

# PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

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Reward Your Horse  
by Releasing Pressure  
BY SANDY COLLIER





# Releasing Tension

## Using the Horse's Natural Instincts

By Jim Masterson

Does your horse have a tendency to feel “off” sometimes for no discernable reason? Does he consistently have more difficulty with movements in one direction over the other? Does he sometimes feel stiff or resistant to training? Do you seek ways to enhance your horse's performance without resorting to medications?

These are some of the more common issues that can be addressed with an alternative form of therapy that equestrian competitors can use to improve performance, that works with a horse's natural instincts. Even better—it's something you can do yourself.

In contrast to most traditional treatment modalities it is something you do with the horse, rather than to the horse. In fact, if you don't allow the horse to participate, it doesn't work! Although it was developed to improve performance used on equine athletes competing in high-demand environments such as barrel racing, cutting show jumping, harness racing and endurance, its intuitive and interactive nature does more than this. It enables you to access a new level of communication with the horse.

### How Does It Work?

One reason this works is because of the horse's incredible awareness and sensitivity to outside stimuli. This is how he survives. Working with this sensitivity, we can access a level of the horse's nervous system that enables him to release deep stress in muscles and connective tissue. We do this by reading what the horse is telling us through his responses and body language.

It helps to understand how this works by looking at two underlying principles of the horse's survival instinct. First, he's a prey animal; and second, he's a herd animal.

### Fleeing and Bracing

As a prey animal, the horse's survival in nature depends on his ability to flee from pressure. Getting away from danger, intrusion or discomfort is the horse's first survival response. If he doesn't have this option, as is usually the case when working with humans, his second survival response is to brace against pressure, discomfort, or pain.

### Body Language

As a herd animal the horse relies for the most part on body language for communication and survival; from the most obvious flattening of the ears, to the slightest softening of the eye, shift of weight, or even subtler signs. When it comes to pain, the horse will instinctively do his best to block out pain in order to prevent himself from being either picked out of the herd by a predator, or kicked out as a weak link. This is why it's often so difficult to

accurately evaluate lameness in the horse.

By learning to read subtle changes in the horse's body language, and applying techniques that don't trigger this bracing response (internal and external), you can bypass the blocking process and access that part of the nervous system that will release pain and tension.

### Reading the Horse – Using Touch and Response to Release Tension

Touch and response are nothing more than stimulus and behavior. When you apply the correct stimulus (touch), you will get the correct behavior (response). Once you learn to read and follow subtle changes in body language (responses) of the horse to your touch – and use of levels of touch that stay underneath the bracing and blocking process – the horse will tell you where he's holding tension and begin releasing it. At this point the horse begins to guide the process. If there's any question about whether you're using the correct amount of pressure, the answer is almost always “less is more.”

### The Bladder Meridian Technique

Below is a simple yet powerful technique that will demonstrate how this works, and begin the process of releasing tension and developing another level of communication between you and your horse.

In Chinese medicine, there are 12 primary energy meridians in the body. The bladder meridian is one of the major ones, in that it has a unique effect on balancing all the others. We use the Bladder Meridian Technique to get on the same page with the horse; so that we can start to get used to this particular horse's body language, and his nervous system can get used to our input.

The meridian runs along each side of the body, parallel to and just below the topline. It begins at the poll and continues down the neck and back, about 2” to 3” below the topline of the body, until it reaches the croup. From there, it “leaves” the topline, going over the rump toward the “poverty groove”

between the hamstring muscles. Follow this groove down the hind leg, over the side of the hock just off the hind centerline of the leg, down the groove on the side of the cannon bone, over the fetlock, to its termination on the coronary band, as shown in the diagram below (above, over there).



*“The Bladder Meridian is an energy meridian that runs down both sides of the topline of the horse.”*

You will follow this meridian with your hand or fingertips, very slowly and very lightly, and stop at certain points where the horse “tells” you there is something there. You will stay on these points – doing essentially nothing besides continuing to watch your horse’s responses - until he releases tension there. You will know when he is releasing tension when he tells you with larger “release” responses. We call this process; SEARCH – RESPONSE - STAY - RELEASE.



We SEARCH for responses as we slowly (I said, slowly!) run our fingers down this imaginary line. The RESPONSES we are looking for are very subtle. The most common is a blink of the eyelid, or a twitch of the lips. Some horses are more stoic than others, so it's important to watch closely for the slightest response.



*“A Response is any subtle shift in behavior that correlates to your touch. The most common is a blink.”*

The next step is to STAY on the spot where the horse has blinked. Do nothing; don't rub, push, pet, or poke. The STAY part is the most difficult part for humans to get. It is our nature to do things, and make them happen.



*“Stay... and stay... and stay... lightly on this spot, doing nothing, until you get...”*

If you stay on this spot, doing nothing, and wait... wait... and wait for the horse's nervous system to begin to let go of this tension, you - and your horse - will be rewarded with a RELEASE of tension. Signs that this has happened will be one or more

larger release responses. Some of these are; dropping his head, licking and chewing, shaking his head as he feels circulation return, repeated yawning (see photo), snorting and sneezing. Often the horse will fidget just before this happens. Fidgeting is important, as it lets us know that the horse is feeling something and is about to let it go.

*“... a Release. Signs of this are larger response such as head shaking, or repeated yawning.”*

### Levels of Pressure

The levels of pressure we use with this method range from almost nothing, to about as much as we can use; in techniques that require movement in other areas of the horse. The key is that whatever pressure we're using is kept under the horse's subtle bracing response.

For the Bladder Meridian Technique we use what is called “air gap” pressure, meaning literally no pressure at all – barely touching the tips of the hair. The principle here is that if you give the horse nothing (no pressure) to brace against, his body will begin to send circulation to the area and the muscles will start to relax. In a sense, you are tricking the horse's nervous system into letting go of blocking - and consequently releasing - tension.



*“Air Gap pressure means barely touching the hair of the horse.”*

So, you might say, “Horses always blink, yawn, lick their lips, shake their heads and fidget. How do I tell if it is a response, or if my horse is just chewing, blinking at flies, or scratching an itch?” The answer is that you're not just looking for these behaviors: You're looking for the correlation between what you're doing with your hand, and the subtle changes in behavior, or responses, from the horse. This is what makes it work; what forms the communication.

All it takes is the patience to watch, wait, and see what the horse has to say; and the willingness to go slowly and lightly with your touch. Remember, less is more! This technique is not confined to the bladder meridian, but can be used to find and release tension in any part of the body can be done on any part of the body.



*“These techniques can be used anywhere on the body.”*

### Further Pointers

- For the horse to participate in this process, you must allow him to do so on his own time. Let go of the element of time. Throw away the clock. You're on the horse's agenda.

- Different horses have different personalities. Some respond more readily than others. Some are more stoic and you have to look for the slightest blink; others are more demonstrative and will release right away. However, if you stay light enough, long enough, the horse's nervous system will begin to release tension.

In the next issue (??) we'll show you how to release tension in key junctions of the body that most affect performance using techniques that move these areas of the body through ranges of motion in a relaxed state. These techniques also rely on reading and following the horse's responses to the movement, and will release even deeper tension, and establish even deeper bonds of trust and communication with your horse.

*“Techniques that ask for movement in a relaxed state release further tension in the body.”*

A video clip demonstrating the Bladder Meridian can be found online at <https://www.mastersonmethod.com/training-videos.html?limitstart=0> . More Masterson Method Techniques can be learned from the book and dvd Beyond Horse Massage by Jim Masterson. Information on upcoming weekend clinics to be taught in the UK next spring can be found at <https://www.mastersonmethod.com> .



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.