

PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

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Mystery Lameness

By Jim Masterson

Question: I have a mare that suddenly began switching leads behind about a year ago. We worked on holding the canter and that worked for a few months, but recently she has gone to not wanting to get off of the left lead. When I try to put her on the right she'll switch behind, preferring cross-cantering to staying on the right lead. The vet did a lameness evaluation and could find nothing in the stifles or hocks. I notice she's becoming extremely short-strided behind, some days are worse than others. I get worse when she has a few days off, but I don't feel that working her is helping as overall it has gotten worse over time. I also notice in the paddock that when she rests the hind leg she will sometimes stomp her foot on the ground when the leg relaxes. Can you tell me what muscles may be causing this, and what I can do about it?

Answer: This problem falls into the category of undiagnosed, intermittent or what I call "mystery lamenesses" behind. "Something" is going on but the vet isn't finding any joint or soft tissue damage in the feet or lower legs. The next place to look is higher up. I wish I could tell you correctly what specific muscle is causing the problem in your case... but since it's "mystery lameness" I can't.

I can tell you that this type of problem comes up a lot in working horses, and there are some things you can do that may help. I'm going to give you part 1 of the long version, as it helps to know what other things are going on with the hind end, and where the problem might be coming from. A lot of what the problem is, is guess work; but what matters is results. You do some guessing (form an opinion), do some work, if it gets results, good! Maybe you were right about what it was, maybe you were wrong, but if you get results, that's what matters.

First let's get an overall picture of the hind end, above the legs. The hind end junction (sacroiliac/sacrolumbar junction) is like a huge joint, involving huge bones (sacrum, pelvis, lumbar vertebrae), huge ligaments (sacroiliac, sacrotuberous), huge driving muscles (gluteals, hamstrings) and deep muscles (psoas, iliac, groins).

The power of the forward driving muscles of the legs - such as the gluteals and hamstrings - transfer from the hind limbs into the body through this junction. The strain put on the deeper muscles and ligaments that support this junction often goes unnoticed until a performance problem shows up.

Problems in this area are often created when something specific has happened; such as the horse slipping badly, taking a bad step, or getting a leg caught in something and pulling to get away. However the problem can also be caused by a build-up of tension leading to over-straining of this junction when the horse is in training or work. As this tension accumulates in the deep muscles and connective tissue of this junction the horse will continue to do its job to the best of its ability - as horses do - until it shows up as lameness, or sometimes before that as abnormal or "bad" behavior.

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 the muscle strains or spasms won't let go. The effects of this can be consistent, or can go on intermittently sometimes for years. This possibly explains your horse's behavior when trying to relax. She's constantly trying to find a comfortable position, and occasionally stomps the ground as the muscle(s) involved spasms when it's trying to relax, and she feels it and stomps her foot.

The first thing to do is rule out the possibility of something involving the joints, tendons or ligaments of the feet or lower legs. If a vet exam reveals

nothing in the feet or legs, then the next place to look is higher up in the body. If the sacroiliac (SI) joint is a suspect, you'll see the veterinarian inject the ligaments of this joint with a long needle from the top, or recommend a chiropractic adjustment.

Often the problem isn't just one thing but rather a chain of things connected together by bio-mechanics and pain, involving these deeper muscles under-



neath the SI such as the psoas and deep groin muscles.

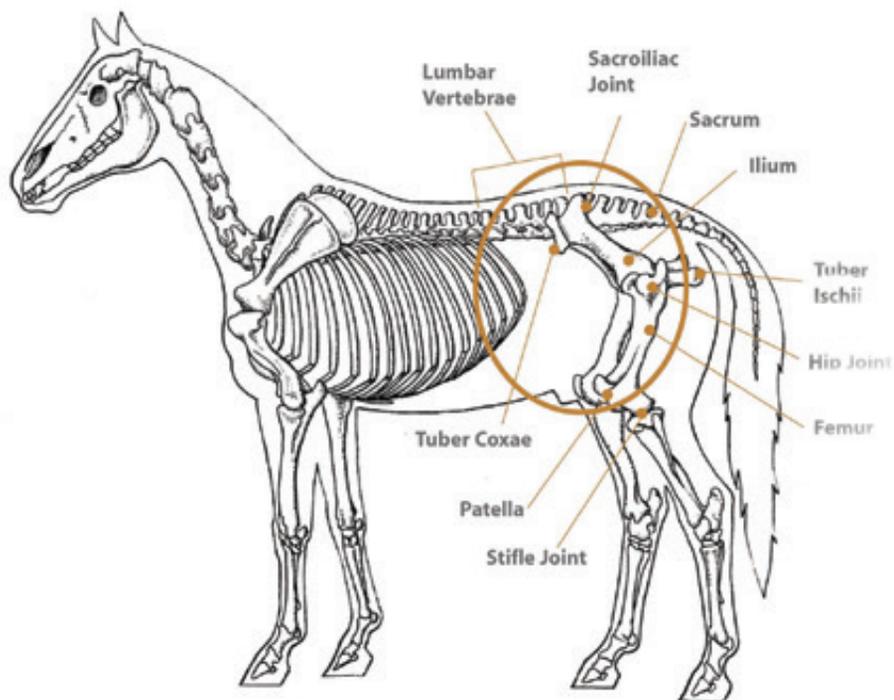
The purpose of all this isn't just to scare you, but to give you an idea of what's going on in the hind end. If there isn't damage to the muscles or connective tissue involved then often bodywork therapy will help to relieve the spasms that may be causing the problem.

If you choose this route, the good news is you don't have to know a lot of Latin words to help your horse release tension in these deep muscles. You just have to know some simple bodywork techniques that will enable the horse's nervous system to relax them, and how to read what your horse is telling you when she's releasing whichever of the soft structures is holding the tension.

Many of these techniques don't even involve touching the muscles you're

working on, but work with the horse's nervous system by bringing the horse's awareness to what it's been using its survival - or bracing - response to deal with. Use of light levels of touch on specific points or areas (so the horse can't brace against the pressure), movement in a relaxed state, and certain positions of the legs will allow the horse's nervous system to begin releasing the spasm.

In the next issue we'll take look at some techniques that you as an owner can use to help your horse release tension in this important junction. There are many different bits out there, and each had its advantages and disadvantages in certain situations and applications. There are two main types of equipment available when you are looking at headgear for your horse. The first is a bit, which works off pressure in your horse's mouth. The second is a hackamore, which works mainly off pressure on the nose. There are three main sub-categories within each of these types.



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.

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