

ADDRESSING THE NEIGH-SAYERS

by Joseph Freeman

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the process that horses go through when they receive a Structural Integration series as well as the perceptions that guided the practitioner's progress. The paper explores the experience of working on beings who cannot verbalize the results but whose progress can be measured by structural assessment and movement gains before and after the series. Included are assessments of and responses to the work by the horses' owners who provided descriptions of their progress. The paper supports the notion that SI work has clear cross-species applications.

CASE HISTORIES

* Dat Hickory, four year old stud colt. 16 hands (5' 4" at top of spine), bay quarter horse who sustained multiple injuries to his hind end at one and two years of age.

* Nick, ten year old gelding, 17 hands, bay thoroughbred racehorse being retrained as an eventing horse. Possessed structural holding patterns that limited his performance.

* Q, four year old gelding. 17 hands, pinto warmblood who suffered a devastating injury at age three.

Writing case studies on horses is challenging. Case studies seek to generate relevant quantifiable data for evaluation with the intent to prove or disprove a hypothesis. I spent some time trying to contrive the means to quantify the efficacy of equine SI work. I thought about comparing scores earned by horses in competition, comparing pre SI scores to post SI scores, but the overabundance of variables during competition makes this unrealistic. I thought about measuring ROM and rejected this because, while it is quantifiable, it's also subjective. Horses can be nervous creatures and they don't always respond to new activities with alacrity. In fact they often balk and that would affect the beginning measurements and probably falsely improve the measurements post SI.

Finally I asked myself how I presently measure the effectiveness of the work. That led me to ask the following questions:

Does the series result in greater ROM for the horses?

Do horses demonstrate greater athleticism and confidence after a series?

Do their competition scores go up?

All this is true, yet is it measurable in an objective manner? That last question was the one most challenging. In fact, I'm not sure it's even important in the context of the measure of satisfaction they bring to the life of the client who provides the means for the sessions. Client satisfaction is filled with variables, completely subjective, yet is of utmost importance. With that said, I'd like to discuss my experience with three representative horses who've had the SI series.

During the series I am aware of shifts in tissue as we progress. Equally importantly, I watch and feel them sensing me as I work. As a prey animal, they have to tender their trust quite far to let me into their tissue as far as I need to work. The SI work is sometimes difficult at the outset as they assess what I am doing with them, yet it is also sincere and must also be gentle enough for them to accept. I come away from this pairing intimately knowing the stories of their lives and often adding a chapter to my own.

This work also nurtures connection, often making horses more open and responsive to people, creating something the owner didn't know was possible. The horse and I both end the series knowing each other very well.

CASE STUDY #1: Dat Hickory

Dat Hickory was the first horse I ever worked with and was in great part responsible for me shifting my practice from human SI work to equine SI. He was a year old stud colt, son of Doc's Hickory out of the famous Doc Bar. As cutting horses go, he was royalty but he needed to earn his chops in the cutting arena before he could fulfill his role as the center of his owner's breeding farm. His future, however, was hampered by two injuries. The first he sustained as a yearling when he slipped and fell hard, damaging his hip. A year later he pulled up a metal post he'd been tied to. Spooked, he took off running with the heavy post dragging behind him, battering his hind legs and causing significant damage.

Horse people say it's a mistake to put a green person and a green horse together, but it worked out well in our case. In fairness, Hickory was well trained, only young. Me, I was brand new to horses and too dumb to be afraid. We ended up teaching each other. He taught me how to deal with a waving hoof and how to keep from getting nipped. I taught him that his body could be strong and flexible and that he could depend on it again.



Before beginning his first session I palpated his entire body, gauging his reactions and what my hands told me. I found tension in his neck, hips, lumbar region and rear legs.

Note: I began the series with the intention of doing ten sessions but found the work was complete after the fifth session. This has held true for nearly all the horses I've work with so I adopted the five session series as the standard model for equine SI.

Session 1 (2/24)

I focused my work on his neck, back and intercostals. The ribs on his left side were very sensitive as was the lumbar region on the left and left stifle. I noticed that his right hoof was internally rotated and that his right hock wobbled at the walk. He did not trust me well enough yet to allow me to work inside his hind legs. I found that trust built session by session as he came to understand how the work was helping him.

Session 2 (3/1)

I found more sensitivity in his right hip. I was able to release superficial muscles on all four legs inside and out. Upon checking I found no sensitivity in his left intercostals or left lumbar.

