

PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

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WEAVER
QUARTER HORSES

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Are you listening to what your horse's body is telling you?

By Jim Masterson

How often have you overheard someone says something like, "My horse does just fine picking up the canter lead in one direction, but it's a little more difficult going the other way. He throws his head when I ask, and it just feels a little rougher." or, "My horse makes such a drama about putting on and off his bridle. He throws his head straight up and acts like it's the end of the world!"

There are various levels of behavioral issues that come up in training or riding that may affect the performance of your horse. Some behavioral problems such as trailer loading, spookiness or bolting for the barn may be simply that; behavioral issues that can be modified with training.

Other, more subtle issues that have to do with differences in lateral movement such as bending, turning, spinning or lead changes, while others may have to do with the horse's ability to use the hind end in stopping or collection, resistance to the bit, or outright refusal when asked to do certain things. With these issues, there's a possibility that the behavior might have to do with physical pain or discomfort, or the onset of this.

A common and obvious example would be the head-shy horse. In my experience, 95% of cases of head-shyness have associated pain and tension in the poll. This may be the result of direct trauma such as hitting the head or pulling back against being hard-tied, but more often is related to an issue or issues in another part of the body. Often pain in one part of the body can develop from a seemingly unrelated issue in another part. Commonly pain in the poll - especially in working horses - develops due to soreness in a front foot or lower leg, generally, on the same side as the sore foot. Other problems such as dental issues, a sore back or excessive pain in the sacral area are also related to pain in the poll. The head-shy horse may not



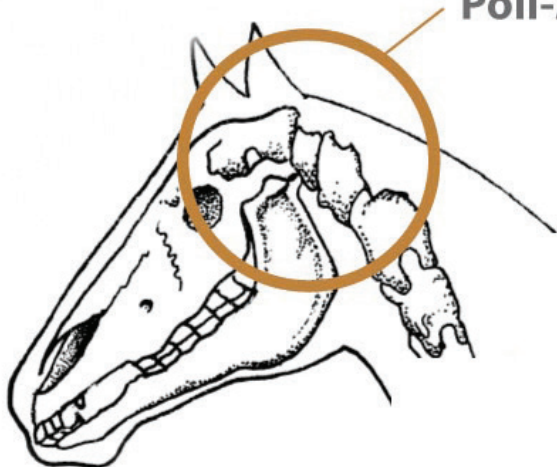
only be telling you that something's bothering him upstairs, but may also be telling you that there's another issue at hand (or foot) that you may want to know about.

If left unnoticed or untreated, the primary issue that's creating tension elsewhere in the body may eventually become a problem requiring veterinary treatment or long-term attention. In this case, a thorough veterinary or dental exam may uncover hidden, or chronic problems associated with the head-shyness. Once the primary issue has been found and taken care of, use of bodywork therapy and local topical therapies will help to release tension that has accumulated in the poll, and in other parts of the body that may have been compensating for the issue.

Supplements and local topical treatments to the primary issue can also help to keep the pain in this area to return. In this way, the whole body is addressed. Following up with suppling exercises, the owner can help to keep the horse's poll and neck flexible, his head down, and hopefully a smile on back his face.

Horses do things for a reason, and it pays for the owner or trainer to understand what that reason might be. Whether it's a subtle difference in movement or something that's creating a training challenge, by paying attention to what your horse's body is telling you, you may be able to avoid training and physical issues with your horse.

Poll-Atlas Junction



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.