

# Sports Massage in Dressage

This increasingly popular therapy aims to free your horse's movement and enhance his performance.

By Vanessa Craft

**D**oes your horse's lengthening lack its former power? Is he struggling with shoulder-in right, yet floating in shoulder-in left? Are you spending more time trying to get him supple in your warm-up? While there are a number of reasons why he may not be moving as well as he should, the most overlooked cause is simple muscle tightening.

Sports massage—a technique pioneered for equine athletes by Massachusetts-based specialist Jack Meagher—can alleviate muscle tightening to restore your horse's freedom of motion and to improve his performance. Sports massage therapist Jo-Ann Wilson, one of Meagher's associates, explains how.

## The Benefits of Sports Massage

"Motion is like a wave: There's a start point and an end point," says Wilson, codirector of the

Jack Meagher Institute of Sports Therapy. "If there is muscle tightening anywhere along the line, it will inhibit the wave of motion."

A simple exercise allows you to feel the resistance that comes from muscle tightening. With your shoulder muscles relaxed, lift one arm straight above your head. Now lower your arm and tighten your shoulder muscles. Raise your arm again. While you can certainly still lift your arm, doing so is more difficult with tight shoulders because your shoulder muscles are resisting the motion. You'll quickly tire from moving your arm against this increased resistance. You can probably imagine that if you continued to stretch against the resistance, you could easily strain a muscle or tendon or even injure your shoulder joint.

Muscle resistance works the same way in horses as it does in people. Your horse's mus-

cles, like your own, are grouped in pairs and attached to the bones with tendons. When one muscle in a pair contracts, pulling the tendon and therefore the connected bone toward itself, the opposite muscle must relax. If a muscle is tight and doesn't fully release, it limits the range of motion. A horse working against tight, resistant muscles tires easily and is predisposed to injury.

But when the muscle tightness is released through sports massage, the muscles can work in synchrony to give your horse power. He will move more freely and feel more powerful, more balanced and more coordinated.

Sports massage will also enable you to build your horse's muscles more quickly. Once a muscle gets tight and is unable to contract and release normally, you can't continue to build that muscle because you can't exercise it fully. By keeping the muscle pli-

*Sports massage can alleviate muscle tightening to restore your horse's freedom of motion and to improve his performance, says Jo-Ann Wilson, codirector of the Jack Meagher Institute of Sports Therapy.*



Photos by Dwight Urry



able, you can continue working and building more muscle.

FEL rider Tom Noone of Scituate, Massachusetts, believes that regular sports massages from Wilson helped his horse Fresco to build the muscle he needed to advance from Prix St. Georges to Grand Prix movements. "Horses get tightness and muscle knots from developing muscle," Noone says. "When the muscle gets tight, it can't contract and release, so you can't build anymore. Jo-Ann came and worked on the horse every week or every other week, which allowed me to continue to build muscle."

Noone sums up his experiences with sports massage this way: "The horses feel fantastic after Jo-Ann has worked on them. They warm up in less time, and you can get into work much faster. This

puts fewer miles on the horses, and the quality of the work is better."

### The Meagher Method

Sports massage is a specific type of massage aimed at helping athletes improve their performance and longevity by increasing their freedom of motion. The technique, developed by Jack Meagher more than 50 years ago, is unique because the therapist works intensely on the end points, or "stress points," of the muscle.

Each of the muscle's two end points is attached to a different bone via a tendon. One end of the muscle, called the origin, is connected to the more stationary of the two bones, which is typically also the more proximal, or central, bone. The other end, called the insertion, is con-

nected to the bone that has a wider range of motion. As the muscle contracts to pull the tendons and thereby move the bones, strain builds at the junctions of the muscle and tendons. These stress points are where muscle knots and spasms usually start.

"By releasing the tightness in the stress points, "sports massage can increase range of motion," says Wilson. Particularly in a sport such as dressage that emphasizes grace and fluidity, a fuller range of motion is essential to top performance.

But a sports massage therapist must be able to pinpoint the horse's stress points in order to get the best results. If the therapist misses the stress points by as little as a quarter of an inch, she won't be able to restore full range of motion.

