

# PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

VOLUME 9 ISSUE 2



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# Giving barrel racers and other horses that compete in timed events the Treatment They Deserve can pay off for both you and your horse

By Jim Masterson



Any athlete will perform better when his or her muscles are relaxed, joints are pain free, everything is in alignment and full range of motion is restored. It is true with humans, and I believe, it's true with horses.

You don't just send the pitcher home after a major league baseball game. The team's trainers will work with him to relieve any soreness or tension and prepare him for his next outing. We should do the same for our competitive horses.

Just like a human, a horse's muscles will continue to tighten over time, reducing stride and range of motion. When you release stress and tension in the muscle, the horse performs better. This allows the horse to perform better than his competitors, and who doesn't want that?

From the perspective of improving performance through bodywork, anatomically speaking the equine body can be divided into three key junctions: the poll (where the neck meets the head) the shoulder/withers junction (where the forelegs join the body), and the sacroiliac junction (where the hind limbs join the body). Tension accumulation in these key performance-related areas can manifest itself in numerous ways, including head shyness, sensitivity to touch in the poll area, flexion stiffness, bending issues, one-sidedness (pulling or fading to one side), uneven gait, lameness and even behavioral problems.

Tension in horses builds up in the neck, shoulders, withers, forelegs, and hind legs. Generally, in the working horse, where there is a junction, there is going to be tension. And, like humans, the source of this tension may be located someplace else. Just as poor fitting shoes in humans can cause pain in the knees, hips, or back, poor fitting shoes on a horse can cause pain in the poll and neck/shoulder/withers junction in front, and the hamstrings/gluteals, hips or sacroiliac in behind. And this isn't even counting what may be happening in the horse's back, or the diagonal effects of front/hind end issues.

A horse's risk of injury increases when the muscles and tendons become excessively sore and tight. Accumulated stress restricts movement and causes muscle and structural imbalance.

The extreme physical nature of barrel racing puts its equine athletes at a higher risk for muscle-related soundness and performance issues. The repetitive effects of conditioning and training for the sport, as well as the

strain of the race itself, can cause excessive soreness and tightness in the horse's muscles. To me, barrel racing is kind of like combining a quarter-mile sprint with cutting.

Other factors aside, I've found that one of the main causes of soreness and tightness in the muscles is soreness in the horse's feet. With about 65 percent of the horse's weight being carried on his front end, this is one of the most important areas to take care of, giving even more meaning to the old adage, "no foot, no horse."

Other factors of tension and pain can come from imbalances and other issues with the horse's teeth, and issues with saddle fit. While rider will make several adjustments to get the right fit for the rider, often a fit for the horse that takes into account issues such as discomfort from pressure points, or room for mobility of the scapula is not given as much consideration. The horse just wants the same consideration.

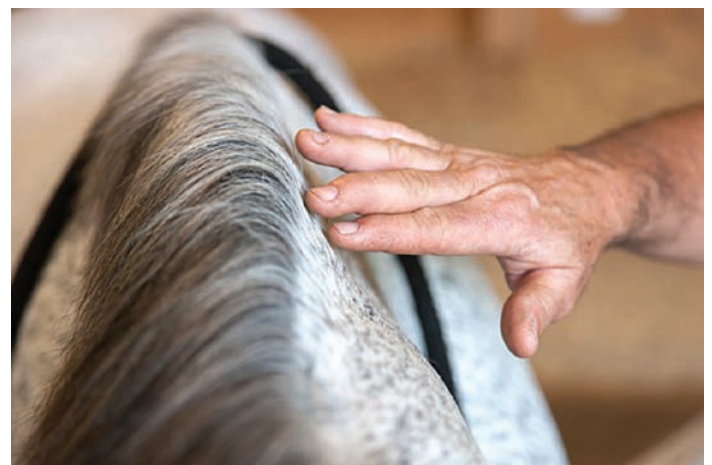
A secret to getting a horse to release excessive accumulation of muscle tension is using a level of touch that allows the horse to release the tension himself. The Masterson Method® uses levels ranging from almost no pressure (what we call "air gap" - barely touching the skin) all the way to the strength it takes to squeeze a lemon. With this method, we can activate the horse's nervous system to release large amounts of muscle tension on its own by using a much lighter level of touch than people might imagine.

Using a simple axiom: Search, Response, Stay, Release you can begin the process of getting the horse to release muscle tension in your horse:

**SEARCH** - running your fingers along the topline of the horse using very light 'air gap' touch

**RESPONSE** - watching for very subtle signs (for example an eye blinking, lip twitching) that the horse uses to tell you there is tension under that area

**STAY** - remaining very lightly on that area, doing nothing, except bringing the horse's attention to the area, so that his nervous system can start the next step





**RELEASE** - the horse's behavior gives larger signs that muscle tension has let go. These larger release responses can be one or a combination of the following: licking and chewing, snorting or sneezing, shaking its head or body, or repeated yawning.

With this SRSR process the horse will show where his muscles have accumulated tension, and when that tension is being released. You can use this formula anywhere on the horse. We know from experience that after the horse has shown these release responses there is more relaxation and circulation in the muscles, range of motion is improved and often straightness is improved as unilateral tension or "torque" on the key junctions mentioned above has released. You should feel the difference in the ride and, if you're competing in a timed sport, a difference in the clock.

Taking the time to really focus on the horse's responses, and having the patience to wait (Stay) lightly, doing nothing, until the horse gives you a larger release response, will get results.

Throw away the clock; you're on the horse's time now. It can take up to a minute or more after getting the smaller initial response on an area for the horse's nervous system to start to let it go. And stay focused on what the horse is "telling" you during the process. He is the leader in this dance between the two of you.

**Do you have equine bodywork questions? Jim is now offering the opportunity to ask questions on a free live webinar each month entitled: "Talk with Jim". Go to the [www.MastersonMethod.com](http://www.MastersonMethod.com) website and click on "Talk with Jim" on the menu bar to the left for information on how to participate.**

**On the next "Talk with Jim" the focus will be on Barrel Racing. Jim will spend time talking with Christie Hebert, Masterson Method Certified Practitioner and Barrel Race Competitor and then take your questions live.**

**Join the live webinar, February 18th at 8pm Central for "Talk with Jim" Information on [www.MastersonMethod.com](http://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.



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