

PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST



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What is the MASTERSON METHOD?

By Jim Masterson

This month we are showcasing the Introduction to Jim Masterson's book, Beyond Horse Massage. More information on the techniques, purchase the book or find out about weekend seminars in your area, go to: www.MastersonMethod.com.

The Masterson Method—Integrated Equine Performance Bodywork—is a unique, interactive method of equine bodywork in which you learn to recognize and use the responses of the horse to your touch to find and release accumulated tension in key junctions of the body that most affect performance. In contrast to most traditional modalities, it enables the horse to actively participate in the process of releasing tension. It is something you do with the horse, rather than to the horse. This participation and interaction is what makes the method fascinating for those who use it. In fact, if you do not allow the horse to participate, it does not work!

Although this bodywork was developed to improve performance in equine athletes competing in high-demand environments such as show jumping, harness racing, endurance, reining, and barrel racing, its intuitive and interactive nature can help to not only improve performance, but to access a new level of communication with the horse.

The results of this interaction are both visual and palpable (*you can feel with your hand*):

- Visual signs of release of tension in the horse's body.
- Improved performance, suppleness, mobility, and comfort.
- And, most importantly, the immediate bond of trust that begins to develop as a result of this cooperation.

This is a very practical, hands-on approach that you can begin using immediately. You do not have to have knowledge of anatomy or massage to begin using the basic techniques of this method. The techniques you will need are easily learned with the help of this book. The principles of touch and response will be demonstrated to you by the horse from the very beginning. Once the basic techniques are learned, and you follow what the horse is telling you, the horse lets you know where tension is stored, guides you in releasing that tension, and lets you know when it is released. The results are real time.

This approach can be easily integrated into other

modalities, so it can be of value to the professional massage and bodywork therapist as well. Once learned, these tools enhance effectiveness of other modalities through immediate feedback from the horse. Another tool for the professional toolbox!

The Techniques used in this method can be used together, from front to hind on the horse, or individual Techniques can be used to address particular issues on different areas of the horse's body. As the results are visible and immediate, many of these Techniques will yield visible and immediate improvements to specific performance-related issues.

That said, you will soon see while working with this method how interconnected different areas of the horse are, and not just because I say so (not a very convincing reason) but because the horse will show you. When working on one area of the horse you will often get a "visible" release in another area. How these areas are interconnected and how they affect performance makes logical sense once you look at the anatomy. Anatomical explanations will accompany the Techniques presented in this book, and a quick reference chart relating specific Techniques to common performance issues will follow in the Appendix.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Survival Instinct and the Horse's Language

One reason this method works so well is because of the horse's incredible awareness and sensitivity to outside stimuli. This is how he survives. Working with this sensitivity, you can access a level of the horse's nervous system that enables him to release deep stress in his muscles, connective tissue, and structure. To do this you must learn how to use touch, and how to read what the horse is telling you through his responses and body language.

To fully understand this, you need to be aware of a couple of underlying principles of the horse's survival instincts:

a) Prey Animal

As a *prey animal*, the horse's survival in nature depends on his ability to flee from danger.

Getting away from danger, intrusion or discomfort is the horse's *first survival response*. If he doesn't have this option, as is normally the case when with humans, the horse's *second survival response* is to "brace," "push," or "guard against" intrusion, discomfort, or pain. This is the survival response that you learn to bypass.

By applying Techniques at levels of pressure that *don't* trigger this bracing survival response (whether it's internal or external), and knowing from the horse's responses when this is happening, you can bypass the bracing response and access that part of the nervous system that will release tension.

By nature, most horses take the path of least resistance when given the option—and when asked properly—and this path is for him to release tension.

b) Herd Animal

As a *herd* animal the horse relies, in large part, on body language for communication in the herd. This can be seen from the most obvious flattening of ears and baring of teeth, to the slightest softening of the eye, shift of weight, change in breathing, and even subtler signs.

The horse will instinctively do his best not to show outward signs of pain or weakness, to prevent himself from being either picked out of the herd by a predator or kicked out of the herd as a weak link. This is why it is so often challenging to accurately evaluate lameness in the horse.

When you learn to follow the signs and responses the horse gives you, he lets you know when you are being effective, where he is holding tension, and when his body has released this hidden tension. By using levels of pressure that the horse's defense system doesn't internally resist—knowing how to read and work with the horse when this is happening—you enable the horse's nervous system to release tension that he has been covering up.

A fascinating aspect of this is that when the horse begins to realize that you are allowing him to release tension that he has been holding instinctively, he begins to take part in the process by more readily showing you release responses, and letting go of tension in his body more easily. *This creates a deeper bond of trust between you and your horse (fig.1.1)*



The deeper bond of trust between human and horse.

The Junctions of the Body That Most Affect Performance

Repetitive work, pain, lameness, or compensation for any discomfort can cause tension patterns to develop in muscles and connective tissue that can restrict movement in joints and major junctions of the body. This accumulated tension and restricted movement can negatively affect performance, comfort, add to psychological and emotional strain, and result in a loss of willingness and behavior problems. These restrictive tension patterns can themselves eventually contribute to lameness. Even after the primary cause of lameness is removed, the tension patterns and restriction often remain. A point has been reached where the horse cannot completely release this tension without help. The purpose of this method is to help the horse release accumulated stress and tension in the body that he cannot release on his own.

