



THE HORSES SPOKE

Jim
was

LISTENING

By Liz Cornell

RELEASING TENSION WITH THE MASTERSON METHOD

By now, one would think that every training method and every health and wellness product imaginable has been discovered for both equestrian and equine. Baby-boomer equestrians might remember that forty years ago, Jack Meagher was a pioneer in equine sports massage. His popular 1985 book, *Beating Muscle Injuries for Horses*, still graces the bookshelves of many equestrians today. Yet, according to Jim Masterson, we have more to learn from our equine athletes about their musculature and its tension, soreness and strain. And thankfully, for the horses' benefit, as they spoke, Jim was listening.

Jim's Discoveries

Fifteen years ago, Jim Masterson of Fairfield, Iowa never intended to become a massage therapist for either horse or human. In fact, he knew absolutely nothing about the subject. He was a show groom and horse hauler for a hunter/jumper barn in the Midwest. Then one fateful day, Jim observed two massage therapists together work on a horse in a gentle manner.

"I was fascinated by the subtle responses in the horse's eyes, lips and breathing as they slowly ran their hands lightly over his body. By the time they were done, the horse was very relaxed," Jim recounts. Intrigued by what he saw that day, he was fortunate to spend a few hours with the women learning the basics of their massage techniques. Later, at his barn at home, he began working on the horses himself, relying 100% on each horse's subtle responses with their eyes and mouth to guide him. "I had virtually no other training in massage, so I had no choice but to rely on the reactions from each horse, no matter how slight, as I experimented with different levels of touch. I discovered that I could get a response from the horse with almost no contact at all."

Over time, Jim learned how to stay under the horse's threshold of bracing and resistance by softening and releasing at just the right moment. "Horses indicate a release of tension with large release responses, such as repeated yawning, snorting and sneezing, and rolling back the second eyelid," he explains. Other, smaller release responses include blinking and chewing.

As Jim developed his methodology, he was fortunate to work with competitive show jumpers where the riders, trainers, veterinarians and other therapists were able to give him feedback. "With this information," he continues, "I was able to determine what specific areas of the horse consistently accumulated tension in work, which when released, showed improvement in performance." Eventually his breakthrough techniques were packaged into what he's trademarked "The Masterson Method."



Photo by Rhett Savoie

Jim Masterson works on unlocking the poll-atlas junction of the horse.

Is it Difficult?

Since his techniques are different from traditional massage, Jim

jokingly refers to The Masterson Method as "lazy man's massage," since it's not physically taxing on the practitioner's hands and fingers. (A certain amount of strength to pick up and hold the legs of the horse is expected for that part of the therapy.) Patience, time, and constant observance of the horse are critical to mastering his techniques. In addition, a quiet environment is ideal but not mandatory. The classic "less is more" theory applies in many ways throughout the program.

Options for learning The Masterson Method include the newly published instructional DVD and a glossy 200-page book entitled *Beyond Horse Massage*, which contains many helpful photos and diagrams. (For about the cost of a riding lesson, you can purchase both on

their website at www.mastersonmethod.com where you'll find more information about the program.) Jim travels worldwide holding weekend seminar-workshops, a five-day advance course, and certification for the more serious therapist. If you can't attend a clinic, you can still expect to achieve results on your own after watching the DVD and reviewing the book.

One of the basic theories that Jim explains is the three junctions of tension that the horse needs to release and unlock which most affect his performance. First is the poll-atlas junction, second is the neck-shoulders-withers and last is the hind-end/sacroiliac. His techniques don't invade the joints directly, but instead affect all the muscle tissue around and next to the joints.

Chinese medicine fans will recognize The Bladder Meridian (see diagram above) which allows you to bypass the horse's survival-defense response and connect directly with the part of the horse's nervous system that holds and releases tension. This is where you begin your touching work to establish the basis of your communication with the particular horse you are working on before you address the major three junctions mentioned above. Even if this simple portion



of Jim's techniques is all you can manage to do, it will make a difference.

Jim is quick to point out that his methods differ from traditional massage therapy which is designed to physically break down the tight and knotted fibers in your horse's muscles to increase blood flow to the region. By contrast, Jim's methods trigger the nervous system of the

horse and induce endorphins, a sort of natural drug that releases tension in contracted muscles.

Does It Work?

Jim was designated the official Equine Massage Therapist for the 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012 USET Endurance Teams and has helped competitors at the FEI World Cup, Pan American Games and World Games competitions. Without hesitation, top trainers such as Australian Peter Atkins (eventing) and Brianne Goutal (show jumping) say that their horses have improved in performance after applying The Masterson Method of therapy. Well-known dressage trainer Jane Savoie remarks, "Without a doubt, Jim's work is amazing! It is gentle, effective, and strengthens the bond and communication between you and your horse. His method directly complements what I do while training."



Photo courtesy Jim Masterson



Photo by Emily Daily

◀ Opposite: Jim Masterson. ▲◀ Above left: Jane Savoie and her Grand Prix Friesian Moshi (Menno) at the piaffe. ▶▲ Above right: Peter Atkins and Henry at the Fork CIC3* in 2009.