Session 3 (3/4)

During this session I focused on the sides of his body. I also got much deeper on his legs and found that the wobble in his right hock was due to a lack of alignment through that joint. I worked on the inside of his right femur and on the medial ligaments of that leg. These are very sensitive areas for a horse and work here was occasionally punctuated by him lifting his near hind hoof off the ground and slowly waving it at me. We had a working relationship at this point and it became clear to me that he wasn't trying to kick me so much as showing his concern, making me aware that he was nervous about work in this part of his body. Each time he did this I spoke to him calmly and tapped his gaskin, then shifted the intensity or direction of my work to let him know I got the message.

Session 4 (3/13)

In this session I worked almost entirely on his hind end. I focused on the inside of his rear legs. Hickory's trust level had come up quite a bit which allowed me to work very deeply. His most sensitive spot was just above and behind the stifle inside the left hind leg. I spread all the releasing tissue forward into his back and down his legs.

At the end of this session his owner and trainer stared at him for five minutes. Finally his owner said, "He's got pants!" The muscles just above the gaskins had been fascially contracted since the injuries. Now the muscles were released and in full view. (Later she sent a long testimonial and several photos of his hind end showing off those pants.)

Session 5 (3/21)

Hickory's trainer told me he'd been doing great the past week. He'd had a few days of strengthening work and was going very well. At this point I departed from the ten session protocol and decided we could wrap up the work in this session. I decided to reinforce his overall progress by working his spine and topline structure. I knew the SI work would allow the newly

found strength from his hind end to flow freely forward all the way to his head. I worked his back, neck and head. He loved the neck work. I also worked all the muscles that would help his forelegs in their extension. We ended with connecting strokes to integrate him from tail to poll where the neck meets the skull.

Post series observations: I have fond memories of Hickory, a gorgeous horse who had a good idea how beautiful he was. I saw him five times for followup sessions in the years after his series but the most memorable was soon after his series when his owner invited me along for his first lesson with a cutting horse trainer.

Hickory's owner sat astride him on one side of the arena. The trainer and his horse were on the opposite side of the arena with a buffalo calf in the middle. The purpose of the lesson was for Hickory to learn to keep the calf from reaching the arena walls but this was new to Hickory. He stuck out his nose and took a few tentative steps toward the calf, trying to figure out what kind of animal the calf was. The calf suddenly bolted and ran toward the arena wall.

What happened next happened very fast. Hickory reared up as the calf bolted, and in a flash he realized his quarry was escaping and suddenly knew what his purpose was. He spun a full 270 degrees and sped off after the calf. His owner somehow stayed aboard. The trainer's jaw fell open for a split second before he, too, charged off after the calf.

Finally Hickory fulfilled the role he was born into.

CASE STUDY #2: NICK

Nick's owner had worked with him for several years training him as a three day eventing horse but he was never quite right. Eventing horses compete in a challenging schedule that includes precision dressage on day one, stadium jumping on the second day and cross-country jumping in a prescribed time limit on the third.

The owner's main concern was that when Nick cantered in a circle to the right, his shoulders went to the left while his hind end shifted to the right. Nick was athletic and, given the limitations of his structure, was doing his best but he hadn't become the top level horse she hoped he could be.

Session 1 (11/29)

Nick was high strung but it showed only when I worked in his problem areas. He shifted slowly from side to side as I worked those places. I found most of his holding concentrated in his right ribcage. This kind of holding sets in over time and affects the movement of the latissimus dorsi and serratus thoracis. The tissue was dense and had a solidity behind his shoulder blade that made me think it had been settled there for at least four years. The other areas of concern were his left lumbar region, the base of his neck on the left and to a lesser degree on the right, and the whole length of his neck. Horses jammed through their barrels (trunk) like Nick was

understandably often have stiff necks.

Nick hung on to these restrictions tenaciously. There was enough of a shift to let me know that more was possible but I couldn't get a significant change in that first session. I felt that I could, however, gain some improvement in his condition if we did a five session series.

His owner was reticent at first, having had a lot of professionals work on him in the past and yet his problems persisted. She finally decided to get him a series saying, "I've tried everything else, I might as well try this."

Session 2 (12/6)

I start sessions with minimal pressure and graduate to deeper work as the tissue unwraps and the horse's trust level increases. Nick allowed only medium depth pressure in his most held areas which was still an improvement over the light work he allowed in the first session. His areas of concern were the same but he let me in just a bit farther. He was significantly calmer during this session.

Session 3 (12/20)

This is the session where his pattern of tension finally opened up. I got in much deeper behind his right shoulder and he showed me new areas of tension that arose in response to his pattern shifting. Curiously his right hip was tender as well as the inside of the same leg. Previously this had felt fine. Either he was using the muscles of this leg differently as his body changed or he strained it in the intervening two weeks. Both were possible but my intuition said it was more likely he was unwrapping layers and revealing underlying tensions that were covered by a compensatory pattern.

