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# THE DRESSAGE HORSE OPTIMIZED

with the Masterson Method<sup>®</sup>



Developing and Preserving the Equine Athlete through Effective, Sport-Specific Bodywork

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**5.11** Go softer,  
go slower.



When you first start doing bodywork, it is easy to misjudge how much pressure you are actually using because you are focusing on hand and body position and the details of how to do a technique. However, *the level of touch you use is the single most important thing that will determine the level of success you will have.* If you use too much pressure, the horse will either brace against you or block it out. In either case, there is no release of tension. When in doubt, the cardinal rule is: *GO SLOWER. GO SOFTER* (fig. 5.11).

The way you learn how the levels of pressure and the responses work is through *Search, Response, Stay, Release (SRSR)*:

- *Search*—With a soft hand in *air gap* or *egg yolk* pressure, slowly move along a line just off the topline of the horse's neck (fig. 5.12 A).
- *Response*—As you go s-l-o-w-l-y along the neck, watch the horse's eye for a blink (fig. 5.12 B). This tells you your hand is likely over an area of tension. If you aren't sure the horse blinked because of your action, simply run your hand very slowly and lightly across the same area again. He will blink again if it was due to tension in the area and if you haven't moved too fast or too heavily. Remember, the horse can feel if you are using a soft, relaxed hand or a stiff, hard hand. The horse will not respond to a hard hand even if it is in *air gap*.
- *Stay*—Don't move your hand from the spot and maintain no more than the same level of pressure you started with, or lighter (fig. 5.12 C) and *stay* (fig. 5.12 D).
- *Release*—Eventually, the horse will release tension in the area you have drawn his attention to with your hand (fig. 5.12 E). When he does you

**Safety Note:** When the horse is restless and wants to move around a lot, you can ask someone to hold him. However, the handler should not distract the horse from focusing on the bodywork by interacting with him. Also, the horse should not eat during bodywork. If a handler is not available and you wish to restrain the horse, do not hard-tie him to anything in the stall. Looping the lead through bars of the stall (if available) is usually sufficient.



A



B



C



D

5.12 A–E Search,  
Response, Stay,  
Release (SRSR):  
Search (A).  
Response (B). Stay  
(C). And stay (D).  
Release (E).



E

**5.13** Some of the many “blink points” on which you can do SRSR.



will see one of the *release responses* outlined on pp. 73–75, often a lick and a chew.

The horse has literally hundreds of “blink points” on his body that you can help with *Search, Response, Stay, Release (SRSR)*. If you learn nothing else from this book, this simple Technique has surprising power to reduce tension in your horse (fig. 5.13).

## The Power of Patience

We cannot relax the horse. Only the horse can relax himself. Only the horse can release the tension in his body. We can only facilitate that release of tension. The horse can only release tension on his own time. As a bodywork therapist, throw away your watch. You will be spending a lot of

time (successfully) waiting for the horse to take care of himself.

## The Horse Is the Guide

Because the Masterson Method is built on the principle of non-resistance and follows the body-language signals of the horse, the horse is the guide. The horse tells us everything: where to work, the level of pressure to use, which techniques to use, and in what order.

Remember, the horse is also an “onion”: it takes time to peel away layers of stress. He can participate only so long at a single bodywork session without getting overwhelmed. Very deep or longstanding issues can take multiple sessions to release. It is important not to try and “fix” everything in one



session. Doing regular bodywork on your horse will help you be more in tune to him as a being and your relationship with your horse will be strengthened. An excellent side benefit!

## Working by Sections of the Body

Part II of this book discussed biomechanical aspects of the dressage horse's work. Due to the nature of this work, dressage horses commonly carry extra tension in the poll, behind the jaw, over the topline of the neck, in the *pectoral* muscles, the back, the shoulders, the *lumbar* and *psoas* muscles, the driving muscles (*gluteus medius*, *biceps femoris* and other hamstrings, and the groin muscles).

The limbs need extra mobility laterally, medially (inward), and forward. The thoracic sling must be free to lift. The back needs maximum flexibility longitudinally (to round and lift) and laterally (bend). The dressage horse also needs to be able to flex the neck laterally at the poll to both sides.

You will notice that many of the techniques used in the Masterson Method will release tension in muscles directly related to specific dressage movements by following the same movement of the area as it performed under saddle, but during the release Technique the movement is done while the muscles are in a relaxed state.

Essentially, tension is relieved with the horse in nearly the same

body positions as he is in the work that caused the tension to begin with (figs. 5.14 A & B). The Masterson Method is especially effective for dressage horses and easy for the therapist.

When tension accumulates in one area of the body, it also affects movement in other areas. For example, when tension is released in muscles surrounding the scapula by using *Scapula Release Techniques* (p. 91), it releases tension in muscles that affect movement in the hind end, such as the *longissimus dorsi* muscle that attaches at one end in the vertebrae of the lower neck directly in front of the scapula, runs along each side of the back, and attaches on the other end at the pelvis (see fig. 2.11, p. 24). So, you can see that releasing tension in this muscle affects flexibility in the scapula, the back, and the hind end.

**5.14 A & B** Notice that the *Scapula Release Techniques* release tension in muscles directly related to specific dressage movements, such as the half-pass.



## Key Areas and Junctions That Most Affect Performance

With the Masterson Method we have found that when key junctions of the body become restricted,

movement in related areas of the body is affected. Conversely, when tension in these key junctions is released, then restriction in these and related areas is released. In this book, we focus on areas specific to the dressage horse.

**N**ot all Masterson Method Techniques can be included in this book, which is focused on the unique needs of the dressage horse. For additional instruction on bodywork techniques, please see the *Beyond Horse Massage* book and DVD; attend a virtual training course through mastersonmethod.com; or attend a live instructional course taught by a Masterson Method instructor. In addition, the *Dressage Movements Revealed* DVDs provide video of Jim Masterson working on a dressage horse, using the techniques taught in this book.

- The Poll-Atlas Junction, Neck, and Temporomandibular Joint (TMJ)
- The Shoulder-Withers Area (Cervical-Thoracic C7-T1 Junction)
- The Back—Thoracic (approx. T8-18) and Lumbar Vertebrae
- The Hind End and Hindquarters (Lumbosacral Junction and Sacroiliac Joint)

5.15 A–C The four key areas and junctions marked on the horse's skeleton (A), muscles (B), and body (C).





