

HORSEMANSHIP *Journal*

INSPIRING READING FOR THE THINKING HORSEMAN

BUILD THAT BOND

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EQUESTRIAN PHYSIOTHERAPIST **SUE PALMER** MAKES HER HORSEMANSHIP JOURNAL DEBUT SHARING WITH US HER THOUGHTS ABOUT OUR HORSE'S BACK HEALTH

A healthy back is essential in order for your horse to perform at his best. When he's coming back into work after time off, or when you're ramping up his work to get ready for the show season, it wouldn't be unusual for him to get some level of soreness. Think about yourself, and how you might feel if you started the 'Couch to 5K' training, for example. Unless you are used to running, you'll get some aches and pains along the way. You know, of course, that the reason you're doing the training is that in the long term you will have less aches and pains, because you will be fitter, stronger, and healthier. However, that doesn't stop it hurting as you work your way through the program! You can choose whether or not to keep going, which pain to work through and which to listen to.

We can't explain to our horses that we need them to work through some level of discomfort in order to get the long-term benefit of improved strength and fitness. As their guardians and their trainers, we are in the very tricky position of deciding how much to push them, and when to back off. It would be great if they could talk to us, and tell us when they're struggling. Since they can't, we have to use our judgement to monitor them the best we can.

In this article, I share with you an assessment technique that you can use with your own horse to check whether his back might be sore, and a massage technique that you can use to help ease soreness in his back. One of the focuses of physiotherapy



is to reduce pain, stiffness and restriction in range of movement. By doing this, we are encouraging the horse to use his back correctly. A horse with a weak back and stomach muscles will have more of a belly (I fully sympathise with him!). All too often, we assume that our horse is bloated or overweight. This may well be the case, and losing weight and strengthening the core work well together.

Exercises that build the back and stomach muscles, such as pole work, hill work, and working your horse correctly, can help to relieve the back pain. When the back

muscles contract, they cause hollowing of the back. This is the opposite to the lifting of the back that we're looking for in a horse who is working correctly. If your horse has a sore back, he might tense his muscles and contract them, especially when pressure is applied, for example, the weight of a rider. This tension can be worsened, for example by a poorly fitting saddle, or a rider who is not in balance. When the back muscles are sore and tense, they work against the stomach muscles, making it difficult for your horse to round through his back, to engage his hindquarters, and to be light in

the contact. Clearly, having a horse who is comfortable through his back is essential for him to perform at his best.

Every horse is an individual, and should be treated as such. What one horse feels as sore, another may not take any notice of. I've met horses who practically collapse when I check their back, but there's no sign of reluctance in their work and their performance is outstanding. I've met others who barely react when I assess them, but are clearly uncomfortable being ridden and are not performing to the best of their ability. If you are in any way unsure whether your horse is struggling, then I recommend assessment and treatment from a Chartered Physiotherapist (acpat.org) or Registered Animal Musculoskeletal Practitioner (rampregister.org).

EXERCISES

Assessment: Is your horse's performance or behaviour affected by pain or discomfort? Is he tight or sore through his back? Use this simple assessment technique to help find out.

Technique: Gradually press into your horse's muscles just behind the shoulder blade, in the withers pocket. Slowly and firmly (about as hard as you would press to dent a football) move your hand from withers to quarters (it should take 5 to 10 seconds to get from front to back). Then do the same thing in the opposite direction, moving slowly and firmly against the hair, from quarters to withers.

The ideal: there should be no reaction from your horse.

Check for: Amongst other things, any reaction of discomfort (for example, moving away, head up or swinging head round towards you), the muscle contracting and suddenly feeling hard where you're pressing, rippling of the muscles as though the horse is being tickled, signs of discomfort when you move against the hair but not when you move in the direction of the hair, heat, lumps or swellings. If you find any of these, consider contacting your Vet, Chartered Physiotherapist, or Registered Animal Musculoskeletal Practitioner to find out why, and whether that could be affecting your horse's behaviour or performance.

Treatment: Try this massage exercise to help ease tension in your horse's back. The National Centre for Complementary and Integrative Health says "... much of the evidence [for massage] points toward beneficial effects on pain and other symptoms associated with a number of different conditions. ... these effects are short term and that people need to keep getting massages for the benefits to continue." What's so exciting about massage, in my opinion, is that you can help your own horse. You can massage him as often as you have time to do so. Over time, reduced pain can lead to improved quality and range of movement. Better quality and range of movement means less risk of injury and better scores from the judge. And a happier, safer, more comfortable horse. What more could we ask for?

Massaging the back: This is a simple technique that you can use to reduce muscle spasm, and therefore potentially improve your horse's comfort and performance.

Why: In all our ridden work, we ask the horse to accept the weight of the rider. Muscle spasm in his back will make this uncomfortable. This in turn can lead to poor performance and/or bad behaviour.

What to do: Using the palm of your hand, with the pressure going through the heel of your hand, stroke (effleurage) from just behind the shoulder, all the way to the top of the quarters. Repeat on a second line from just behind the shoulder to the middle of the spine, then again from just behind the shoulder straight up to the withers. Work as firmly as you and your horse are comfortable for you to do so, and take at least 3-4 seconds for each line. Do this at least 10 times. Your horse should find this relaxing and comfortable. If he doesn't, try moving more slowly (your horse can only be relaxed if you are relaxed) or more gently (if your horse is sore, he may react to too much pressure).

If you are concerned about his reaction, contact your Vet, or a Chartered Physiotherapist (acpat.org) or Registered Animal Musculoskeletal Practitioner (rampregister.org) for further advice.



About ... SUE PALMER

■ ■ ■ Sue Palmer MCSP is an award winning Chartered Physiotherapist registered with the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (csp.org), the Health Care and Professions Council (hcpc-uk.org), the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy (acpat.org), and the Register of Animal Musculoskeletal Practitioners (rampregister.org). Sue is also a British Horse Society Accredited Professional Coach (bhs.org) and an Intelligent Horsemanship Recommended Trainer (intelligenthorsemanship.co.uk).

Sue believes passionately in helping owners to improve their relationship with their horses. To this end, she has written and produced the 'Horse Massage for Horse Owners' book and DVD, and 'Understanding Horse Performance: Brain, Pain or Training?' book and DVD. Inspiring commitment, connection and curiosity, you can find Sue at thehorsephysio.co.uk, on FB and YouTube as The Horse Physio, and on Instagram as @suepalmerthehorsephysio