

PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

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"Mystery Lameness" Behind Reading the Horse's Body Language to Release Tension

By Jim Masterson

Previously I discussed performance issues involving undiagnosed, intermittent or what I call "mystery lameness" behind. With this problem, "something" is going on behind, but without any apparent signs of joint or soft tissue damage in the feet or lower legs. Accompanying complaints might be that the horse is short-strided, weak or uncomfortable behind, switches leads, or cross canters. Signs can be consistent or can go on intermittently for years. Having ruled out anything in the feet and lower legs, the next place to look is in the body in the sacroiliac, the deep groin and the core muscles.

In the first article (June 2014 issue of Performance Horse Digest), we took a look at anatomy and what goes on in the hind end. Muscle strains in this area often go undetected, with no visible or palpable signs of swelling or inflammation. The problem may not necessarily involve tears or other damage, but rather a muscle strains or spasms due to slipping, falling, or the cumulative effects of hard work. The horse holds on to the spasms as part of its survival response. The horse won't let go of these spasms on its own, but we can often get the horse to release the spasms itself, by using simple techniques that bring the horse's awareness to a problem that its nervous system has been blocking out in order to survive. In this issue, we will show you some of these techniques.

These techniques involve paying close attention to what the horse is telling you through subtle changes in body language as you work on him, using a very light touch. These techniques will send signals to the deep muscles and connective tissue of the hind end junction – the deep core muscles that we can't reach and which may be causing the problem. These techniques work with the horse's nervous system to enable the horse to relax the muscles. It is important to pay close attention to subtle changes in the horse's behavior (responses to what you're doing), knowing when you're on the right spot, and when the horse is releasing tension. The feedback from the horse is what makes the techniques effective.

The techniques are so simple that you may doubt they're working. But with a little patience, an open mind, and paying close attention to what the horse's body language is telling you, you may be surprised.

How do you begin? Like this: 1.) Run your fingers very lightly (I said VERY LIGHTLY) over one of the Hind End Release Points described below, or any area of soreness or tension on the horse (for example in these photos, the withers). 2.) Watch the horse's eye for a subtle response such as a twitch or blink. 3.) When you get a subtle response such as a blink or twitch, keep your fingers or palm lightly (I said LIGHTLY) on that spot, not rubbing or moving at all, until the horse gives you a larger response, such as licking

and chewing, shifting weight from leg to leg, or yawning. 4.) These large responses are signals that the horse has released tension from the muscle or connective tissue associated with that point.

One thing that will help you to see how this works, and how light you have to be with these techniques, is to watch this YouTube video clip at: youtube.com/mastersonmethod

The clip is called the Bladder Meridian technique and demonstrates the process of searching for responses, and staying on the spot until the horse releases tension. It shows you how light a pressure to use, and what to look for in the horse's responses. I know this may sound a little crazy, but if you go out and try it, you may be surprised by what the horse tells you, and by the improvement in performance you will see afterward. This technique has been effectively used on thousands of horses, including hundreds of USEF and FEI competitors.

The part that you may find most difficult is how lightly you touch the horse. If you put any pressure at all on the release points, the horse will internally block neurological signals to the muscles to relax. Think of it as touching the hair ends without touching the skin. Which of these points your horse responds to depends on where your horse is holding and releasing tension. There is no particular order; it's an experiment to see which points the horse responds to and releases. Go by the horse's responses. And have patience.

The Bladder Meridian is a general treatment for the whole body to begin releasing tension. After doing this, we will apply the same principle to specific Hind End Release Points that address the hind end issues previously discussed.