Peter Atkins' top event horse Henry has benefited greatly from Jim's techniques. "I always let my horses tell me if a therapist is any good or not," Peter states. "After Jim's first visit, the next day both Henry and the other younger horse Jim worked on definitely 'told' me they wanted Jim back. Both were more balanced, straighter and stronger. Each time he has worked on my horses, he has taken their balance and straightness up to a new level. Jim has put together a program of numerous modalities, stretching, chiropractics, massage, acupressure and much more. His methods are simple, logical and they work."

As we train our sport horses to be the best athletes possible, no matter what the discipline, it requires the development of correct musculature. Muscles that hold tension and aren't able to relax and release will not perform correctly and could ultimately cause other problems to surface. While so many factors affect our horse's performance that include diet, turnout, saddle fit, bits, shoeing, training, etcetera, The Masterson Method incorporated into your program may be a simple and less expensive way to enhance your horse's comfort and improve your relationship with your horse at the same time. ❖

The Masterson Method's Influence on My Riding

By Coralie Hughes

I found dressage rather late in life and have frequently heard "it's the journey that counts." This is good news for me since I still have a ways to go! With the help of a giving, aged schoolmaster, I completed the USDF Bronze medal requirements in 2007. Though excited about this achievement, I still felt I didn't have a good grasp of what is considered "good" (on my test score sheets), so I went through the USDF L judge training program in 2009. Along the way, I have read every article and book on the subject of dressage training, riding and equine biomechanics that I stumbled across.

Still feeling woefully inadequate when encountering a training issue, I have developed my own system of asking myself four questions. First, am I asking the proper question of my horse? Second, what might I be doing wrong in applying the aids? Third, does my horse understand the aids? And fourth, is it a fair question to ask of my horse? These questions address whether or not I am doing my job correctly when asking, does the horse understand it, and lastly can the horse easily comply physically with the request. Since my horses have been basically fit and sound, I searched for several years for a way to best answer the last question when I didn't feel I needed the services of a veterinarian.

FINDING THE METHOD

My trainer, Jennifer Conour of Jolietville, Indiana introduced me to Jim Masterson. He was preparing horses for an internationally-known clinician, and Jennifer wanted me to see what Jim was doing because she felt my horses might benefit from his techniques. I talked briefly with Jim, watched his introductory video and spent hours practicing on my horses. I was hooked and decided I needed to know more.

After a year largely dedicated to going through The Masterson Method certification process, I became a certified practitioner in September 2011. With upwards of 500 hours invested in becoming certified, I am not only impressed with the effectiveness and durability of the method, but also by how the bodywork has caused me to think differently about my responsibility as a rider.

Jim's method combines techniques from multiple modalities (including acupressure, osteopathic, massage and myofascial release). As mentioned above, The Masterson Method uses the horse's responses to targeted human touch to find and release accumulated stress in

the connective tissues and muscles of the horse. Tension patterns in the muscle and connective tissue of the joints from pain or repetitive work can create restriction in joints and major junctions of the body. Accumulated



Photo by Lauren Esping

“If horses are so sensitive that they respond best to the very lightest or no touch at all, how does the riding truly affect their bodies?”

stress can restrict movement and affect performance. The horse reaches a point where he can't completely release this stress or tension on his own, even after the work, injury, or pain that caused the tension pattern is gone. The techniques are applied to key junctions of the body that most commonly affect equine performance: poll and neck; neck, shoulders and withers; and the sacroiliac and lumbar junction.

This is a method in which the horse participates in the process. The horse tells you exactly where the stress is, how much pressure to use and when it is released. You observe results during the process in the horse's release responses and in performance afterwards. A few typical release responses of the horse are licking and chewing, head shaking, deepened breathing, dropping a hip and, my favorite, yawning. As a practitioner, the release responses and the obvious relief to the horse bring me joy.

To be effective in releasing tension, the practitioner must use the correct level of touch at the right spot on the horse's body. As one practices the techniques while experimenting with the level of touch, time after time the horse teaches the all important lesson that less is more, meaning the lighter and the slower the better. In the beginning, it is difficult to set the clock aside and dial in to horse time. It is also hard to set aside the human notion of a meaningful touch and realize that the horse rarely prefers a vigorous touch or intense massage and will instinctive brace against heavy pressure.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

As an experiment, I did a whole bodywork session on a horse I thought of as a bit of a bully and was surprised to find that he responded exquisitely to air gap pressure (barely touching) all through the whole 90-minute bodywork session! Learning The Masterson Method has given me an appreciation of the enormous sensitivity of the equine neurological system; not just

◀ **Opposite: Coralie competes her mare Feuertraum at second level.** ▲ **Above: Coralie demonstrates one of the techniques to unlocking the poll-atlas junction.**

that they can feel a fly, but that they easily respond to the warmth of the hand.

