



Jo-Ann Wilson Can Change A Horse With Her Hands

She's never been afraid to improve a horse—or her life.

BY MEGHAN BLACKBURN

It takes a certain amount of strength to alter one's path in the middle of life. If you saw Jo-Ann Wilson moving her hands across a horse, you'd never know she hadn't devoted her entire career to developing the renowned Wilson Meagher Sports Therapy massage. But in fact, Wilson began exploring equine massage therapy while well established in another profession.

As the executive director of a teaching program for Harvard University (Mass.), she was running programs for troubled adolescents, helping children with psychiatric issues and learning difficulties, as well as some who were homeless.

"At that time, things were getting tight financially; the funding was being pulled for children, both public and private dollars," said Wilson, who was living outside Boston. "What happened was, the care and the work for children became incidental. Everything else became more stressed: trying to keep kids there, trying to find homes for the kids; nobody wanted kids. I got overly exasperated."

At home, Wilson had come in contact with Jack Meagher, who had alleviated her Thoroughbred's sore back. The



impression Meagher left on Wilson was so strong that it prompted her to pursue a change.

"I went back to work, and I thought, 'You know what? Things are getting

Jo-Ann Wilson decided mid-career to change paths and learn equine sports massage from Jack Meagher. She worked with him for 15 years and helped develop the Wilson Meagher Method. LEITH SMITH PHOTO

tough out here. I can either continue with this and fight and fight and fight for kids and sadly see that they didn't get what they needed—or move on," said Wilson, from the mid-coast of Maine. "I've done a lot in my life, and I kind of grappled with it because it felt like I was abandoning children and healthcare, but then I thought that same thread can carry through to what I do now."

“You know what? Leave no stone unturned. You have to take a risk in life.”

—JO-ANN WILSON

A Student, Again

So she approached Meagher about working with him.

"I asked Jack if I could study under him, and he said, 'No. You want to study with me, you have to go to massage therapy school,'" recalled Wilson, who obtained her RN from University of Bridgeport (Conn.) and received a master's degree in education from Lesley College (Mass.).

For two years following her decision to change careers, Wilson cut her hours as executive director but still retained the position. She went to a massage therapy program and also studied under Meagher.

"I finally finished school and quit my job. People said, 'You are insane.' I went, 'You know what? Leave no stone unturned. You have to take a risk in life.' And so I did. And people thought, 'What if you don't make it? What if?'" said Wilson. "I wasn't worried."

Her parents—not horse people—encouraged this sense of fearlessness. With her friend's pony, Wilson spent hours riding bareback, playing cowboys



Jo-Ann Wilson learned her craft from the great Jack Meagher, who was a pioneer in sports massage therapy for horses and humans. PHOTO COURTESY OF JO-ANN WILSON

and Indians and reenacting scenes from John Wayne movies. For a fourth grade talent competition, she convinced the principal to allow her to bring a pony on stage as part of her circus act.

"My father always taught us as kids to have absolutely no fear," said Wilson. "And to this day, he says that. He told me that I could do anything that I wanted in life, within reason—anything. And he used to say to us, 'Go ahead and take a risk. And for goodness sake, don't worry when you take the risk. Because worrying is using your imagination to create what you don't want. And don't sit around and wait for your ship to come in—go and swim out to it.'"

"That has been with me my entire life. I've always taken risks," she continued.

Wilson's career leap paid off: She worked with Meagher for 15 years and became his partner and associate. "He trained me, and his work was nothing like I learned in school," she said.

Continuing Education

Meagher founded sports massage in the 1950s—he is known to have coined the term.

Wilson said, "He's the one who took it out of hospitals and put it into the world of athletes. He studied motion and combined the biomechanics of motion with the physiology of motion and came up with three soft tissue techniques which he called sports massage."

Continuing to be inspired by Meagher's work, Wilson set out to share it with the world.

"Most of his work had been anecdotal," explained Wilson. "He worked with top athletes, top dancers; he worked with the [National Football League], with Cassius Clay [Muhammad Ali] and Jack Le Goff and was the sports therapist for [the U.S. Equestrian Team] in 1976. He wrote the first textbook on sports massage."

