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STRUCTURAL INTEGRATION FOR HORSES

by Joseph Freeman, C.H.P.

“Now watch!” Carol said as she brought her horse to a canter. She’d invited me out to the beach on a sunny, blustery June day to show me the crooked way her Hanoverian gelding, Henry, moved in this gait.

The first three strides were choppy. His pelvis was pulled forward on the right and his body angled in that direction.

“See?” She said. “This is what he does.” It was hard to watch. Henry looked simply uncomfortable.

Carol called me about a month before this beach trip. She’d read my brochure and asked me to evaluate her horse. She hadn’t heard of Structural Integration for Horses (SI). Her veterinarian suggested she give it a try.

Carol cares deeply for her gelding and, over the years, has tried different methods to improve his performance. They all helped, some more than others, but ultimately, his canter remained crooked.

We met at the barn and I told her about myself. I am a Certified Hellerwork Structural Integration Practitioner. I worked with people for many years and, as a favor to friends, I worked on their animals. Over time the remarkable results attained with the animals convinced me that my true calling was hands-on work with the animal kingdom.

I’ve been working fulltime with horses for six years now and these generous creatures have taught me a lot. I have a deep love of horses and I know they enjoy working with me.

I explained to Carol that in my series of five sessions, each goes deeper than the last. The first session is about gaining Henry’s trust, freeing up his surface compensations and mapping out his core tension pattern.

As the work started, she told me he was a particular horse and that he didn’t take to everybody. She said that while he’s a great horse, his canter had been a problem for the longest time. I found him to be wary but accepting. After ten minutes of work, Henry realized I wasn’t going to hurt him and settled in.

At the end of the session I’d discovered where Henry’s topline had been jammed up and could feel tension in both hips, both sides of his barrel and the entire left side of his neck. Carol had several questions ...

*** How is the work done?**

I begin by gaining the horse’s trust. I introduce myself and then do a “pat down” in which I palpate the horse all over and observe his reactions. I then gently lengthen out the surface musculature in the quadrant that concerns him the least.

I start in a non-threatening area because connective tissue in the body acts like plastic wrap. When you tie a knot in the corner of a sheet, it pulls from all over. Conversely, when you feed slack toward that knot, it loosens up.

By working in this manner I feed slack to his tight areas and partially free them up before I even work them. I keep my work within the horse’s tolerance limits. When he realizes that I won’t exceed his

limits, he relaxes into the work. I imagine what each stroke feels like to the horse even as I deliver it and only give strokes that I myself would want to receive.

Finally, I address the pattern of tension in the horse's body. I work on the whole body each session because muscles don't tighten up singularly. They tighten up in groups.

These tension patterns tend to support the holding in a given area. If I only worked on the tight spot and ignored everything else, the tension pattern in the rest of the horse would cause that area to ratchet back down again. By working the whole body this effect is mitigated and the horse gets to keep the gains he receives.

*** Do you work on the muscles?**

I work on the connective tissue. This elastic substance surrounds each muscle like a sleeve and thickens at the ends to form tendons. These tendons attach to the bones. When the muscle fibers contract, the muscle pulls on the tendons which move the bones.

These muscles work in pairs. The first one pulls the bone forward and the second pulls it back. When the first one is contracting, the second is extending. It is this interaction that allows a horse to move his leg back and forth.

Part of the function of connective tissue is to protect muscle fiber by preventing muscles from extending too far and becoming damaged. When falls, cuts and bruises happen, connective tissue shortens up to immobilize the injured area during healing and doesn't always lengthen out again.

When muscles are held shorter, the limb they effect is prevented from extending as far, and other muscles that supplement that movement shorten up as well.

All this happens incrementally over time, often years. The end result is a pattern of subtle restrictions stemming from the wear and tear that is part of an active horse's life.

Seven days after the first session I met Carol and Henry at the barn for his second. She said his overall movement was more fluid but his canter remained ... funny.

As I began the work his eyes immediately softened and his lower lip went slack. He stayed that way throughout.

In this session I worked his whole body, muscle by muscle, addressing individual muscle tension, with special attention given to his neck and limbs. When we were done, the tension I'd found on his left side from the hips all the way to the poll was substantially reduced. The right side tension was gone.

*** Carol asked, "How will this help Henry?"**

I explained that the benefits come from evening the muscle tone from one side of the horse to the other. Most horses prefer one direction, they favor one lead or they bend better in a particular direction. Why? Because the tension pattern in their connective tissue makes those directions more comfortable for them.

