

# The Benefits of Equine Massage Therapy

*Alternative therapy is considered by Western culture as any healing practice that deviates from conventional and scientifically proven medicines. Such holistic therapies, like acupuncture, magnetism, massage and herbalism, are culturally and historically significant, and people have practiced these techniques since ancient times with continued success. The horse world has begun to catch on to the positive results that alternative therapy can create not only for people, but for horses, and many veterinarians today have even started using alternative therapies as a complement to their traditional medicines and practices.*

BY BRITTANY DEVRIES

And miles to go before I sleep  
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Robert Frost's famous poem about a horse helping his owner finish work on a snowy evening connotes the great effort horses put into their work. This poem dates back to 1922, but it carries the timeless diligence and tireless ways horses strive to please their owners. Saddlebreds are quintessential examples of this game attitude, as well. Whether or not they let on, a full-time job of training, working and showing takes a toll



Scottsdale's Equine Massage Therapist Karen Mitchell

on their bodies as much as on any athlete. Loose and limber muscles is the fundamental principle behind equine massage therapy, as well as the manipulation of muscle and connective tissue to enhance the function of those tissues and promote relaxation and well-being. It is an idea that has always played a role in the regular care and maintenance of a horse in any training facility. Cooling out a horse post workout with a Vetrolin bath or liniment rub, even rubbing down a sweaty horse with a towel, all provide soothing relief by targeting major working muscle groups like the shoulders, back and glutes. Equine massage therapy greatly expands upon these methods, applying professional massage techniques first developed for humans to give the equine athlete expert relief and keep them feeling their best.

## MASSAGE THROUGH ANTIQUITY

As delectable as they might sound, petrissage, effleurage and tapotment are not pastries found in a French boulangerie; they are techniques used in the art of massage. With an ancient history that dates as far back as 3,000 BC, it was Swedish physical therapist Pehr Henrik Ling whose work invigorated its establishment in the United States. Ling developed techniques such as these within a system he referred to as 'medical gymnastics,' which improved bodily rigor and health for him and his patients. This adjunct medicinal therapy made its way to the United States in the mid 19th century when two New York physicians, brothers George and Charles Taylor, introduced their Swedish studies, including Ling's techniques, into their own practice. Without the scientific studies to support its effectiveness as we have now, massage first gained popularity as a tool for relaxation. For example, many hospital nurses used simple techniques to calm patients and relieve pain. In the 1970s there was a noticeable rise in the use of massage among athletes, which helped the practice develop from a form of relaxation to a credible scientific therapy.

Equine sports massage therapist Jo-Ann Wilson recalled the Olympic-caliber development of equine massage therapy in the friendship between two greats—United States Equestrian Team (USET) Coach Jack LeGoff and the father of equine massage Jack Meagher. "Jack Meagher worked with many professionals in their fields in the 1970s, and Jack LeGoff was one of his clients," said Wilson. "After helping his back problem, LeGoff asked Meagher what he could do with horses." Though Meagher had worked on horses here and there before, his relationship with LeGoff sent him to Montreal to accompany the USET at the 1976 Olympic Games, a move which solidified the future of equine sports massage therapy. Later, Jo-Ann Wilson and Jack Meagher worked together to develop the Wilson-Meagher Sports Massage, a foundational, widely used equine sports massage method.

## HOW MASSAGE WORKS

The magic behind massage therapy lies in the voluntary inner workings of striated muscles. There are three types of muscle—cardiac, smooth and striated. Cardiac and smooth are both involuntary; cardiac (also called myocardium) makes up the heart and smooth make up

all other organs and blood vessels. Striated (also known as skeletal) muscles are connected to the supporting skeletal system. Working together, these muscles allow a supported range of motion. Consider a racing Thoroughbred. The cardiac and other bodily organs work together to keep blood and oxygen pumping through his body, while the horse synchronizes movements in his legs, hindquarters, neck and shoulders to run through the first turn. The incredible impact of 1,100 pounds hitting the ground's surface in every stride without falling apart is the feat of its strong but flexible skeletal structure connected to a thousand interweaving muscle fibers called myofibrils. These protein strands made of myosin and actin work together to create muscle contraction. The muscle penetration found in massage therapy draws oxygenated blood flow to the muscle to increase the efficiency of blood circulation, which in turn helps in the elimination of toxins from the body.

Another significant aspect of massage has to do with the connection of muscle to bone. Fibroblast cells make collagen, an imperative protein molecule that creates ligaments, tendons, covers the bones and helps form cartilage and bones themselves. These cells travel around the body to repair tired muscles with collagen fibers, which are then organized into specific structures held together by hydrogen bonds. After a long workout, a horse's muscles are stressed and tired. Fibroblasts bring repairing collagen fibers to sore shoulders and stifles and hydrogen bonding makes a fibrous web that repairs, builds and strengthens the tension of ligaments and tendons in these areas. The downside is that the 'gluing' effect of these hydrogen bonds can be built on abnormal tensions as well. In such a case, the fibers are much more an inhibitor of movement than they are an enabler. When you have poor posture, or a horse has a bad pastern, these fibers only hold you in that stiff position. Also called myofascial release, deep tissue stimulation as found in massage helps to soften and reorganize these connective tissue matrices by releasing hydrogen bonds and setting the fibers in a correct position.

