

PERFORMANCE HORSE DIGEST



VOLUME 9 ISSUE 6

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Releasing Tension in the Poll and Atlas Using the HEAD-DOWN TECHNIQUE

By Jim Masterson

The junction between the poll and the atlas is the most important junction in the horse. It's through this portal that the nervous system, which sends and receives signals from all of the body, passes enters the brain.

Tension in the muscles and connective tissue around this junction affects functions of the entire horse. Conversely, pain or discomfort anywhere in the body creates tension in the poll. It goes both ways. So you can see why the poll/atlas junction is so important. And it doesn't help that the horse is so good at covering it up. By the time your horse is showing signs of tension and discomfort in the poll, such as bracing against the bit, or especially head-shyness, then it's probably been there for a while.

A technique that we use to help the horse to release tension in the poll is to massage the muscles behind the poll with the horse's head down. When the horse's head is down and his nose is extended, the muscles behind the poll shorten and relax. When they're relaxed, you can massage them on each side of the mane under where the halter would be. In addition, in this position the movement generated by massaging will get movement in the joint.

The goal of this technique is to get the horse to lower his head, so that the muscles on top of the atlas are relaxed. The process of getting the horse's head down is just that – a process. This is a very vulnerable position for the horse to be in, especially if there is tension or discomfort here, and your horse might be reluctant at first. But if you have patience, and follow these steps then you can help your horse to release tension that has accumulated here.



Step by Step

Stand on the left side of your horse's neck. Place your right hand behind the poll, just behind or underneath the halter. You'll use this hand to massage the muscles once the head is down. Put the other hand on his forehead. This is the asking hand. (If you're left-handed you can reverse hand and body position.)

Ask the horse to bring his head slightly toward you. When the horse is standing straight, he's mentally braced. When you ask him to bring the head slightly to the side it's easier for him to soften or yield.

Gently ask the horse to drop his head just a little bit, then soften. The softer you start and the quicker you soften, the sooner the horse will learn to yield. Ask again, and soften. Each time, you'll get him a little lower, and a little lower, until he decides to stop lowering his head. This is the position where you'll start massaging. Don't continue to push or he'll push back. If this is where he's comfortable, this is where you'll start massaging.



Start gently, using the flats of your fingers, not digging in with your claws. Massage, soften, massage, soften - like you're kneading bread dough. (If you haven't kneaded dough before, go in and make some bread and give your horse a chance to relax some more before going on.)

As you're massaging, ask for his head to bob up and down just a tiny bit. This will create a little bit of movement in this junction, which will aid in

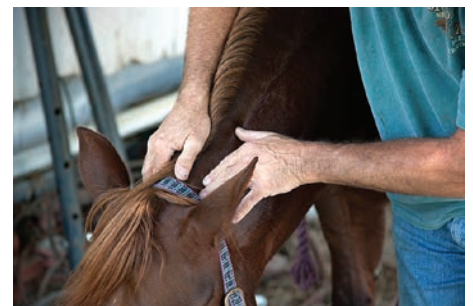
relaxing the connective tissue even more.

Most of the time, as the horse becomes more relaxed he'll start to lower his head more and more, especially if you're not trying to force it down. Just follow his head down, massaging and bobbing, resisting the urge to push his head down. At some point, he may want to raise his head up. When he absolutely has to put his head up, don't try to hold him down. Just keep your hands gently on his head and go up with him. Then start massaging again.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing. As he feels one layer of tension let's go, he'll often raise his head. Just start massaging and start the process again. If you try to hold his head down, he'll feel trapped.



Gently massage, increasing the head bobbing if he's comfortable with it. Gradually you may be able to increase the pressure of the massage as the muscles relax, and use both hands to massage. If you massage too hard your horse will want to get out of it. If you feel this happening, soften the pressure. The goal is to combine this massaging with the head bobbing to get the best results.



Do this for a couple of minutes - being mindful of when the horse might need a break. - then step back away from the horse to give him the space



to feel what's going on, and to see "what he has to say".

Snorting and sneezing, repeated yawning, and shaking of the head are signs that tension has released and that blood circulation is returning to the muscles.

Tips:

- Start gently and be sensitive as to how much pressure to use.
- If the horse starts to move his feet, move with him.
- If the horse is too sore, scared or reactive when you approach the poll, then use the Bladder Meridian Technique (mastersonmethod.com/training-videos.html) with him first to make the Head Down more comfortable for him.
- Keep hands loosely on the poll if the horse throws his head up, then ask again. Don't try to force the head down

Safety Tips:

- Keep your own head off to the side while doing this. The horse's head can come up before you know it and your heads will collide.
- Do not move your feet too quickly while the horse's head is down as this may startle him and bring his head up suddenly (see above). Slowly shift your weight before moving your foot, like a horse does when he's relaxed.

In the next issue we will look at another technique to release tension and restore range of motion to the poll/atlas junction.

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 horseshows 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.mastersonmethod.com for more information.

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