If your horse prefers bending left, it may be that the tissue in his left barrel is held tighter than the same tissue on his right. When he goes right, he has to work harder, fighting the restricted tissue on his left side, whereas when he goes left he can relax into it.

By freeing up his left side and bringing it into balance with his right, he can bend to the right with the same facility that he bends left.

Freeing up the restrictions in your horse's body allows him to access all the fluidity, grace and power that is available to him. It allows him to train from a place of muscle tone balance. He doesn't have

to drag the remnants of past injuries through each workout anymore. Progress is accelerated, frustration is abated, exhilaration is produced.

A week after session two, we did the third. Carol told me that Henry was moving better but the canter was not there yet. She was optimistic because of the improvements she'd seen in him, but was also reserved because she'd gotten her hopes up in the past and been let down.

In this session, the focus of the work was on integrating muscle groups. The tension was centered around his left shoulder and at the end of the session, it was greatly reduced.

It was a few days after this session that I visited them at the beach. I was still wincing at Henry's first few canter strides when it happened. On Henry's fourth step his back straightened out, his stride lengthened and he went even and true as if he'd gone that way all his life. Carol whooped with joy. They cantered beautifully down the beach for a quarter mile.

*** During these sessions she asked,
"How did Henry first get into that condition?"**

Scar tissue, or tight connective tissue, forms to heal muscle tears or as a response to pain. The pain can be caused by any number of things like an abscessed hoof, an old kick bruise or an ill-fitting saddle. The pain doesn't have to be great, just enough to cause irritation.

Over time a muscle near the pain site will tighten up and compensation patterns form. Often the tension patterns remain long after the initial injury has healed. Sometimes the compensations become so invested in the tissues that they become issues in and of themselves.

Often as the sessions progress, the compensations peel away layer by layer until one tight spot remains. That muscle or that area is the cause of the tension pattern that developed.

As long as the pain persists, the horse will continue to respond to it until it's resolved.

True healing cannot begin until the area at cause is addressed. Freeing up the compensations clears away the cobwebs and allows the source of the problems to be addressed. At this point we'll also know if it would help to bring in another type of practitioner, like an equine chiropractor.

Two weeks later we did the fourth session. Carol was ecstatic. Henry was going very well and his canter was getting stronger every day. Henry looked confident and relaxed. His eyes sparkled.

This fourth session is designed to bring out the fluidity of his full body motion. I found less tension overall, but some holding in new places. Carol had some concern. I explained that this commonly happens with horses as they begin to use their bodies in new ways.

*** Does it work for all horses?**

I focus on dressage, hunter-jumpers and eventing horses because my work provides the flexibility and movement qualities that English riders seek. I work on horses who are in training because these horses are engaged in a consistent workout program. Their progress and flexibility are constantly measured.

Riders and trainers know when they are performing better on a ride-to-ride basis. Also, a good training program works hand in glove with SI because the horse quickly feels the increased flexibility in his body and strengthens it.

After completing a series, as a horse works into his new-found fluidity, that fluidity begins to work into him. At some point, with good riding and insightful care, he will begin progress toward muscle tone balance on his own steam.

*** Carol asked, “Does it hurt?”**

This kind of work can be uncomfortable if not done well. The first session is the one where all the restrictions and apprehensions are present. It has to be done with great respect and kindness. Horses know when they are being cared for and respond accordingly.

Recently I worked on a Jumper who pawed and tossed his head throughout the first session. I could feel the tightness all along his left side. In subsequent sessions he seemed to know my work was helping him and stood quietly, only pawing and tossing his head when I stopped. This is a normal reaction from a responsive horse.

Meanwhile Carol and Henry worked together to build his strength.

Carol said Henry’s canter was strong. In later sessions I found some spots that had tightened up due to his new, more even way of moving, but they freed up quickly and would fade as he grew stronger.

Back at the beach Carol and Henry returned from their quarter mile ride. She explained that this was the first time he had cantered straight in six years and she thanked me excitedly and profusely.

They turned and trotted down the beach, transitioning to a straight, even canter, both horse and rider with their heads up, thrilling to the power and freedom as the sand flowed by beneath them.

I watched as they slowly became a dot on the horizon. A satisfied peace came over me as I felt the joy of seeing a horse and rider moving together in harmony.

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