for:

- Blinking
- Twitch of lips
- Sighing/heavy breathing
- Shifting weight from side to side (about to release)
- Licking/chewing
- Yawning
- Sneezing/snorting
- Shaking head
- Rubbing/scratching legs or back
- Stretching



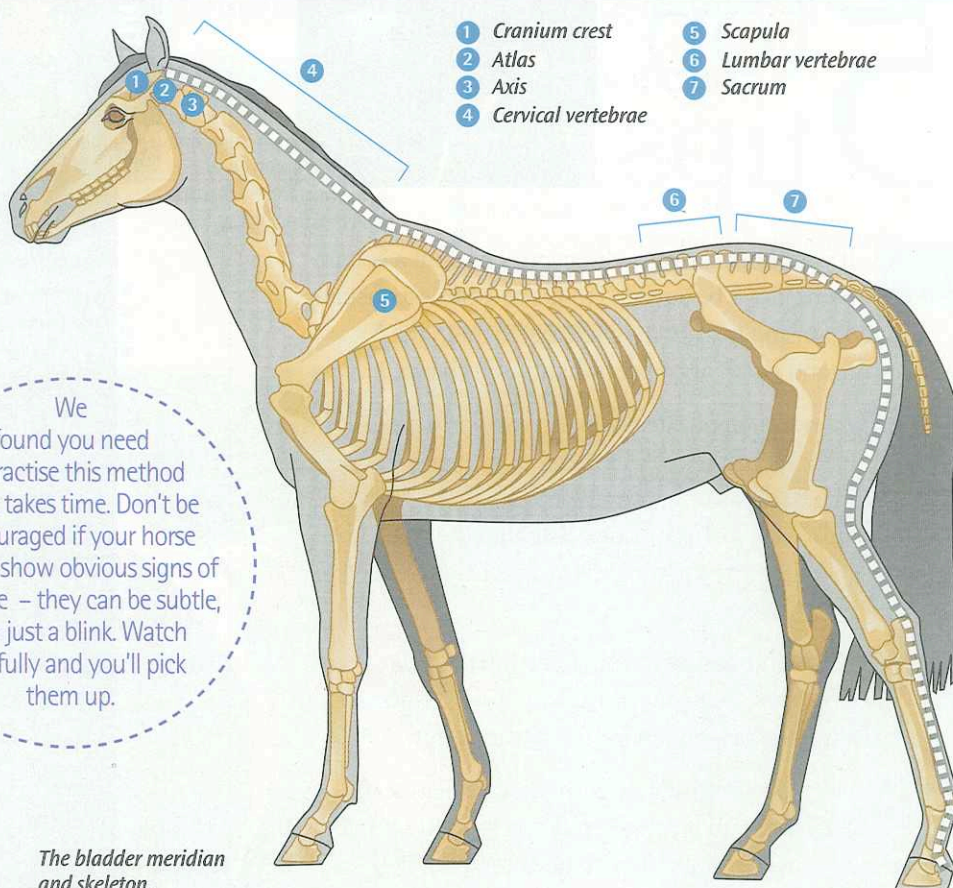
As you work, stick to this format

1. Search – via touch for an area of tension
2. Response – look for a sign (reaction) to indicate your hand is on an area of tension
3. Stay – at that point of response, varying pressure if necessary or gently moving your hand over it until you see a ...
4. Release – the horse shows signs of release of tension

EXERCISE 1 – FOLLOWING THE BLADDER MERIDIAN

This exercise helps you develop the feel of touch, notice responses in the horse and locate areas of tension. The bladder meridian is a major meridian running past all the major junctions that can lead to stress. You follow it with your hand and look for responses.

We found you need to practise this method and it takes time. Don't be discouraged if your horse doesn't show obvious signs of response – they can be subtle, even just a blink. Watch carefully and you'll pick them up.



The bladder meridian and skeleton.

illustration: Graham Gaches

How do you do it?

- Allow yourself plenty of time, patience and find a quiet space – the stable is usually best.
- Start on the left side of the horse moving the flats of your fingers/hand slowly along the bladder meridian line, starting lightly with your pressure (air gap) at the poll.
- Watching your horse's responses as you go, link your hand movement to the area where the response happens.
- When you have a response, stay in that area. You may want to increase the pressure or move your hand in an 'air gap' around that area until you see a release. You may want to apply more pressure to an area to aid the release. If he doesn't release, try using less pressure to give his body more time to respond.
- You're looking for your horse to show a sign of release. This could be shifting of weight, yawning, a stretch, closing his eyes, a deep breath. You can move your hand back along the line if you wish.
- Allow moments for you to step away from the horse (maybe outside the stable) as this can allow him a release.



