

# PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

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## Pivoting on the Hind End

BY SANDY COLLIER

*A DASH TA STREAK*

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*A STREAK OF  
FLING*

*CS FLASHLIGHT*

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*and many more!*



# One-Sided Horses

By Jim Masterson

Have you ever noticed that it is often easier for your horse to perform lateral movements such as bending, turning, leg yields, etc. in one direction than the other? These same horses will often have an easier time on one canter lead than the other.

This can be due to a lot of things, but is often due in part to a horse's natural predominance toward one side or the other; what is sometimes called "natural crookedness", or being "right or left-eye dominant."

Horses are the same as humans in this respect. Eight to nine out of ten of humans are naturally right-handed. In my experience working with performance horses, I find the numbers to be comparable - the difference being that horses have an extra set of legs back there, so that this predominance shows up on a diagonal. In doing physical bodywork on horses I find the majority to be what I call right front-left hind horses. They generally are a little more comfortable on the left lead and more comfortable bending and turning to the left. As they tend to put a little more load on the right front, over time they will accumulate more tension in the right poll and upper neck as compared to the left - which affects flexing to the right; and as they put more load on the left hind they will become tighter in the sacrum, and the gluteal and hamstring muscles on the left. The can also over time become a little stiff in the right loin or lumbar area.

This natural predominance, and the associated muscle tension patterns that develop, may be very strong in some horses, and less so in others. I originally thought that this asymmetry could be learned behavior due to handling the horse from an early age, predominantly from the left side; and riding him with stronger hands, predominantly the right. I started to think differently when I began working on younger horses straight out of the pasture, as well as horses that were rarely ridden. The majority of these young horses fit the above right front-left hind description.



Lori McIntosh Photography

"Why is this important in the training and performance of the horse?" you might ask. Because working through this natural imbalance properly will positively affect your horse's long-term soundness, and improve his physical ability to perform even more demanding movements down the road.

Proper conditioning involves working through your horse's natural imbalance in a way that progressively strengthens the muscles of the weaker direction or diagonal, and supple the over-developed muscles of the stronger.

One of the easiest ways to accomplish this is to give the horse plenty of intervals of rest during any given training session, and increase the workload from session to session only in small increments, until you feel that your



horse is evening out.

If you are still having trouble getting your horse to even out, it could have something to do with the "progressive" part of the conditioning. He may be trying to tell you that something is over-tightening. Repetitive movement of muscles without intervals of rest will lead to over-tightening and loss of use - meaning range of motion - of those muscles. Continuing to try to work through the problem can lead to over-straining the muscles that you want to strengthen, making them less useful.

That's on a practical level. On the level of the comfort and willingness of your horse, this over-straining can just plain-old hurt. That's one thing about the equine athlete that's different from the human athlete. The human athlete will do something when pain tells him that something is not working right, whereas your horse will cover up the pain and keep on trying until it begins to show up in his movement, or until he goes lame. Just because the horse will do more doesn't mean something isn't happening that might show up down the road as a physical lameness, or an intermittent or undiagnosed create "mystery lameness". The key to preventing this is to be aware of when a performance issue might be a physical problem rather than training problem.

If your horse continues to tell you something is wrong, the first thing to do is to have the possibility of injury or impending injury ruled out by a vet. Once a veterinary issue is ruled out or treated, and the horse is still trying to tell you that something is wrong, the next thing to look for is over-tension of muscles in the body. It will make both your job, and your horse's, easier if you can do something to release tension as it accumulates rather than trying to push through it - and to recognize what the horse is telling you before it becomes a veterinary issue or something serious that's going to give you trouble down the road.

Complimentary sports therapies can be as important for the equine athlete as for the human athlete, the difference being that human athletes - or their highly paid agents - can speak up for themselves, whereas the equine athlete has only you for his agent. In both cases, in the long term it pays to listen to your client.

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](http://www.mastersonmethod.com) for more information.