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"So I said, 'I will do a piece of scientific research to prove your method increases range of motion.' And so I got a major research grant," she continued.

In her research, funded by the Massage Therapy Foundation in 1999, Wilson used race horses and a treadmill to measure time, distance and speed. She hired Harvard University's motion laboratory, a leading ultrasonographer and the Swedish software company Qualysis.

"To make a long story short, I provided the evidence that showed that the method we used did in fact increase range of motion. It had a science to it," she said. "And from there, I promised Jack I would start a school, that I would provide scientific evidence as a foundation to this method, and that I would teach."

Wilson co-founded the original Jack Meagher Institute but later formed a partnership with Meagher to create the Wilson Meagher Sports Therapy practice, which she continues to run.

Meagher passed away in March of 2005, and Wilson is determined to keep his legacy alive. "When Jack was dying in a nursing home, I sat there and kissed him goodbye. I said, 'Is there anything I can do for you? Anything I can get you?' He said, 'What you can do for me is spread my method throughout the world.' And I said, 'OK, that's my promise to you.'"

"Jack meant everything to me," she added. "He gave me my professional life. If it weren't for Jack Meagher, I wouldn't be where I am today—I know that."

Hands On Horses

Wilson is keeping her promise. Not only is she practicing the method she learned from her mentor, but she's teaching it as well. She takes on students and therapists from around the world, and she speaks at events like the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games (Ky.), where she gave a presentation, "Sportsmassage for the World's Largest Athlete."

"I stress that the looser you are, the better you perform and the longer you last," said Wilson. "The body is a unit. It has to function like a unit. If



Jo-Ann Wilson teaches students from all over the world, and she requires that they complete a massage or physical therapy program. PHOTO COURTESY OF JO-ANN WILSON

there's any resistance, it throws the whole body off. The more tightness, the more energy you have to use—so you get tired. In order to increase performance, you have to reduce the resistance."

She gave a talk this winter to the U.S. Equestrian Federation's Developing Riders/Eventing 25 Program, which is headed by chef d'equipe David O'Connor.

"She was fantastic with them," said O'Connor, who has been one of Wilson's clients since the late '90s. "I think the kids got a lot out of it."

Wilson often conducts one-day horsemen's workshops, during which she teaches riders to implement some of her techniques. "For anybody who has a horse, the bare minimum we can do for our horses, outside of feeding and watering them, is prevention of motion problems. Using a simple technique, they can learn how to massage their own horses," she said. "It's a great thing for a horse owner to learn—to prevent a motion problem—because a motion problem will lead to a chain of other problems."

The U.S. Eventing Team brought Wilson on board for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. O'Connor, who was

the individual gold medalist that year, acknowledged her work as preventative and emphasized the importance of exercise in Wilson's therapy. Under O'Connor's direction, Wilson also worked with the Canadian Eventing Team at the 2010 WEG and the 2012 Olympic Games.

"It's being aware of the muscles and their restriction. And then it's using your own flat work and dressage as physical therapy also," said O'Connor. "I think with all of our horses, it hasn't been about fixing them. Her work makes you aware of how to get muscles loose but also how to continue that work under saddle, thus preventing future problems."

"She's the best person I've been around for understanding a horse's locomotion," he added.

Wilson explained that her method is anatomically accurate. "I look at biomechanics and physiology on the horse to create the change. You have to go where the problem is—more importantly where the cause is. Or it will repeat. I work at where the muscles and the tendons meet," said Wilson. "You make the change come from within the horse. And then you exercise after. Exercise activates the fibers."

► More About Jo-Ann Wilson

► Horses helped bring Jo-Ann Wilson and her husband, Leith Smith, together. The first time they met, she was wearing an Upperville Colt & Horse Show T-shirt, and he asked her about it. They've been married 12 years now. Smith, who has his Ph.D. from Syracuse University (N.Y.), is a historical archaeologist for Maine.

► Wilson's friends and longtime clients sometimes call her by a nickname—"Jali," which is after her dog.

► When she first graduated from nursing school, Wilson worked at Harvard Medical School's Judge Baker Children's Center Guidance Center (Mass.) for six years.