- 1.) There are two points under the base of the tail – left side at 11 o'clock on the "dial" and right side at 1 o'clock – that release tension on the sacrotuberous ligament and the muscles that pull on the sacrum, thus putting tension or torque on the sacroiliac joint. Rest your hand on the rump on the opposite side, and slide your thumb as far up under the base of the tail as you can. Note: Go easy on this one.)
- 2.) The second point is at the top of the croup. These affect tension on the sacroiliac joint itself.
- 3.) The third area is forward of that in the lumbar area. This relaxes not only the lower back, but deeper core muscles.
- 4.) The fourth is on the point of the pelvis, tuber coxa or hip bone, affecting



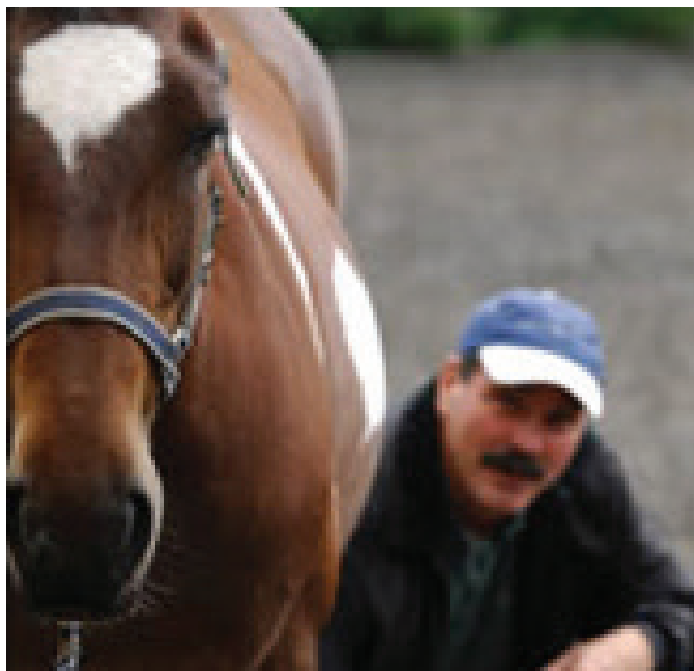
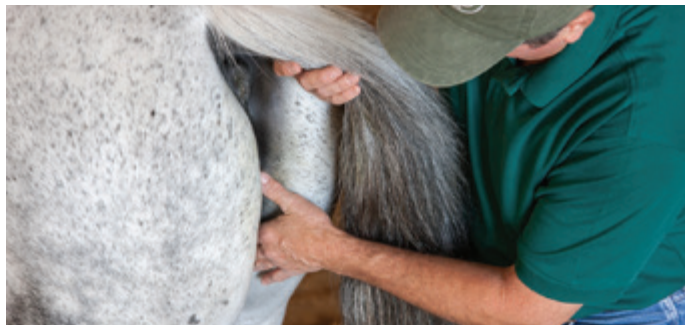
the core muscles and the abdominals.

5.) The Stifle Point is on a little bony protrusion on the inside of the stifle. Groin muscles that attach at the other end up underneath the pelvis, where you can't get to them. When we use the Stifle Points we help deep groin muscles to relax, and allow the stifle to relax out to the side when the leg is resting. Note: Go slowly on this one too, as the horse may be more sore than you think.

6.) The sixth is at a point where the two wings of the pelvis join together between the butt bones, and is called the Pubic Symphysis (or PS) Point.

Note of caution: Any of these points can be sensitive or sore, and the horse may react if you "attack" them suddenly, especially the stifle point, pelvic point and under-the-tail points. Always approach the points gently, and if the horse is too uncomfortable with you touching them, then hold your hand a few inches away from the spot until the horse relaxes.

The value of the Bladder Meridian and the other Release Points is that they allow the horse to tell us through his responses where he is holding tension, help him to release the tension and tell you when this is happening, and to



move better. The key thing to remember when using these points is that you are simply sending signals through them to get the horse's nervous system to begin releasing tension. You don't need to push; rub (kick, bite, etc.) them for them to work. Simply search the area of the point with a very light touch, looking for a response, and then waiting for the horse to let go. Often these light techniques alone will release deep-seated tension in the hind end. In later issues, we'll look at further techniques that release tension in key junctions of the body that most affect performance.

Jim Masterson has been the equine bodywork therapist for the 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012 USEF Endurance Teams, and has worked on thousands of horses, including equine athletes competing in FEI World Cup, Pan American and World Equestrian Games competitions. He is the author of the book and DVD Beyond Horse Massage, and the DVDs Equine Massage For Performance Horses and Dressage Movements Revealed. Go to www.mastersonmethod.com for more information.