

NWHS 101 – September 2006 Issue
Horse Massage While You Ride

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I have the great pleasure and blessing to be able to pursue my horsemanship journey and passion for developing an understanding of horses with many people. Several years ago we started the habit in our clinics of gathering people around the kitchen table each morning to discuss the activities of the previous day, talk about “why” we accomplished certain tasks, and most importantly listened to what others had gleaned from the experience. During these sessions I learn so much, as there is always a new perspective and a fresh way of seeing how our relationship with horses effects our lives.

In Montana recently I had the pleasure of having several young riders in my clinics. Some of these aspiring horseman were there to ride, others just to watch. Their provocative statements never cease to amaze me. From Sarah, a 13 year old who was riding her 25 year old Quarterhorse – Buck, who shared: “I don’t think my horse had ever been asked *politely* before”. Plus this little pearl of wisdom: “Don’t doubt that he can do something before you even try.” From Sarah’s younger brother – Connor - who had sat and watched for 3-days in 90 degree heat: “If you have good posture your horse will have self-confidence and become more brave”. And one more gem from back in 2005 and my little friend Emily: “You can learn more than you think from simple things”.



Sarah and her friend, Buck, in Hamilton, MT..
Just ask politely!

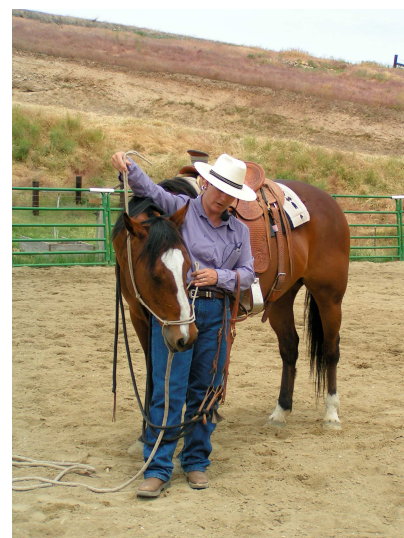
Why am I sharing these great quotes when the topic for this month’s article is supposedly ‘Horse Massage While You Ride’? Frankly, as I contemplated what I wanted to

say about *massaging* our horses, I was struck by the *messages* the horse has to share. It is so important that if we want our horses to be soft, supple, and willing to give, that we must rise to a higher level of listening. If we want our horses to be willing to yield in a respectful manner, then the human must be willing to give, release, reward, and be accountable. To become a good massage therapists for our horses, we must also have our physical, emotional, and mental attributes in order.

Ok...Enough preaching! Let’s look at some practical applications to the philosophy shared above, and apply it to the method of massaging our horse as we ride.

One of the first questions that comes to mind is – Why are we doing these exercises on board and with forward movement? Actually all of the suppling positions discussed in the July article of NWHS 101 can be accomplished from the ground and at a stand still.

Alice and Riddle, in Emmett, ID. Suppling begins on the ground with a willingness to yield in a respectful way.



However, the ability to ‘feel’ of, for, and with the horse is enhanced greatly by being on board. Add forward movement to our three massage positions, and you will be helping both yourself and the horse find the reward of keeping a ‘soft feel’ through all transitions and work that needs to be accomplished together.



A second question that often comes from the humans after attempting a horse massage, is regarding when to use these positions. It is easy to confuse these rather gross hand and body postures with riding positions. Try to keep them separate! Just as you would not use a yoga position, such as the Downward Dog stretch, while attempting to run down the field, neither would you use Massage Position #3 to get your horse to walk a small circle! The stretch and flexing enhances the dance. As the massage therapist, I will go to what ever place in the saddle that will encourage the horse to let go of the braces in his muscles and mind. But when the yoga is complete and the horse is relaxed 'with' me, then I become accountable for my good posture and the finessing of a true dance with purpose, rhythm, timing, balance, and perhaps collection with engagement. If my horse gets bothered, I may go back to the massage positions to remind him that my hands are there to give him a massage, not to pull or create tension. I will get his mind back to the job at hand, by giving a soft massage, then we will resume the dance which has more structure for both of us.

A final question I often get regarding these three massaging positions relates to the correlation of 'longitudinal' flexing and suppleness to the 'lateral' exercises. Certainly a flexing over the top line of the horse, created by the picking up of his belly muscles and driving his hindquarters, is essential to most jobs we will ask of our horse. These components are what can make the dance brilliant! However, the massage over the top line will come first by accomplishing lateral supple and flexing, second by recognizing the importance of the poll position for fore and aft balance, and last by engaging the driving power of the hind end. Unfortunately these longitudinal components are often developed falsely without lateral flexing first, or with mechanical devices such as tie-downs or improper use of draw reins or side reins. As in most cases, these devices are an excuse for poor hands, and a lack of understanding and commitment to the horse.

Horse 'Massage' while you ride really starts with YOU! Are you willing to listen to the whispers of the horse, as they tell you how much they really enjoy being soft and supple, rather than braced and fearful? Can you aspire to develop an attitude like my young human friends that takes on the guidance qualities of being polite, accountable, and gracious? Can you become a massage therapist that your horse looks forward to having on his back, and then provide the leadership that creates a brilliant dance? I have a vision that you can!

Please Note: Review:

www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles for "The Rest of the Story" in NWHS 101 July issue for the three Massage Positions. Other references:

- Gymnastic Exercises for Horses, The Classical Way by Eleanor Russell
- Work-in Hand for Lateral and Vertical Flexion by Bettina Drummond (2 Volume Video)



Softness through the topline or longitudinal starts with softness in the lateral movements and suppling. Then when you have a job to do, like moving young horses around the round pen, it all comes together...The purpose of the suppling exercises makes sense to the horse, and staying soft becomes his method of operation.