EXERCISE 2 – RELEASING THE POLL



1. For a bend to the left. Standing at your horse's left side by his head, place your left hand on the nose and the side of your right hand/thumb on the bottom wing of the atlas (see pic).
2. Very gently flex the nose towards you (guided by your left hand) by using gentle pressure/massage with your right hand, rocking the head slightly. It's important his head stays straight.
3. Work this hand down the vertebrae of the neck looking for signs of tension. Stay with these areas, maybe increasing pressure, until there's a release sign.
4. As you finish, step away to allow your horse to show signs of release. This may be so subtle you're not sure you've seen a release. If so, go back to the area later to see if there's a difference.

EXERCISE 3 – MASSAGE THE POLL



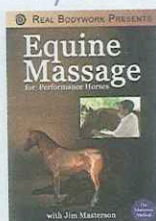
This exercise helps soften the muscles behind the poll

1. Relax the atlas by doing Exercise 2 (previous page).
2. With both hands at the poll (behind the ears) ask your horse to lower his head, using gentle pressure and release as he moves his head down. If he goes to bring his head up, apply the pressure and release as he puts it down. Don't force him.
3. Gently massage in small circles the muscles around the poll and atlas – start with grape pressure using the Search and Response method.
4. Muscles may feel hard to begin but when they relax feel for smaller, harder knots beneath. The more relaxed, the deeper you can go, as long as he's comfortable.
5. Don't rush. Search for a response and when you get it, stay at that point gently massaging until there's a release.
6. You're aiming for his head to bob freely when it's down.
7. Never pressure your horse if he doesn't like it. If he doesn't want to put his head all the way down, use the Search-Response-Stay exercise on page 87 until he releases some tension.
8. Step back and allow your horse to show signs of release.

Tip

Keep your head out of the way as you don't want to collide heads if he brings his up!

If you want to know more...



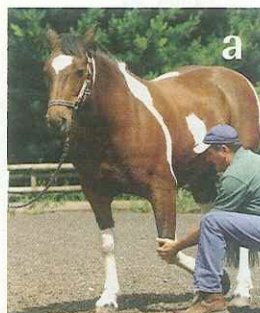
● For more information on The Masterson Method visit www.mastersonmethod.com or see Jim's DVD Equine Massage for Performance Horses (\$34.95 plus p&tp – about £17.50 plus p&tp) available from the site.

● Jim will be returning to the UK later in the year to run more clinics

and training seminars – for more info email penny@equinesportstherapy.co.uk.

● Thanks to McTimoney Animal Practitioner Penny Gunter (www.equinesportstherapy.co.uk) for her help with this feature.

EXERCISE 4 – RELEASING THE SHOULDER



Two 'horsey yoga' exercises to help release tension in the neck, shoulder and withers

Release shoulder down and back

- Crouch at your horse's shoulder.
- **Pic a** – Lift the foreleg to bend at a right angle at the knee.
- Support the weight in your hand/on your knee.
- Help the leg muscles relax by rotating the hoof and massaging the flexor tendons. You want to see the horse relax and drop at the shoulder (scapula).
- **Pic b** – Once he has, straighten the leg and bring it back (under his body) to put his foot flat on the ground. His leg shouldn't be flexed at the fetlock or he will buckle onto the pasterns. You want the points of the shoulder and his head to drop as you do this.
- Let him relax in this position for as long as he likes.

Release shoulder down and forward

- Stand in front of your horse facing him.
- **Pic c** – Pick up the hoof and extend forward, supporting behind the fetlock. The lag can be straight or bent, just as long as you're supporting it – you can rest it on your knee.
- This is a relaxing position for horses, you're looking to see the shoulder muscles drop and relax.
- **Pic d** – Slowly lower his foot to the ground in front of him (don't let him step forward and fall down onto the foot).
- Look for the shoulder to drop forward and down as you place the foot on the floor.
- Let him relax and release.

Tip

It's tempting to bring your horse's leg too far out when you lift it forward which makes it hard to place the foot down – have someone watch you do it to advise you.