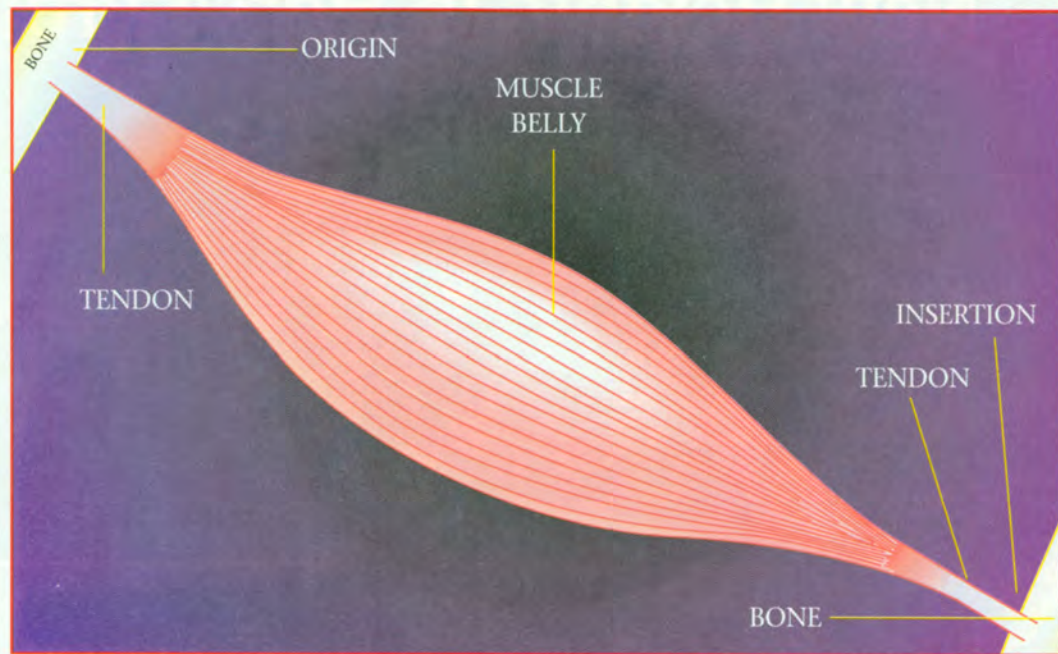


Equine sports massage, developed by Jack Meagher more than 50 years ago, releases muscle knots and spasms at stress points (indicated by circles) where muscles join with bone and tendon. By releasing the tightness, a therapist can increase an athlete's freedom of motion to improve performance.



## The Initial Evaluation

A sports massage session begins with a careful assessment of the horse. When Wilson arrives at a client's barn, she talks with the owner about the horse's performance. Next comes the visual assessment, which plays a critical role in diagnosis. Wilson watches the horse move at the walk to get an idea of where he's tight. "You get the best view of muscle function at the walk," she explains. "The slower the horse moves, the more he has to use muscles." Wilson focuses on the shoulder and pelvis—areas where a large amount of muscle-building occurs in dressage training and where she therefore usually finds tightness.



The muscle origin is attached to the more stationary bone. The insertion end is attached to the bone with motion.

If a horse is having difficulty performing a particular movement, Wilson can

tell where to look for muscle tightness because she knows which muscle groups are used in the various dressage movements. For instance, if the horse has labored or restricted movement in shoulder-in right, Wilson looks for tightness in the back muscles on the left side because these are the muscles that must relax to allow shoulder-in right.

In addition to detecting muscular problems, Wilson is often the first person to notice a joint or hoof problem, says Noone. Noone remembers when Wilson found some soreness in the lower back of one of his horses, which she suspected was due to a problem in the horse's hock joints. Although the soreness was still too subtle for Noone himself to detect it, he reported the warning to his veterinarian, who examined the horse and prescribed appropriate joint therapy.

A natural process called protective

splinting is what alerts Wilson to a problem that lies beneath the muscles. "Because muscles move bones, nature can immobilize injured joints by tightening the connected muscles," Wilson explains. "In orthopedic medicine, that's known as protective splinting." Wilson can see the muscle tightening, or splinting, as restriction in the horse's motion and can also feel it during a sports massage session.

Muscular splinting serves essentially the same function as a man-made splint: By restricting motion, it limits the associated strain on already-damaged members. For instance, the digital flexor tendons, which flex a horse's hoof, are attached to a muscle in the upper leg. (A horse has no muscles below the knee.) That muscle will tighten, limiting flexion, if there's a problem inside the hoof or anywhere else from the knee down.

