

PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

A young boy wearing a white cowboy hat and a blue long-sleeved shirt is riding a horse. The shirt has "RUNNING M PERFORMANCE HORSES" printed on the back. The background shows a sunset over a field.

VOLUME 8 ISSUE 11

**CONFIDENCE,
CLARITY &
CONVICTION.**

**BY CRAIG
CAMERON**

**HORSE
COMMUNICATION**
WHO AND WHY

**BY DICK
PIEPER**

"Got er done Pap's."

Kids, Cattle & Quarter Horses

RUNNING
M
PERFORMANCE HORSES

SEE PGS. 3 & 36-37 FOR DETAILS

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Is My Horse Hurting?

Releasing Tension

In The Poll-Atlas and Neck

By Jim Masterson

Lateral Cervical Flexion

Is your horse having trouble bending in one direction, or does he brace against the bit, either one side or both? Today we'll talk about things you can do yourself, to help your horse release tension or discomfort that may be limiting his ability to do what you are asking of him. Specifically, we're going to focus on the first of three key junctions of the horse's body that affect performance – the poll/atlas junction. Tension in this junction affects not only movement here, but affects the whole horse. And conversely, any discomfort elsewhere in the horse shows up in the poll. It's a vicious circle and somebody's got to break it. Why not try a few simple techniques to help it along yourself?

The Masterson Method is a method of equine performance body work where we learn to read and follow the responses of the horse to our touch to help it release tension in key junctions of the body that most affect performance. It is a very practical method that can be easily learned by horse owners. You don't have to know a lot of anatomy to begin learning this method. You just have to learn how to read the horse's responses to your touch and he'll guide you along the way.

It's also a very results-oriented method. You get results as you're working on the horse through visual responses of the horse and you get results afterwards in improvement in performance. But I think the most important result you're going to get is the change in relationship you'll experience with your horse through the interaction.



Last issue we started with a technique, the Bladder Meridian Technique, that would show you how to read subtle changes in your horse's behavior that would tell you where your horse may be holding tension in the body. If you have done this to your horse already you will know if he is holding tension in his poll and neck and will have started to release it.

Today we're going to focus on releasing tension in the first of three key junctions of the body that most affect performance; the poll and atlas. We're going to do this by asking for movement in this junction in a relaxed state.

The principle here is when you ask a joint or a junction to move through a range of motion - even a small range of motion - in a relaxed state, it releases tension in the joint or junction. That's just the way it works. But



the key is that the joint or junction has to be relaxed during the movement. If you just move, bend, pull or push it through a range of motion, you're just bending and moving and pushing it. But when it's relaxed during the movement, it allows the horse to release tension in the connective tissue of that joint or junction.

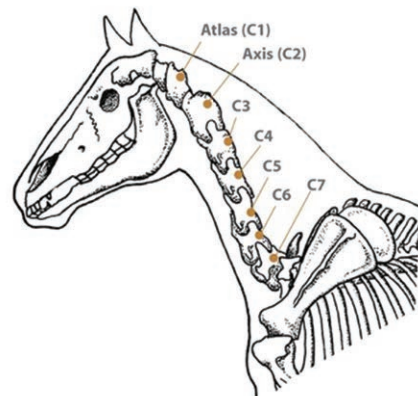
The horse is a survival animal, and while moving this junction in a relaxed state when you come across significant discomfort the horse is going to brace against it, either externally or internally. When you run into this bracing if you soften and yield, it will allow the horse to release the discomfort that's causing it.

You will know the horse is bracing externally when you feel it in your hands and you will know he is bracing internally by watching for subtle signs. If you pay close attention to what the horse is telling you; both visually, and to what you are feeling in your hands, you will know when you have found tension, and will have helped him to release it.

The principle here is SOFTEN and YIELD. When you run into resistance, soften and then continue on through it.

Quick Anatomy

The area we are focusing on is the poll, atlas and neck. First in line is the poll, which is at the top of the head or skull. Then we have the first vertebrae of the neck, called the atlas. The junction between these two we call the poll/atlas junction. Then we have the remaining six vertebrae of the neck. The actual vertebrae run farther down below the topline, near the widest, thickest part of the neck; not along the topline (see drawing). This is the area we are going to be gently asking for movement in. The first and most important is the poll/atlas junction.



How to do the Lateral Cervical Flexion Technique

Standing at the left shoulder of your horse, place your left hand - your "nose hand" - gently on the horse's nose or the nose-band of the halter. Place your other hand, your "neck hand" gently on the first vertebrae of the neck, or

atlas. This would be on the hard area about 3 to 4 inches behind and slightly below the ear.

