

The Masterson Method Weekend Workshop

It was a difficult decision. Winter in Florida, every weekend brings a different workshop, clinic, seminar, symposium, or summit. Tired of hearing about the many choices, my husband told me I could pick one (emphasis on one) to attend as a Christmas present. Early on in our relationship, the ground rules were firmly established and understood. Every gift giving holiday is an excuse to buy something horse related, bar none. Forget about a diamond anniversary band, I would rather have a custom made beaded brow band. He used to think this would save him money. Hah! That illusion was shattered long ago. He now adheres to our own particular Code of Silence as it relates to my expenses equestrian, “don’t ask, don’t tell, don’t go there.”

But, I digress.

As I reviewed my options, one in particular seemed to offer a unique opportunity to add a new dimension to my work with horses, the Masterson Method Weekend Seminar-Workshop. The Masterson Method is an interactive method of bodywork in which you learn to recognize and use the responses of the horse to touch, in order to find and release accumulated tension in key junctions of the body that most affect performance. The horse is an active participant in the process of releasing tension. It is something you do with the horse, rather than to him. While designed to improve performance, it has the added benefit of teaching you to access a new level of communication with your equine partner.

Why Masterson?

My passion is dressage. The object of dressage, from the USEF rule book, is “the harmonious development of the physique and ability of the horse. As a result it makes the horse calm, supple, loose and flexible but also confident, attentive and keen thus achieving perfect understanding with his rider.” Maximizing performance and creating a happy, healthy athlete requires a multi-faceted approach. What you do off the horse is just as important as time on the horse. Suppleness defined is the range of motion of joints; it is pliability and flexibility, the opposite of stiffness. A horse’s suppleness is largely determined by genetics but with time can be improved or negatively impacted by training. Suppleness is way near the foundation of the Pyramid of Training; it’s that important. It goes hand in hand with Relaxation, and requires the absence of negative muscular tension. If I could learn to locate and release tension in my horse through bodywork, would that not improve the suppleness under saddle? Absolutely! Reason One.

Reason Two. Dressage is about partnership. Horse and rider move as one. A side effect of the Masterson Method is improved communication with your horse, an immediate bond of trust as you work cooperatively together to release tension. It’s a dynamic dialog with the horse, in fact, if you do not allow the horse to participate, it doesn’t work. An opportunity to improve my communication skills with the horse? Count me in!

The Masterson Method has an international reputation, and joining me at the Weekend Workshop were participants from Israel, Ireland, Canada, and various parts of the United States. While from many

different backgrounds, we were all united by a common goal, our desire to help horses. Our teacher, Marie Riley, was engaging and enthusiastic. After brief introductions Saturday morning, we all got to work.

We began by focusing on the 3 key junctions of the body that most affect performance, the Poll, the Neck/Shoulder/Withers Junction, and the Hind End Junction. When tension is released in any of these junctions, the muscles are able to relax, and as a result, tension is even released in more remote areas of the horse's body.

We learned how to use defined levels of touch to search for responses from the horse. These levels were described as:

- Air Gap – Barely touching the surface.
- Egg Yolk – The amount of pressure it would take to indent a raw egg yolk with your finger tip. Yes, you can try this at home.
- Grape – You guessed it, 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.

Responses range from the subtle, such as a blink of an eye, a change in breathing, a quivering of the lips, to large releases. Snorting or sneezing, shaking the head, yawning, stretching, these were obvious signs that tension was being released in the body. If there was ever a question about the level of pressure to use, we were repeatedly told, less is more! Relaxation (there's that word again) was a requirement for the horse's full participation. Bracing was the enemy of the release.

The first technique we learned was how to use the bladder meridian. The bladder meridian is one of the major acupuncture meridians, running down each side of the horse's body. With this technique we learned how to read the horse and the correlation between our touch and the horse's response. We felt the immediate bond of trust that developed as a result of our interaction. Working on a variety of different horses, we learned to search for areas of tension, looking for the most subtle of responses, and then to stay within that area, waiting for the release. I don't know who smiled wider with the release, me or the horse?

How do we use the Bladder Meridian?

Rule 1: Use Search, Response, Stay, Release. When you get a response such as a blink, or a twitch of the lips, stop moving your hand and rest it there, using air gap pressure. Wait! A larger release is coming. The most common release will be licking and chewing, or the horse may let out a sigh or yawn. Once the horse shows the larger release response, move on.

Rule 2: Go softly. Use air gap pressure, barely touching the horse's hair with your palm or your fingertips. Run slowly over the meridian, all the time watching for subtle responses.

Rule 3: Go slowly. Relax, take a deep breath, and forget about the clock.

Over the next two days, we would learn other techniques that targeted the three key junctions of the body. Marie would explain and demonstrate the technique, and we would divide up into groups of two and practice what we had learned on the horses. Marie and other apprentice instructors would circulate in and out of the groups, making sure we were correct in our understanding and application of what we had just learned. And, the horses were our teachers, guarding when we moved in too strongly with the pressure, offering gratifying releases when we had read their more subtle responses correctly, and becoming active participants in the work.

By the end of the weekend, I was amazed at what we were able to accomplish with each horse. While we had only scratched the surface of all there was to learn, we had enough tools to be able to effect some very real change. Subsequently, I have been able to use the techniques learned that weekend on my own and my student's horses to great advantage. The result has been increased mobility and comfort and a very grateful horse!

The Masterson Method Weekend Workshop was held February 9th-10th at Spanish Legacy Andalusians. To learn more about the Masterson Method, visit their website www.mastersonmethod.com

Who is Jim Masterson?

Jim Masterson, founder of the Masterson Method, is the USET Endurance Team Equine Massage Therapist. Jim accompanied the USET Endurance Team to the World Equestrian Games in 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2012. Team member Meg Sleeper, DVM said of Jim, "It is impossible to overestimate Jim's ability to keep performance horses working at their peak level. Simply put, he is like having a secret weapon." Jim has also supported equine clientele competing in other international level competitions, and currently works on 500 – 600 horses a year on the U.S. Hunter-Jumper Show Circuit.

*When he first became interested in equine massage in 1997, Jim recognized that the horse exhibits certain neurological responses to touch as it releases tension in the body. Using those responses to guide his work, he developed an effective method of bodywork that anyone can learn to use. In 2004, he released an instructional DVD, *Equine Massage for Performance Horses: The Masterson Method*. This was followed in 2011 by the book, *Beyond Horse Massage*.*

Clinic Organizer Anna Bergenstrahle was able to chat with the Jim Masterson as he was finishing filming a new DVD.

How often do you recommend treatment? In performance horses, once a week if possible. When horses are being worked on a regular basis Jim recommends working on them the day before or same day as performance.

Are all horses good candidates? Yes! Performance horses because their work is challenging and they get sore and tight just like human athletes, but all horses are one sided and can benefit from the work

Are some disciplines harder on horses than others? Standardbred racing is physically very challenging but also finds that a lot of dressage horses are being brought along too fast and are sore. However, he has worked on Jane Savoie's horse and was very positively impressed with how he felt.

What about different breeds? Some breeds are more stoic (like Fjord horses for example) and one has to watch more closely for reactions, others are more reactive (like warmbloods or thoroughbreds).

What makes a good therapist? A patient person , a person who has some all around horse knowledge but has an open mind and no preconceived ideas and is open to learn

Do you believe in combining modalities? Yes, horses respond well to homeopathic-holistic treatment, the more the better, but spaced out, not too close together

Jim considers the horse to hold 50% of the responsibility for the outcome of the session.

Karen Abbattista
Karenabbattistadressage.com