► Wilson wanted to be a veterinarian, but because there weren't many women veterinarians at the time, her parents encouraged her to pursue nursing.

► A client who was a professional international ballroom dancer inspired Wilson to compare horse sports to other sports. "International ballroom dancing is like dressage. They're judged on movement and fluidity and accuracy. A working hunter is like a diver. They need rhythm and courage. Polo ponies are like basketball players—they go from standing still to flat out runs, stop, turn, spin and run again."

Continuing Her Quest

Wilson travels the East Coast to work on clients' horses, which might be dressage horses, pleasure horses, race horses, polo ponies, hunters, jumpers, steeplechasers—and she also works on people. In the winter, you can find her in Wellington, Fla., Aiken, S.C., or Ocala, Fla.



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However, sometimes clients need her help when she's not in the area. Jennifer Miller, who is based in Aiken, recalled a situation in which Wilson helped to fix her horse from afar.

"I got in a bind a couple of years ago. I had a horse I was working with that was really tight in his back," said Miller, an amateur hunter/jumper rider. "And over the phone, she told me where to press until I felt the muscles releasing

and his back became soft. And the vet was there a day or two later and looked at the horse and was really impressed how soft the back was.

"She really gives you great help," she continued. "I'm a big fan of Jo-Ann's. I think she's just fabulous."

In Virginia, she's worked with longtime client Tony Workman, a hunter trainer.

Lynn Ellen Rice owns several horses in training with Workman, including

Gramercy Park, who earned the Peter Wetherill Cup as the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association's 2012 World Championship Hunter Rider Hunter of the Year. Through Workman, Rice met Wilson about 20 years ago.

"If [your horse has] any kind of an issue, you always notice a difference [after Wilson's work]. She's very good at feeling their body and telling where tightness is. A lot of times from feeling them, she'll say, 'Oh, this horse doesn't like to land on the left lead' or whatever it might be. And then she'll work on releasing certain areas that are really tight, and they always feel much better afterwards. A horse that's stiff to the left and won't bend to the left will definitely bend more to the left," said Rice, Hillsboro, Va.

Purple Heart, whom Rice campaigns in the 3'3" amateur-owner hunters, used to have issues with tightness in and around his hindquarters. "He wasn't really lame, per se, but he was uncomfortable," Rice said. "After working on him several times, Jo-Ann suggested that we do a galloping therapy. She felt like he was developing tightening in some of the fibers underneath the skin, and the best thing to do was get him to gallop and stretch out. And it made a huge difference with him and his hind end comfort—and that leads to everything else."

When Wilson moved to Maine nine years ago with her husband, Leith Smith, they happened upon an opportunity to

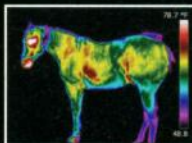
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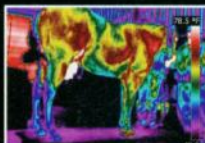
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Jo-Ann Wilson, shown here with Peter Barry's Kilrodan Abbott, traveled to the London Olympic Games as the sports therapist for the Canadian Eventing Team. PETER BARRY PHOTO



Jo-Ann Wilson has a long clientele list of national and international equine athletes, including many O'Connor Event Team horses. PHOTO COURTESY OF JO-ANN WILSON

further share Meagher's original method. Their neighbors were filmmakers who'd worked with National Geographic.

"So they said to me one day, 'Jo-Ann, rumor has it that you change the way a horse moves with your hands. Is that true?' I was really taken aback because I had never thought of it that way," said Wilson. "It took me a few seconds and I said, 'Actually, yeah, I can. And with very little overhead.'"

Her neighbor suggested she make a film about her work, and though they were unable to muster up funding for that movie, they ended up collaborating on her educational DVD, "A Course in Equine Sportsmassage." She's now creating instructional videos for specific problems—for horses that drift to the left, for example.

"My big plan is to continue to carry on spreading this message to the world—to horse owners and professionals," said Wilson.

So far, she's got a lot of fans.

"I think she's the best that there is," said O'Connor. 🐾

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