I have come to question the conventional notion of a “stoic” horse. Are they less sensitive than others or actually much more sensitive? A horse often resists releasing the tension in a muscle or joint because he has been guarding an area for a long time as part of the survival response. As a prey animal, a horse's first survival response is to flee; the second is to brace against discomfort, covering up signs of lameness, pain or stress. In the horse's psychology, to show weakness is to become a predator's next meal. The practitioner learns to work around the survival response. A horse can't brace against a light touch.

As I have practiced these techniques and learned to read the very subtle responses of the horse, I have gained more than an awareness of the condition of a horse's body that is meaningful to me as a horse owner and rider. The extensive study of the equine bone and muscle anatomy required for The Masterson Method certification fed my fascination with biomechanics and deepened my understanding of what a dressage movement really requires of the horse.

There have been some additional surprise benefits in practicing The Masterson Method. For example, being very right-handed, the ability to use my left hand has improved and the fine motor movements of both hands and arms needed for effective riding are becoming more coordinated and controlled.

HORSE AS MIRROR TO THE RIDER

At some point along the path of learning The Masterson Method, the really big question hit me—if horses are so sensitive that they respond best to the very lightest or no touch at all, how does the riding truly affect their bodies? I started experimenting with my own horses by assessing the condition of my horse's body before and after riding. Did tension in the poll and neck increase or decrease? Is one side of the back more sensitive than the other? Is one shoulder tighter? Do these findings correlate with the issues encountered during the training session, the ability to bend and flex and the ability to travel straight? What



Photo courtesy Coralie Hughes

might I have done during the riding session that may have caused body issues? Was I sitting straight or dropping a seat bone? Were my legs quiet and evenly appropriate beneath me without kicking too much? Were the reins of even length (particularly difficult for me since my left arm is nearly two inches shorter than my right)? Was the horse being ridden honestly straight from my core, or was I unbalanced? Did I sit upright or lean forward a touch which threw my horse on her forehead? Were my elbows flexible with steady hands which allowed consistent contact? Could I hold and then release the reins without ever pulling back?

I have always wanted to ride well and have aspired to model myself after riders who look good and at the same time are effective in the saddle. I have a newfound goal to learn to control my rogue body parts and relax my tense joints and muscles. It became evident that my horse needs me to ride more correctly since her fit, healthy body was displaying issues that were a mirror to my own physical deficiencies.

Based on my experiences with my own horses, I started to observe riders with a different eye. Once I was certified with The Masterson Method, I would watch a client ride her horse before massaging and working on her horse. Consistently I found that the horse's body, assuming no significant medical issue, mirrors that of the rider. For instance, stiff arms and tight or overly busy hands often correlate with tight polls; a dropped seat bone or uncentered rider can cause unilateral lumbar soreness; a rider's tight back and restricted hip joint can inhibit the horse's ability to use his back freely restricting his fluid movement.

RIDING WITH CONTACT

Here's one specific example of how I have applied the techniques of The Masterson Method to my riding. Correct and effective contact is one of the most difficult skills to develop as a rider. From my work as a Masterson Method practitioner, I have theorized that when hands are unsteady or stiff, the horse first tries to stick his nose out so that the bit hits the lips, not the bars of the jaw. Secondly, if forced to drop his nose through heavy hands,

he absorbs the shock of the hands in the poll to protect the mouth. And third, the horse drops his head behind the vertical to once again avoid the impact of unsteady or pulling hands.

Through my experience practicing The Masterson Method, I have come to recognize the vital importance of steady hands so the horse can relax into a consistent, following contact. Steady hands does not equate to rigid, unmoving hands and arms. I discovered that as his body moves through the motions of walk, trot and canter, my arms, especially my elbows, needed to remain flexible and soft in order to steadily follow his mouth.

This requires a lot of "feel" in the beginning. Once my horse trusted my hands and the contact was steady, I could begin to experiment with different levels of rein pressure in my hands depending on the situation. Could there not be value and purpose in a range of intensities akin to squeezing an egg yolk, grape, lemon and lime? It seems to me that in riding it is important to develop the contact-feel when there is resistance on the part of the horse akin to my experience in practicing The Masterson Method of bodywork: to understand when

to hold (without pulling back) the contact through the resistance followed quickly by softening when the horse begins to yield, when to soften proactively and re-ask to lessen the resistance, and when to proactively soften and give the contact before the resistance is frank. I now have a much better feel for what my trainer means when she asks me to "hold . . . now soften" during a riding lesson.

LASTING INFLUENCE


I believe it is at the second rung of the dressage training pyramid, relaxation, that lessons from the practice of The Masterson Method can be most helpful. Yet it also helps with the contact and suppleness aspects as well. Thanks to my training in this technique, I feel I have gained good ground on being able to answer my fourth question, is my aid a fair question to ask of my horse? Now I'll keep working on questions one, two and three. Combining The Masterson Method with my dressage training is a fascinating process that promises to last a lifetime. 



Photo by Ann Bennett/Windrush Hill Farm

▲ Above: Coralie and Jim Masterson stand with the mare Bella Nova owned by Whitney Jaeger.