

PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST

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Journey to Road to the Horse

BY RICHARD
WINTERS

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FLEXING AT THE STANDSTILL

BY CLINTON
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Unlocking TMJ Tension with Equine Bodywork

By Jim Masterson

The temporo-mandibular joint (TMJ) is the junction of the upper and lower jaw. As such, the joint balances on the teeth. The TMJ is a critically important joint where emotional as well as physical tension easily accumulates. For this reason, keeping the horse's teeth in balance is an important part of general horse care. Tension and discomfort in the TMJ transfers quickly to the poll but can directly cause contact or eating difficulties.

The temporal mandibular joint issues will cause tension in the poll, and vice-versa. Conversely, pain or restriction in the poll will affect other parts of the body. Issues in your horse's body have a way of reflecting in his poll and atlas. Therefore, tension and pain he might have from a sore back or compensation for pain in his feet, is generally going to collect there.

And when the poll tightens up, pain radiates into the TMJ and jaw. It's very common for me to find horses with excessive pain and tension in the poll due to sore front feet, who have corresponding pain and restriction in the TMJ, but who have had regular dental work done with no serious dental issues.

Dental issues should be ruled out as the teeth themselves can be directly responsible for TMJ pain or restriction. Any horse, especially one that competes or performs for a living should be checked annually by a veterinarian or a trained equine dental technician. Even after a dental problem is corrected, it is a good idea to release the TMJ of any residual restriction.

Other causes of poll pain that can radiate to the TMJ are rider-related. Over-collection directly affects the poll and the TMJ through the use of the bit. Problems can also develop from using or overusing a bit that isn't suited to a particular

horse's mouth, especially if dental issues already exist.

By releasing tension in the poll and atlas, you will relieve tension in the TMJ. The following techniques will effectively and safely loosen the TMJ, as well as keep healthy movement in the jaw. These exercises are designed to help release some of the pain and tension, but are by no means a substitute for finding and eliminating the cause of your horse's TMJ discomfort, he stresses.

Masterson Method for TMJ #1

Place a thumb or fingers inside and on the roof—or palate—of your horse's mouth, and hold it (them) gently there. This will cause your horse to lick, extend his tongue, and move his jaw from side to side. Your horse will probably try to move his head around and get away at first, so keep one hand on his halter. This is not to keep your horse from pulling away, but to enable you to go with him as he moves his head around. As your horse gets used to it, he will even start to enjoy it, especially as he begins to release tension in the TMJ from the movement.

Masterson Method for TMJ #2

Place one or two fingertips very lightly right on the joint of the TMJ. This is using what I call 'air gap' pressure, which is allowing a slight gap of air between you and your horse's hair. This will bring your horse's attention to that area.

Keep your fingers very lightly there, barely touching the hair. Once your horse has relaxed, watch his eyes as you slowly move your fingers around an area about the size of a nickel. SEARCH for a blink in your horse's eye. When you get a blink, that is the RESPONSE we are looking for, stay (STAY, STAY, STAY) on that spot, throw away the clock, still barely touching the hair, and wait.

You may have to wait only five seconds, or you may have to wait 30 seconds, before your horse gives you a RELEASE that he is releasing tension. This sign will most often be licking and chewing, or sometimes repeated yawning and shaking of the head. After the release, you can search other places for a blink and continue. We call this process: SEARCH, RESPONSE, STAY, RELEASE. If you have time, you can do this on any point on the horse allowing the horse to guide your work.

If your horse has pain in this area, he might not want you to do this. This can be a sign that he needs to release tension there, so stick with it. These TMJ release techniques also serve as a good way to check for pain or restriction. If your horse responds with visual release responses,



such as yawning and shaking the head, then he probably had some pain or restriction there. The good part about this is that you're already helping him to release it.

Jim Masterson, equine bodywork therapist for the 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014 USEF Endurance Teams and for thousands of equine athletes competing at the top level horse shows and in FEI World Cup, Pan American and World Equestrian Games competitions, teaches a unique method of equine bodywork to horse owners and therapists in which the practitioner learns to read and use the responses of the horse to touch to release tension in key junctions of the body that most affect performance. This is an effective and rewarding method of bodywork that anyone can learn to use to improve performance, and open new levels of communication and trust with the horse. He is the author of the book and DVD Beyond Horse Massage and the DVD Equine Massage For Performance Horses. Go to www.master-sonmethod.com for more information.