Session 4 (1/10)

Nick was a different horse in this session. The work of session 3 had given him the freedom to move in new ways but he didn't yet know how. For years his body had been held in a pattern that didn't allow his right foreleg to extend because it had been restricted by the band of connective tissue behind his right shoulder. Now that his shoulder moved better, his right fore hoof landed in unexpected places. For example, when he took a jump, he always landed with his right foreleg touching the ground first and his body slightly bent to the right. He organized himself to this style of landing but now he was no longer held in that pattern.

His owner said he was "jumping fences like a klutz." He hadn't known any way other than the old way to jump and that organization clearly wasn't supporting him anymore. He had to learn how to move his forelegs in a more integrated manner. I worked very deeply on his right shoulder and at the base of his neck on the right. His pattern had clarified to a smaller amount of holding in this one area and we addressed it.



Session 5 (2/15)

Throughout the series Nick found the work to be easier as the work got progressively deeper. His areas of concern today were the right wither pocket above his shoulders, right ribs and right shoulder. The adhesions and tension worked out during the session and toward the end he received the work in a highly receptive state with his head dropped and closed eyes.

The significance of the case study is helped by reading this summary by his owner, Linda Stuckenschneider:

“I bought Nick when he was four years old, fresh off the race track with the intention of making into an event horse. I spent the first year trail riding, getting him to calm down and learn to ride with other horses. I did a lot of lunge line work getting him to stretch to the bit. He had a muscle bulge on the bottom of his neck, carried his head very high and was hollow in the back. His left side was overdeveloped and his right side was so underdeveloped that when I wrote on the right rein he felt like a totally different horse. I realized he was going to be a long term project.

Despite years of constant practice in dressage and jumping his progress was slow. He was still noticeably asymmetrical and his right side had not developed fully. I took him to low-level horse trials and schooling dressage shows and the comments from judges were consistent, that he didn't come through his topline and did not accept the bit. I had done everything I could think of -- custom fitted saddles for both disciplines, equine dentistry, a double jointed snaffle, chiropractic and more. The chiropractic helped to a point but Nick still couldn't come through his back. In the saddle I felt like I was sitting on two inches of his spine.

“The chiropractor felt work beyond his scope was needed so he recommended the Equine Natural Movement Series. At first I was skeptical but after the first session my trainers and I noticed a little difference. After the second and third sessions there was a major difference. Nick rounded and accepted the bit. His back lifted up underneath the saddle. I didn't feel like I was sitting on a balance beam anymore. One day I noticed his whole shoulder area moving and I had never seen that happen.

“Nick changed dramatically. At first he seemed apprehensive jumping with a new body but after the fourth and fifth session it was like a miracle had happened. I had a whole new horse. My

dressage scores came up and his jumping improved. He now lifts his whole shoulder over the jumps, not just his knees. Months after the last session he continues to improve and get stronger.”

CASE STUDY #3: Q

Every once in a great while I am privileged to meet a horse who has the rare combination of intelligence, generosity of spirit and charisma. Q is such a horse. Q was three years old when he was injured. He'd been running through the woods and speared himself with a broken tree limb that entered under his right shoulder blade.

When I met him a year later he pivoted his right lower shoulder around the upper shoulder as he walked. Despite the fact that his injury had healed, his body had organized itself to keep weight off his right shoulder. His right fore hoof was developing a lateral flare when he walked. Because this horse lived a few states away, we did the first three sessions over three days.



Session 1 (3/13)

The first session is about discovering what the horse's internal landscape is, structurally as well as psychologically. Q was wounded. Badly. His will to overcome his condition was there but his confidence was hugely compromised. The image I got when I worked with him was of a horse caught in a massive spider web that wouldn't let him free. He had a bright spirit but was tied down by his injury. I felt his frustration and sadness at having let his owner down and a bit of embarrassment that he had made such a foolish mistake.

The stick had entered his shoulder above his sternum and passed downward transversely piercing the subscapularis muscle to a depth of twelve inches. In the past year he developed atrophy in his right shoulder especially toward the front. During his recovery he developed complicated restrictions high on the left hip, on the right medial hamstring, throughout the left side of his neck, the left side above the wither and right and left intercostals. At the end of the session the right medial hamstring reduced its hold, the ribs were freer and the right shoulder improved slightly but he continued to have significant holding in the left hip.