In the Masterson Method, you begin by focusing on the *three main junctions* of the body that most affect performance. These are:

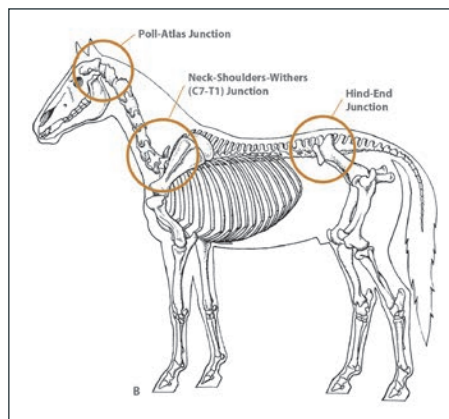
- The Poll-Atlas Junction
- The Neck-Shoulder-Withers (Cervical-Thoracic C7-T1) Junction
- The Hind-End (Sacroiliac) Junction

When tension is released in any of these key junctions, tension is released in muscles and connective tissue in the larger areas of that junction, and often in more remote areas of the horse's body.

The most important junction in relation to overall mobility and comfort in the horse is the *Poll-Atlas Junction*. In my experience, tension, pain, or dis-

comfort anywhere in the horse's body shows up as tension in the poll.

The other two main junctions are where the horse's limbs join the body. Here, forces exerted by the horse's limbs as well as concussion during movement are transferred to the body. Tension accumulates in these junctions as a result. When tension patterns begin to accumulate unilaterally, meaning more to one side than the other, forces are exerted in an unbalanced manner and performance problems can become apparent in bending, lead changes, and movement. This potential imbalance applies to all three main junctions. It's important to remember that you release tension in these junctions because it has been shown by the horse that it works.



The three main junctions of the horse.

Touch and Response—An Intuitive Approach

"Touch" and "Response," when you get right down to it, are nothing more than *stimulus and behavior*.

When you apply the correct stimulus (touch), you will get the correct behavior (response), which starts the process of *release* in the horse. When you use the correct level of *touch* and can recognize the responses that correlate to what you are doing, you can follow those responses to a successful release of tension by the horse.

Although this sounds scientific so far, once you start to recognize the responses of the horse and you get the correlation between what you are doing and what the horse is saying, the horse begins to guide the process.

The more you pay attention to what the horse is

saying, the more you begin to recognize subtler responses from the horse to the point that you begin to "feel" as much as see what is going on. You often start to sense that an area is about to release before the horse visibly shows you the release. It soon becomes less about *seeing* and *thinking*, and more about *feeling*. The horse begins to participate by responding more readily and learns to release tension more easily.

Defined Levels of Touch—Less Is More

One of the distinctions between the Masterson Method and traditional massage is the role the horse plays in the process. With traditional massage you are trained with your hands to find—then "go to work" on—tension and anomalies in the muscle, using levels of pressure that will break them up.

With this method, you listen to what the horse's body has to say and adjust your pressure to get the result you want: the *release* from the horse. If there is any question about whether you are using the correct amount of pressure, the answer almost always is "less is more." The levels of pressure you use can range from almost nothing to about as much pressure as you can apply, depending on which area you are working on and what the horse is telling you.

To avoid the use of technical terms (pounds/square inch, for example) in describing what level to use in any particular exercise, and to make it easy to visualize, we have developed the more palpable descriptions below (that suspiciously, as someone pointed out in a seminar, have mostly to do with food). The key is to let the horse's initial response, or lack of response, let you know if you are using too much pressure.

The following five terms are used to describe the different levels of pressure you apply during the bodywork exercises:

- **Air Gap**—Barely touching the surface. If you were to run your hand lightly down your arm, you would be barely brushing across the hairs on your arm.
- **Egg Yolk**—This is the amount of pressure it would take to barely indent a raw egg yolk with your fingertip. It might be a good idea to break an egg in a bowl to see how light this actually is.
- **Grape**—The amount of pressure it would take to indent a grape.
- **Soft Lemon**—The amount of pressure it would take to squeeze a soft, ripe lemon.
- **Hard Lime**—The amount of pressure it would take to squeeze a hard, unripe lime. In some cases this can be just about as hard as you can push.

It's easy to misjudge or miscalculate how much pressure you are using with these Techniques. This can happen when you are first applying the Techniques and your focus is on your body position and where to place your hands. However, the level of touch you use is the single most important thing that will determine the level of success you will have!

Continued on Pg. 66 >

< Continued from page 37

Don't despair! In each of the illustrated step-by-step sections you will find corresponding, detailed notes around the level of "feel" and "touch" needed to get the most out of the Technique. These will help you become most effective.

Practice your levels of touch on a friend who can give you feedback. During the course of our seminars, most students need to be reminded several times to lighten their touch. Since I will not be there to remind you as you learn and practice these Techniques, your mantra should always be, "Less is more."

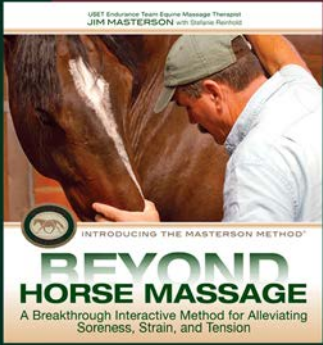
This doesn't mean that you will not use any pressure or strength with these Techniques. It only means that you will need to keep in mind that, contrary to our human way of doing things, when you run into resistance to whatever level of pressure or touch you are using, when you soften or yield to that resistance, it will allow the horse to release that tension (fig. 1.3).



Use different levels of pressure.

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.masterersonmethod.com for more information.

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