Step 1 - Soften both hands (I said SOFTEN!).



Step 2 - Now gently (I said GENTLY!) wiggle his nose side to side with the nose hand. Gently wiggle and stop.

By doing this, you are moving the junction between the poll and atlas through a tiny range of motion in a relaxed state. It's not the amount of movement that causes the release, it's the amount of relaxation. There should be no pressure on the neck with the

neck hand; just rest your fingers there. The only purpose of this hand is to focus the movement here. If you push where there is tension or where the horse is sore, he'll internally brace against the movement and it won't work.

Step 3 - Soften both hands, then re-position your "neck hand" down the line of the vertebrae just a few inches, and with your "nose hand" bring his nose toward you just a few inches, creating a slight bend in the upper neck.



Step 4 - Soften both hands and give a little wiggle here; just with the nose hand, resting your neck hand gently on the neck.



Step 5 - Soften, bring the nose slightly farther around, re-position your neck hand a little farther down the neck, and gently wiggle. Repeat the process until his head is around to the side and your neck hand is at the base of the neck.

As you bring his nose farther around, and your hand farther down the neck, you're flexing and wiggling the lower vertebrae of the neck. (See photos.)



Step 6 - The most important step once you have gone all the way down the neck, is to step back away (I said AWAY!) from the horse to see what he has to say. Give the horse plenty of space and time to let you know if there are any releases to be shown, such as snorting, yawning, head or body shaking. Some horses are very comfortable re-

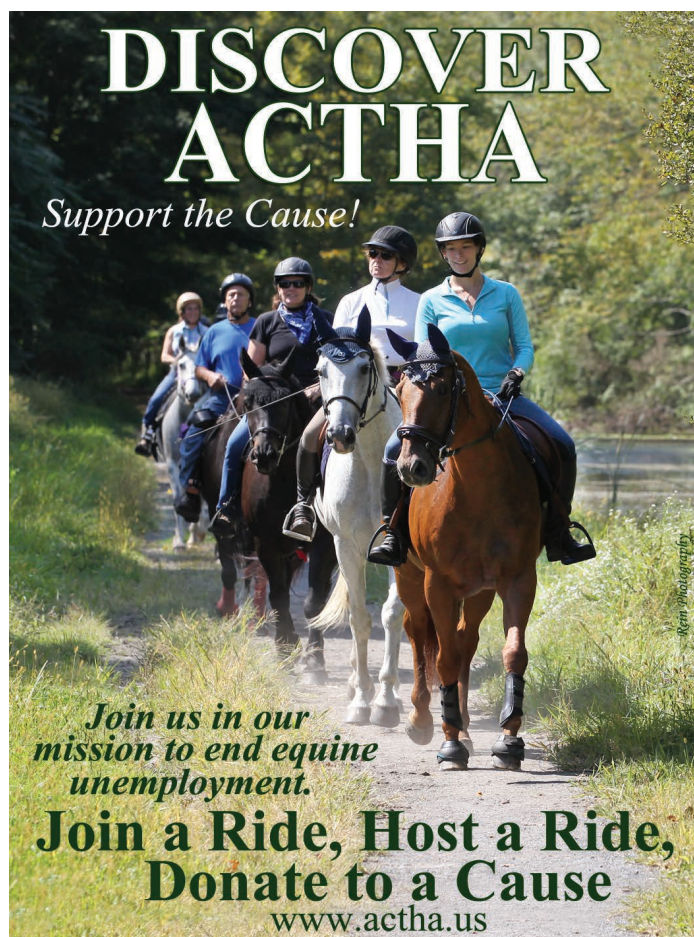
leasing in front of a human, but a lot of horses aren't. You may have to step away back to the other side of the stall or pen.

What To Do Along the Way

If the horse braces or resists at any point in the process, soften your hands (both) and yield just a little bit until he stops fussing. You don't have to take your hands off or let go; just soften. This yielding or softening allows the horse to release the tension you just encountered. If he doesn't give you any huge releases you can just continue. If your horse blinks at any time during the process, this means there is something there that he is not yet bracing against. Stop and soften.

To see how this works you can go to www.MastersonMethod.com for a visual demonstration under You Tube Training Videos, or purchase the Beyond Horse Massage DVD and Book.

Jim Masterson has been the equine bodywork therapist for the 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014 USEF Endurance Teams, and has worked on thousands of performance horses, including competitors in FEI World Cup, Nations Cup, Pan American Cup and the World Equestrian Games. He is the author of the book and DVD Beyond Horse Massage, and DVD Dressage Movements Revealed. He teaches the Masterson Method® of Integrated Equine Performance Bodywork to horse owners and therapists around the world.



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