#### PRINCIPLES AND PROCESS

For the first-timer, an equine sports massage therapist will generally speak with the owner or trainer, asking questions to learn more about the horse's specific condition, situation and any immediate concerns. Many also like to watch the horse move and visually assess the horse's condition. Wilson's description of this also brings the massage principle of maximum efficiency into perspective.



Jo-Ann Wilson applying pressure to the neck



Massaging at specific pressure points along the spine



Stretching



Famous equine sports massage therapist Jo-Ann Wilson

### *Indications of Muscle Tension in Horses*

- Resisting or refusing leads
- Head or neck discomfort
- Shortened stride
- Hip stiffness
- Improper tracking
- Girthing problems
- Behavioral problems
- Tossing head
- Sore back
- Uneven stride

“It is being able to watch a horse move and identify where the horse is labored in its movement,” said Wilson. “Then, talking with the rider or trainer as to how the horse is not moving freely. The first piece is to understand the problems in motion. That is why our method is so unique—we go to where the problem is, say a shortened stride, but we go to the cause of the problem. You might have a shortened stride, but the cause may be behind the shoulder at the withers. It might hurt in the poll but it stems from the muscles in the hocks. Think of motion as a wave—it starts in a hind leg and that wave travels all the way up to the poll. If there is anyplace on the body of the horse where the muscle is tight, it interrupts the wave. The objective is to create ease of motion in the horse. The easier a horse can move, the easier it can do its job.”

After the initial consultation, a massage therapist will then work head to tail on both sides of the body. They will carefully assess the horse’s head, including their jaw, then move to the poll, down the neck and through the shoulders. Then they move to the back, belly and hindquarters and down through the legs, repeating on the opposite side.

Equine sports massage therapist Jeanette James works primarily out of Illinois and its neighboring regions and has worked on such show horses as Spill The Ink, Lady Hawke, CH Call Me Ringo, Pucker Up, Rifles And Roses and All Glory. She further explained the ease of motion promoted by a regular massage routine. “Your horse needs his muscles,” she says. “By employing a massage therapy schedule it helps to keep them looser and more free with better flowing movements;



Working on the shoulder blades

they are more balanced.” During treatments, horses are generally very quick to relax and thoroughly enjoy the soothing experience. Horses demonstrate relaxation in their mouths, and during a massage it is apparent—yawning, licking lips and an open mouth with a lowered lip. The eyes get droopy, half shut and glazed over. They quickly correlate the massage therapist as their “personal masseuse,” nickering and excited when the therapist enters the barn.

#### SADDLEBREDS, IN PARTICULAR

Knight Skye Farm’s Singsation is the epitome of Saddlebred versatility. Owned and shown by Darryl Leifheit, his many laurels range from five-gaited and fine harness championships to achieving the American Saddlebred Horse Association’s FEI Year End Award for the past two years in combined driving. Leifheit explained how massage therapy fit into “Clint’s” transition from fine harness to carriage driving. “Having been a former show horse, he is a really game animal. In driven dressage, it is very different—he had to reach down and not hollow his back as much as he would in the show ring,” Leifheit said. “We’d get up early in the morning and work him hard then put him up. Twenty minutes before his dressage test, we’d take

### *Sports Massage (Maintenance)*

**Purpose:** Maintain soundness, promote freer motion and improve overall wellness

**Duration:** Approx. 1-1.5 hours

**Great for:** Injury prevention and improved strength, flexibility and health at any age



A horse leans in toward Jeanette James in appreciation as she massages his lower neck



Massaging the horse’s neck

### *Equine Massage Basics*

- Recommended 8 weeks or less between massages
- A typical massage lasts 1-2 hours
- Massages should be done at least 24 hours before an event
- Cost ranges from \$75-\$100 per session, dependent on service, number of horses, travel and location



Certified Equine Massage Therapist Jeanette James



Eric Grover working on a Saddlebred



Jeanette James after a successful massage session

him out for a massage. When Jen [Oliver] massaged him, it helped his muscles to limber up.” Equine sports massage therapist Jennifer Oliver began Central Kentucky Equine Massage in January of 2008, and her clientele has doubled in the past year. “Massage really helped Clint make that transition into Combined Driving,” she said. “When your muscles are geared towards one thing and then suddenly you change the way you’re moving, everything needs to learn to readjust.”

