



# PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

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# Accumulated Tension, Performance and Training.

By Jim Masterson



Tension accumulates in the muscles and connective tissues of the body that can negatively affect range of motion, performance, and willingness to perform in the horse. We use techniques that help the horse to release excessive tension and improve the above. The accumulation of this pain and tension can be the result of many things. The normal ones we would think of from the perspective of the human athlete would be repetitive motion and over-exertion of the muscle. We would recognize these from the pain, or from the noticeable effect on our performance, and we would do something about it. Usually the first thing we do is complain, either to ourselves or to



others. Then, if we're smart and want to feel and perform better, we do or have something done about it. Miscommunication doesn't seem to be a problem here.

Of course, you can all see where I'm heading with this. The difference between horses and humans is; the only way the horse can let us know that pain or tension is negatively affecting him is through outward changes in performance, or behavior. The miscommunication comes in when we don't understand why his performance is not up to par, or why his attitude or behavior has gone south. What we often interpret as a mental or training issue may be a physical issue. Some signs that this may be the case would be if a training problem you're trying to work through is, 1) recurring or consistently difficult for the horse to get, 2) a problem that is noticeably or consistently more to one side than the other, or 3) shows up suddenly. These are signs that something physical is bothering or restricting movement in the horse.

So, where might this performance-affecting pain or tension be coming from? Let's talk first about number 2 above; unilateral issues.

There can be a natural difference in lateral movements due to the natural one-sidedness of a horse that can make it difficult to tell how much might be physical discomfort and how much might be due to natural one-sidedness. In any case, releasing this restriction through bodywork can improve both, and make the training much easier for both the horse and rider. It

can also help to prevent natural one-sidedness from becoming a negative through repetitive movement and over-exertion of more one-sided muscles. Using methods that attempt to strength-train through these issues without allowing for suppleness and flexibility will cover up tension imbalances that can lead to physical problems down the road. Just a note: It's when unilateral tension builds in the horse's body that things really start to go south.

Another reason one-sidedness might be showing up is that the horse is compensating for discomfort in the foot or lower leg. If this is ignored it could eventually lead to an injury that requires veterinary treatment. The best way to see if something is starting to show up is to ask the vet to look at it. Often natural one-sidedness is a factor in the development of a foot or leg injury. Just another note: It also makes sense to see if compensation for a foot or leg issue is affecting the diagonal limb and muscles of the horse.

Another difference between US and THEM that clouds the issue is that excessive tension can accumulate in muscles due to many other factors in the horse besides repetitive motion or over-exertion. Some of these are issues that we as humans don't have to deal with, or that are so obvious to us that they don't have a chance to develop into problems in the us.

First on the list with performance horses is feet. We all know that with no foot, we have no horse. How often do we hear the adage "No foot, no human"? I don't hear it that much. We probably more often hear, or at least are thinking, "No brains, no human". Sore feet (or sore foot) are a major creator of tension (unilateral and/or diagonal) in the body. That's why a good farrier is so important.

Other issues that can create pain/tension/restriction that ultimately affect performance and behavior in your horse are: dental issues (TMJ), conformation (often in the feet and legs), poor saddle fit, improper use of tack, nutrition or metabolic issues.

Pain in the TMJ caused by dental imbalances (or improper use of bit) radiates into the poll and atlas. Muscles in the TMJ also connect to the horse's forelimbs and sternum, directly affecting movement in the front end.

Head-shyness is probably the most obvious example of a physical issue being mistaken for a training issue. Ninety-five (95)% of head-shy horses that I work on have excessive pain and tension in the poll. Tension in the poll and atlas affects the entire body. Conversely, anything going on in the horse's body will also affect the poll. This is probably the most important junction in the body, and any sign of tension here is a sign that something is going on somewhere. This applies especially to front feet, which have a direct connection to tension in the poll and atlas.

A common example of a conformational issue creating unilateral muscle tension would be high-low foot syndrome, most often in the front. Not only does the imbalance in loading on the front feet affect the front end, but often on these horses you'll see an imbalance in the hind end showing up in one hip bone or ilium higher than the other. This is the body's way of adjusting to the imbalance in front, and a sign of how an imbalance in one part of the body affects the whole horse.

The purpose of all of this isn't to scare you into thinking your horse is a physical mess if you're having training issues. It's just to point out that there's a lot going on with your horse's physiology in the course of working your horse that affects the outcome of your work.

Becoming more aware of what they are, and paying attention to what the horse is telling you about them in his language rather than yours, will make both of your jobs easier, more productive and more enjoyable.

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 FEI World Cup, Nations Cup, Pan Am Cup and World Equestrian Games competitors. He is the author of the book and DVD *Beyond Horse Massage*, and DVD *Dressage Movements Revealed*. He teaches The Masterson Method® of bodywork to horse owners and therapists around the world.



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