

Prepare for Spring Riding By Massaging Your Horse

By Julie Penshorn

Only a sound horse can happily work well for us. We really must do everything we can to keep our horses that way! Over the winter your horse may have had to deal with walking on slippery footing and some time off. Both can play havoc with his muscles and his mind. Massage helps horses that shy and also those that want to run out from under you, or even buck you off, become more calm, because horses often act out when they are uncomfortable.

Don't we all say, "Can you just rub this sore muscle here?" when we have muscle pain? It's the same for horses. When they roughhouse, gallop to one end of their turnout paddock and slide to a stop, buck, rear, slip on the ice, or just stand around with little turnout, they can cause themselves all sorts of woes. And, like you, they just love bodywork!

If you've never worked on your horse before, don't worry. You will be surprised how easy it is to begin to listen to your horse from the ground. With time you'll find you can work wonders to stimulate circulation and promote healing. You'll help your horse avoid compensation in other parts of his body, and sometimes you can delay the onset of arthritis by reducing inflammation and moving lymph fluid.

A good plan is to hire an expert to help you, so you can learn how by watching and asking questions. But because massage and stretching should really be done regularly, for maximum benefit, each rider should learn some fundamentals and do it him or herself. When you know a little you can support the work of your therapist who comes every so often to help you out and teach you more. Use some different people to help you, because each one will teach you something.

Here's how to begin: Find a mounting block or something sturdy to stand on that won't hurt the horse if he steps on it or over it. You'll want that height when working on the croup and back.

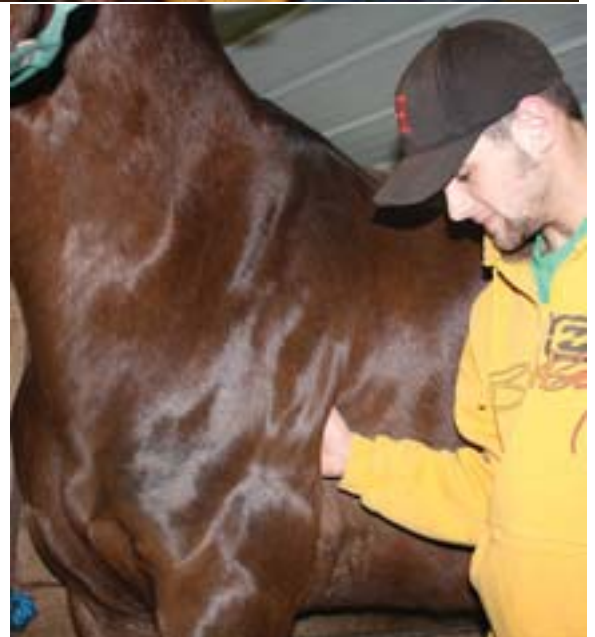
That's the only equipment you really need to get started.



Rebecca starts by analyzing with her hands to determine where her horse is sore. She's standing on a mounting block.



Wade digs in to the shoulder. Comet approves! (above). Wade works the area behind the shoulder. The scapula hangs in a sling of muscles. There are a lot of potentially sore areas. (side)



Then, begin to touch the horse with pressure all over his body, sensing tightness, flinching, ears back, etc. Keep watching the horse for information. The horse will tell you what hurts through his body language. When the respiration goes up, you're on a sore spot. Watch him. When he's blinking more, or yawning, you may well be on a sore spot. Feel him push into you or try to get away from you. Both are indications of a sore spot, but use discretion!

Always monitor your body position. You never want to be in a position where you could get kicked, though I find it's rare that horses act out during massages.

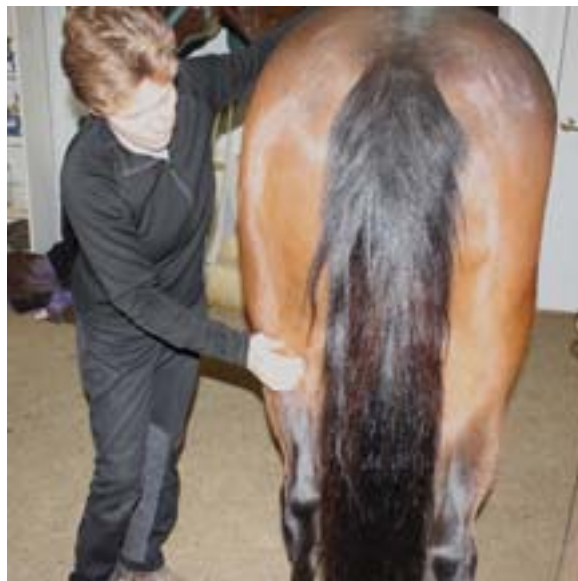
I often use my elbow to get into a deep spot in the hindquarters or the shoulders. In these pictures we show where we like to work on the horses. These are some of the most common areas where we have gotten the most benefit from our work.

Often, as I massage, I am sure the horse needs a chiropractic adjustment as well. With the pressure points near the tail you can get the horse to hump up his back and make many minor adjustments by himself. You may also have results by slowing pulling the tail straight back and down.

By turning the neck while you have deep pressure on it in an upward (toward the head) direction, you'll often get adjustments as well. If you get a noisy pop, it's not ever bad. You're not hurting your horse (watch him say thank you with his head shake and licking and chewing), but you may not get the entire problem solved. So don't think you're done! If you have a neck vertebra that releases from one side, it's highly likely you'll have another one that wants to release from the other side.

I'm a massage therapist, and a Spinologist, but you can't just learn from me! There are many books you may want to explore. A couple I like are the BREMM Method, and Beating Muscle Injuries in Horses.

Here I work the hamstring. I actually like to use my shoulder for this area, because my arms get tired from using elbows and fingers. However, that takes a lot of confidence in your technique and your horse, so do this first!



Work around the hip. Vets can't effectively treat this area in any way, so help your horse out by working this area.



We've found this upward approach to the flank works well for loosening the deep core muscles that tie into the inner hip.



Here Wade asks Comet to hike up his back by applying pressure to the points near the tail. Notice, Comet isn't lifting his back much. I think that's the sign of a horse who is fairly comfortable in his spinal muscles and his back. Comet does show us this comfort in other tests. He's not very sore anywhere. He's unlikely to be much out of adjustment. Wade doesn't have any fingernails, however, and often if you use them you get a bigger reaction! Often I hear the spine go crack, crack, crack as it lifts.