Oliver has worked on a large range of equine disciplines in her practice, including racing, fox hunting, saddle seat, jumping, three-day eventing, dressage and carriage driving. She and other massage therapists noted the interesting differences in the muscle groups through these equine athletes. Much in the way a snow boarder, speed skater and cross-country skier would appear to a massage therapist at the Olympic Games, different equine disciplines also develop particular muscles that massage therapists will address during treatments. Horses, like humans, have the same basic muscular makeup and it is important that the horse as a whole be worked on to promote looseness and fluidity in the entire body. However, differences in disciplines are worth noting. Equine massage therapist Jeanette James commented on these changes. “There is a difference, especially with road horses. When they’re first coming off the track and getting into training, their bodies pick up the way of the trot, and you’re going to almost always notice something like a sore right shoulder or that their bodies tend

to bend to the left,” she said of what she notices when she first begins working with them. “With any harness horse,” she continued, “it’s more in the withers, butt and hindquarters, and especially in the chest. With riding horses, whether English or Western, you noticed more back issues because they are carrying people and balancing that weight. Conformation does play a part. In Saddlebreds, I see some neck issues, as well through the withers, back and hindquarters.”

Eric Grover of Lodi, Ohio, began practicing professional equine massage therapy in 2006. Since then, he has worked on many Saddlebreds, including at Louisville, and noted the differentiation of gaited horses in his own experience. “Gaited Saddlebreds have issues with their hamstrings because of the way they sit down to rack. In most Saddlebreds you’ll find soreness in the shoulders, necks and jaw with the way they arch their necks over, but especially in gaited horses, they are typically a little bit sore because of the dynamics of sitting on their hindquarters.” Due their carriage, Saddlebreds of any division have particular areas that are prone to muscle stiffness but all equine sports massage therapists stress the significance of working on all muscle groups to alleviate not just the problem, but the cause.

#### A CAREER IN EQUINE MASSAGE

Equine sports massage therapist Karen Mitchell can be found in the classroom at Scottsdale Community College in central Arizona with a muscular model of the horse on the blackboard and a crowded room of eager students soaking in every word she says. “Gosh, when they know that they’re helping their horse get toxins out and prevent injury, they are just on fire for learning it,” Mitchell said. She is an adjunct professor at the college, taking her profession as an equine massage therapist and bringing it to a classroom each semester. “There is a misconstrued perception of massage as being a luxury or ‘frou-frou’ thing, but is extremely therapeutic and truly is helpful,” she said. She also mentioned that the rise in its use among veterinarians as an adjunct treatment to traditional veterinary medicine has helped confirm its effectiveness in the public eye. “It is really encouraging,” she said of its complementary use in veterinary practices. “Massage therapists are not vets—we can’t diagnose, we can’t prescribe, but massage truly is helpful to the muscles.”

With classes such as Mitchell’s, and wonderful programs around the country that provide students official equine sports massage certification, this therapy has become a wonderful avenue for those

### *Soft-Tissue Massage (Pre-Event)*

**Purpose:** Warms muscles and relieves surface tension  
**Duration:** Approx. 30 min. to 1 hour  
**Great for:** A tune-up before a class

### *Soft-Tissue Massage (Post-Event)*

**Purpose:** Warms the muscles and flushes out lactic acid  
**Duration:** Approx. 30 min. to 1 hour  
**Great for:** Preventing muscular tension from forming

wanting to pursue a career with horses. However, just like training and other horse fields, it is by no means a glamorous job. It is advised to take time researching equine massage therapy programs, becoming aware of location and where a massage career would be profitable, and deciding if it's the right fit—for many, it is an ideal lifestyle. Another option is certification in both human and equine sports massage therapy. Though more schooling is required, this provides a very firm understanding of anatomy and physiology and provides even more viable job options.

### GIVING BACK

Singsation's owner Darryl Leifheit believes that massage therapy is a way to give back everything his 10-year-old gelding has given to him over the years. "It is another way to address the issues of the type of work that he's doing," he said. "I feel like I'm doing him a nice service to relax a little bit." In comparison to other regular services like vet care, chiropractors, training, show expenses and more, massage treatments are reasonably affordable, even as a regular treatment which is considered roughly every two or three weeks, and many find the results very beneficial. "They'll notice horses are more relaxed in training," said Oliver. "When I work them regularly, they feel good—they are getting more out of training and lessons, they are less sore and ready to learn and their muscles are ready to learn. Everything gets in



Jennifer Oliver stretches ASB Combined Driving star Singsation



Jennifer Oliver works on a horse



It is important for a massage therapist to not alarm a horse during its initial massage treatment

## Deep Tissue Massage (Recovery)

**Purpose:** Relieves severe muscle tension  
**Duration:** About 1-2 hours  
**Great for:** Pains, injuries, older horses and stress

## Stretching Session (Post Massage)

**Purpose:** Increases flexibility and range of motion  
**Duration:** Approx. 15-30 min.  
**Great for:** Reaching the full potential of equine massage



Eric Grover stretches a horse's leg after a massage

sync—the horse is turning easier and getting under himself more with fuller motion. They are happier." Equine sports massage therapy is a beneficial way to help develop a horse to his potential by giving him freedom of movement to use himself efficiently, and of course, it is rewarding to see these hard-working champions enjoy a nice, relaxing massage every so often.