Session 2 (3/14)

I do my best to do this work as respectfully and gently as possible. I want the tissue to be encouraged to let go without me pushing him into pain. In Q's case his injuries were such that his pressure tolerance around his right shoulder was very low. Though he fussed a lot in that area he never refused the work. The challenge with this session was to feel into the tissue, to see with my hands and all my senses the depth of work his shoulder could allow. A fair amount it turned out, probably attributable to the elasticity of his youthful tissue.

The one place I could not reach, however, was where he needed it the most, on the medial side of his right scapula. I used energy work there, seeing and feeling a fine-toothed comb aligning the connective tissue fibers vertically. For the rest of his body I used structural work to integrate each of his quadrants: each shoulder to the same side of his neck, foreleg and barrel and each hip to the hind leg, barrel and opposite hind.

He was still lame on the right front on the walk back to the pasture. I vividly saw his owner's commitment to him, knowing it would have been so much easier for her to put him down or let him live out his life in a chronically injured capacity.

Session 3 (3/15)

I worked lightly with him today. His right shoulder was slightly stiffer when I began work. He still fussed but always let me in as deeply as I asked. I focused on integrating his barrel to his limbs. Commonly horses who injure a limb will clamp their barrels down as they heal up. If the barrel holding continues after the injury has healed, it greatly impacts through the bones and ligaments of the legs as the force vectors hit the resistance of a held barrel. Freeing the barrel allows the force to flow through, reducing the wear and tear on the limbs. I did as much as Q could tolerate on his barrel. He didn't get much deep work. I finished with more energy work on his shoulder and with connecting strokes from his hocks to his poll.

Session 4 (4/10)

With a little over three weeks between sessions he was ready for the deep work. I reworked his barrel using my elbows to stretch the fascial sheets from each of his four corners to bring flexibility back to the barrel. I focused on his left hip, left wither and right pectoralis. His right shoulder freed up nicely in all the areas I could reach. Even the size of the holding under the right shoulder blade seem to shrink. I finished the session with more energy combing in his right subscapularis. He handled the work very well. After our session he went into his stall, laid down and closed his eyes for ten minutes, percolating.

Session 5 (6/21)

Q's owner thought the flare in his right fore hoof was fading. I worked his right and left hind legs, right shoulder, right foreleg and left ribs with some topline work. These places still had tension during the first portion of the session so most of this session involved "ironing out wrinkles" in his fascia. Eventually the held area freed up except for the right shoulder. The holding in that area was, however, progressively reducing as the fascia regained its elasticity.

In session one the area of restriction was 12" long and 3" wide. In session 2 it was 10" long and 3" wide. In the fifth session it had reduced to 6" long and 3" wide, all of it under the right shoulder blade. I finished up with more energy combing. This session was noticeably pleasant for him.

Session 6 (7/7)

In the year between the fifth and sixth session, I trained a local practitioner who did a session with Q every three or four months. When I arrived I did a short evaluation and was surprised how good his tissue felt all over. He needed no work today. The holding under his right shoulder blade was minimal, about 3" x 2.5" long.

Q's owner had watched me do energy work several times and I explained what I'd been doing. She was open to the idea of learning to do it herself so I talked her through my process as I did the energy work. She said she'd do more on him herself that afternoon and that completed the session.

The next day Q's owner called and asked me to come over and have a look at him. When I arrived Q was running free in the arena showing off, whirling, spinning, doing an extended trot, moving with obvious joy and vitality. He did this for 20 minutes, then came over to me at the gate and stood nose to nose with me for five minutes. I got a clear sense of thanks from him. It was gratifying and also bittersweet because it was also a goodbye. We both knew my help was no longer required. My sense was that receiving this work from his owner made all the difference to him. We went back to the barn and I encouraged Q's owner to persevere with it.

A few weeks the last session I got an email from her saying that Q developed abscesses that came out the bottom of three of his hooves, a real "healing crisis." Some equine healthcare practitioners believe horses clear toxins from their bodies this way. Q healed quickly and following that his movement improved even more dramatically, enough that his owner is now, for the first time since his injury, planning on showing him again.

When we began his series I told his owner I didn't know if we could bring him all the way back. I am convinced that the Structural Integration series gave Q the tools to move forward in his recovery. I'm equally convinced that Q's perseverance and his owner's love handled the rest.

Joseph Freeman graduated from the Hellerwork SI training in 1994. He worked in a physical therapy clinic for a few years. In the mid-90s he serendipitously was asked to do a session on a client's horse. He found the process so satisfying that he developed a Structural Integration program for horses called the Equine Natural Movement Series. He teaches at the Equine Natural Movement School with his wife, former Hellerwork faculty Jacqueline Freeman. Joseph and Jacqueline live on a biodynamic farm in southwest Washington.

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