

PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

VOLUME 8, ISSUE 2

AARON
RANCH
COMMERCE, TX

ON THE
COVER
+ PAGE 3

Driving the Young Horse

BY AL DUNNING

Relationships ROADMAP

BY BARBRA SCHULTE

UNLOCKING THE POWER of Magnets BY CLINTON ANDERSON

ALSO FEATURING ARTICLES BY

CRAIG CAMERON, DENA KIRKPATRICK, DOUG LINDGREN, JIM MASTERSON, JONATHAN FIELD, LARRY TROCHA, LYNN PALM, MARK SHERIDAN, MARTHA JOSEY, MONTY BRUCE, PAT & LINDA PARELLI, RICHARD WINTERS, SANDY COLLIER, DR. JULIET M. GETTY, AND MANY MORE!

Primary Issues vs. Secondary Issues

By Jim Masterson

Most muscle tension issues in the horse's body that affect performance are created by - or are secondary to - another, primary, issue or issues. A primary issue could be a direct issue such as saddle fit or pain in a foot or lower leg, or the long-term build-up of muscle imbalance or unilateral tension due to the way a horse is ridden or physically conditioned.

When the horse compensates for discomfort that is caused by a primary issue, then secondary issues (pain, tension, and restriction) that affect movement and performance are created. When this tension accumulates unilaterally, meaning more to one side than the other, then performance problems become even more apparent. Releasing the secondary issues (pain, tension, and restriction) will improve your horse's performance, but unless you find the primary issue that is causing it then the tension and restriction will return.

The point here is, that when a performance, physical, or unilateral issue shows up, there is most likely a primary issue involved.

By determining what the primary issue might be, you can prevent the performance problem from returning, and in some cases, you may be able to prevent the primary issue from becoming a serious lameness or veterinary issue down the road.

Below are some examples of direct primary issues:

Foot and Lower Leg Pain

- Pain in the lower leg due to inflammation of splint bones, ligaments, tendons, knee, pastern, stifles, and hock joints.
- Pain in the foot due to thrush, laminitis, navicular syndrome, general tender-footedness, or improper shoeing.

Saddle and Other Tack

- Saddle fit: eg. incorrect tree, padding, gullet, length.
- Saddle condition: tree broken or twisted, flocking or padding distorted, wear or damage.
- Tack: improper fit or use.
- Bit: improper fit, adjustment, or use.

Dental Issues

- Teeth need floating.
- Imbalance and misalignment of teeth (hooks, ramps, etc).
- Sores or abscesses

Conformational Issues

- Crooked feet or legs.
- Hi/lo foot syndrome



- Long or short in the back.
- How he's "put together."

An imbalance in muscle tension can also be caused by repetitive motion in daily work. When some muscles end up doing more work than others, imbalanced muscle strain will result.

An example of this would be a horse that is asked to perform an exercise that puts a heavy load on the hind end, such as sliding stops. If this movement is practiced repetitively then the muscles that make the movement possible (hamstrings, gluteals, and inner core muscles) will eventually tighten up and not let go. This will happen with any muscle that is used over and over again, without giving the muscles adequate time to recover, and without alternating the movement with exercises that build strength in other areas of the body. What can help to prevent this is giving the horse adequate intervals of rest during training, and cross-training or breaking up the routine.

And finally, unilateral tension can build as a result of the horse's natural asymmetry, or his tendency to have a stronger or more predominant side. Horses, like humans, are not naturally even. Just as humans have a predominant or stronger side and a weaker side (right-handed or left-handed), so do horses, except the horse has an extra set of legs so it shows up on the diagonal (more on this below). Over time unilateral muscle tension builds because of this natural asymmetry. This causes the horse to put an uneven load on the feet and legs that may eventually lead to physical problems in the feet and legs or lameness.

Residual Muscle Tension Patterns

When a primary issue is no longer an issue or has been resolved, often the horse will continue to show from the residual effects of compensation. For

example, when a foot or leg issue such as a coffin joint, bowed tendon, or an abscess is treated or healed, often a horse will continue to show signs of on again-off again or intermittent lameness. This is because the muscle tension pattern that developed while compensating for the lameness is still there. Often that needs to be released before the horse is 100 % sound again.

Finding the Culprit

When determining possible primary issues, bear in mind that the horse is a herd animal that instinctively does his best not to show outward signs of pain or weakness. If a horse starts limping at the first sign of discomfort in the wild, he's going to be picked off by a predator or thrown out of the herd. This is why it's often so difficult to accurately evaluate the cause of a lameness. The more data or information you can gather, the better your chances are of finding what might be causing the tension and restriction associated that's affecting your horse's performance.

Here are some things to consider when looking for primary issues:

Diagonals

One valuable thing to know, whether riding or tracking down performance issues, is your horse's predominant diagonal. This will give you a heads-up on which limbs your horse is loading more, where foot and leg issues might be more likely to show up, some insight into why your horse bends easier to one side than the other or favors one lead over the other. In my experience, 9 out of 10 horses are what I call right front-left hind diagonal horses. They bend easier in the neck and poll to the left and are smoother or more comfortable on the left lead. They load the right front and leg hind a little more, and consequently become tighter in the right poll and left hind, especially in the gluteals and hamstrings. They also are more likely to develop foot and leg issues on the right front and left hind because of this uneven loading. One value of being aware of your horse's predominant diagonal is that it helps you in training to determine whether a performance problem, such as bending or lead-changes, might be a training issue, or a physical issue. It can also help you catch physical issues in the feet and legs before they become lameness issues.

Pain vs. Restriction

Some performance problems are related more to pain or discomfort while others more to stiffness and restriction. Generally, stiffness is the result of a chronic or past issue, and pain is related to something that is bothering the horse at the moment. Knowing which could be causing your performance problem can help you determine the primary issue.

It Is Almost Never Just "One Thing"!

Just as different areas of the horse are interconnected, so one area of restriction or even lameness, is connected to another area. In general, if there is a kink in one link of the chain in one spot, there is most likely a corresponding "counter-kink" down the line due to compensation or the horse's need to re-balance itself. It pays to look at the whole body when dealing with any physical issue. It helps to include the front end when focusing on a possible hind-end issue, and to give attention to the hind end when focusing on a possible front end issue. This is a general way to look at what might be causing performance issues in your horse. These examples of primary issues are excerpted from my book *Beyond Horse Massage*. More on finding primary issues, and on bodywork techniques that will help release the secondary effects of these issues can be found there, and on free Masterson Method training videos available at www.mastersonmethod.com. Check them out.



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.