

NWHS 101 – July 2006 Issue
Give Yourself & Your Horse a Massage
Supple and Warm-up Exercise

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Have you ever treated yourself to the relaxation and pure pleasure of a good muscle massage? Or discovered the euphoria and sense of well-being that happens after the stretching and flexing of a yoga or pillates routine? If you have, you know that the feeling achieved is addictive, and you definitely look forward to the experience. That is the attitude and feeling I would like to develop as a method of operation for both myself and for my horse. I want to establish posture and balance that is based on flexibility and suppleness. In order to accomplish this beautiful ballet with my horse, I need to prepare us both mentally, emotionally, and *physically* for the dance. I can do this, in part, by accomplishing a series of warm-up exercises that prepare the horse and rider team for a great experience.

Let's start by getting ourselves prepared. Of course our over-all physical conditioning is very important. Exercises that lengthen, strengthen, and supple are a must for all aspiring horsemen. There a number of great videos available that will help give you a routine to follow. (Note: References at the conclusion of this article.) In particular, I find the pillates and yoga exercises beneficial. But let's look at three specific stretches we can do, while on board or on the ground, prior to riding. This series will work from my head (i.e. my atlas or poll), down through the neck, shoulders, and through the rib cage. Here is the progression that I will go through first on me, and then progress to supple the same body parts of my horse:

Atlas (Poll) and Neck: As you sit with good posture on your horse, or on the edge of a straight back chair, or stand with good posture – Try lengthening your neck by politely dropping your chin, and extending your atlas upward, as if there were a feather on the top of your head that you wanted to lift. Next, in this position look softly left, then right. Be gentle, and only go as far as it feels comfortable. Close your eyes and identify what muscles are stretching, and which are flexing or contracting. Feel how you get a little wrinkle in your jowl area as you look and turn your head and chin softly. Application & Positioning for the Horse – (Massage Position No. 1) - While on board, ride your horse forward at the walk, and focus on a fairly straight line. Shorten one rein of your snaffle bit rein, or horseman's halter lead rope, or true hackamore, and lift the rein forward, up, and slightly towards the horse's outside ear. If I am lifting on the right rein, I should see the horse's right eye, and lift towards the left ear. My right leg will encourage the horse to move forward, and to help him know that I am asking for a right bend. I will hold this position until the

horse gives slightly by lifting his poll (similar to the feather example for us humans), and develops a wrinkle or two in his jowl area. Remember: This is massage therapy, so your positioning in the saddle and your posture are there to accomplish the best massage FOR THE HORSE! Hold the positioning as you walk for a short period of time, and release the hold in your rein very gently. I think of my hands as holding warm taffy, where I can't pull too hard, and when I release I follow the motion of the taffy, giving back softly to the horse. Release when the horse is soft and there is no brace in the rein.



Encantador preparing for Position No. 1, lifting poll, shoulders up, and about to put a couple of wrinkles in his left jowl area.

Neck and Shoulders: For us humans, let's go back to the exercise above, and add a lifting of one shoulder, and then the other. Note how it feels even better when you start by lifting your atlas, then finding those little wrinkles in your jowl, and last lift a shoulder.

Application & Positioning for the Horse – (Massage Position No. 2) - Again, while on board and moving forward at the walk, shorten up on both reins, then go to Position No. 1. Next lean a bit forward and push your outside rein forward too, directing the energy on a straight line.

You will have a feel, or contact now in both reins, and both are directing the energy forward towards the outside ear and in the direction of travel.

Watch first for the lifting of the poll, then the wrinkles in the jowls, and last some wrinkles in the neck, in front of the shoulders.

Your inside leg helps keep the bend and move the horse

For kicks, try pulling your chin into your chest, and then try to look right and left. This gives you a little empathy for those horses that are ridden in tie-downs, or by people who “pull” back on the reins to get the horse's head to go down!

forward. Reward the slightest try and only hold for a short period, remembering to release slowly.



Enca & Alice prepare for Position No. 2. Note the “feel” in both reins, and both hands beginning to move up and forward towards the left ear.

Atlas, Neck, Shoulders, and Ribcage: Back to our own bodies – Go through Position No. 1 and No. 2, now drop the shoulder in the direction you are looking, and feel the lengthening in the opposite ribcage. Note that you still have the wrinkles in your jowl, in neck, and now some wrinkles or flexing in your ribcage. It feels GOOD from your atlas, clear down through your back to your tailbone! Application & Positioning for the Horse – (Massage Position No. 3) – As always, start with Position No. 1, add in the outside rein and suppling of the neck with Position No. 2, now make an adjustment in the inside rein position. Draw the energy up towards the armpit of your outside arm. A little more leg may need to be applied to keep the forward motion. You want to feel the shoulder rising up, not diving down on to your hands. The ears of the horse should remain relatively level, **not** tipping forward with the jaw tipping back towards your boot. The idea is to develop a soft self-carriage, with the poll and shoulders lifting upwards, and the energy coming from behind. Be very conscientious about your goals here. Remember you are giving a massage, and flexing and lengthening muscles a little more with each position. Be careful not to just drop the feeling on the reins.



The result of a the “massage” is a soft, willing attitude and a posture with the poll as the highest point. When you lift on the reins the horse gets light and looks for his massage!

a muscle massage? As you get more proficient, you will notice that your horse gets lighter when you pick up on the reins. Soon when the calf of your leg comes in contact, your horse will lift his poll and shoulders, find his driving force, and prepare a soft-feel. He will be ready to go to work with a smile on his face knowing your hands are there to give a massage!

Please Note: There are many great additional warm-up and suppling exercises that I recommend to prepare yourself and your horse for a safe and fun day of riding. Watch the website at:

www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles for “The Rest of the Story” in NWHS 101 July issue. Other references:

- Betsy Steiner’s Equilates Program at: www.equilates.com
- Numerous past articles on exercises for aspiring horseman at: www.eclectic-horseman.com
- Dennis Reis – Advancing Video Series at: www.reisranch.com
- Gymnastic Exercises for Horses, The Classical Way by Eleanor Russell



Enca and Tilly in Position No. 3, flexing around the leg, poll up, shoulders up, soft reins..