When Wilson releases the clenched

muscles of a "splint" and restores mobility through sports massage, the underlying problem may be unmasked. This allows her to alert the horse's owner to the need for veterinary diagnosis and treatment before the problem reaches a more serious stage.

## The Treatment Session

Once Wilson has finished her visual assessment, she'll begin the sports massage session. A sports massage therapist trained in the Meagher method uses three strokes—compression, cross-fiber friction and direct pressure—singly or in combination, to loosen tight muscles. Compressing the muscle belly with the heel of the hand, as if performing CPR, loosens the muscle by widening the muscle fibers. Rubbing across the "grain" of the muscle with the fingers—cross-fiber friction—separates tightly packed muscle



fibers, making them more pliable. Direct pressure—pressing with the thumb or other fingers—to a stress point increases circulation to that area.

Once she's completed the treatment session, which takes about 20 minutes, Wilson watches the horse move again to be certain her manipulations are effective. The horse should exhibit more suppleness and a greater range of motion. And if he was having difficulty with a particular movement because of muscle tightness, he should be able to perform the movement more easily after Wilson has released the tight muscle.

She then turns the horse over to the rider with instructions to exercise the horse in a long and low, but connected, canter for five or 10 minutes to continue to lengthen and loosen the muscles before resuming normal work. Exercise is an

## Choosing a Sports Massage Therapist

There is no standard accreditation for equine massage therapists. However, Jo-Ann Wilson recommends that you use a therapist who is certified in human massage therapy and who has been trained in equine anatomy, physiology and muscular kinetics. The American Association of Equine Practitioners (606) 233-0147 has also issued suggested guidelines for the therapists' training.

Until a national professional organization or governing body for equine massage therapy is formed, your best bet for finding a qualified therapist near you is to get a referral from your veterinarian or trainer.

important part of the session. "I loosen the muscle with sports massage and relieve muscle spasms. Then the horse needs to be ridden to lengthen the muscle," says Wilson. "Exercise activates the muscle fibers to get them to lengthen more." Exercise also gives the horse a chance to adjust to his newly lengthened stride.

FEI rider Regula Lorenz of Middleburg,

Virginia, can feel a tremendous difference in her horse's movement after Wilson has worked on him. "After Marcello's massage, I can't wait to ride him," says Lorenz. "When I ride him, it's like he's on springs." She also has noticed a difference in her warm-up time when Marcello gets a sports massage prior to a show class.

"He performs much better with less

warm-up time when he has been massaged prior to a class," she says. "It saves his energy and my energy."

## Hands-On Horsemanship

You can perform simple compressions on your horse as part of your preride routine. Lay your hand flat against a muscle near the top of your horse's shoulder, back or hindquarters. Then lean into your horse and press with the heel of your hand as if you were performing CPR on him. Perform these compressions all along his trunk muscles to loosen them, moving from the top of the horse to the bottom.

You also can protect your horse's muscles by thoroughly warming him up and then properly cooling him down. Wilson recommends cantering—as long as there's no medical or behavioral reason why you should not—to warm up your horse.

Keep him connected, but in a long frame. The canter lengthens the muscles along his back, hindquarters and shoulders. If he has a sore back, canter in a half seat to stretch out his back.

After you've finished your work, it's imperative that you keep your horse moving as long as he is breathing rapidly. Rapid breathing is a sign that your horse's muscles are screaming for more oxygen to replenish what they used up during exercise. Movement boosts circulation to the muscles, bringing them the much-needed oxygen. If you allow your horse to stand still, the muscles won't get the oxygen they need and the fibers will pack together, losing their pliability. Then, sometime within the next few days, your horse will likely come out stiff and sore.

Also be sure to vary your training routine. "Don't do the same thing every

day," says Wilson. Overuse causes muscles to become tight. After a schooling session, give the stressed muscle groups a day of different, lighter work so that they have time to recover before you place further demands on them.

By paying attention to the state of your horse's muscles and releasing muscle tightness when it first appears, you'll help your horse feel better, perform better and advance through the levels more quickly and with less stress. 

*Jo-Ann Wilson is a graduate of the Muscular Therapy Institute, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is codirector of the Jack Meagher Institute of Sports Therapy (413) 772-1815, in Boxboro, Massachusetts, which offers a seven-day seminar for human massage therapists interested in equine sports massage.*