

DRESSAGE TODAY

VOL. 55

EXTRA

*Ready for
Second Level?*
Evaluating
Your
Progress

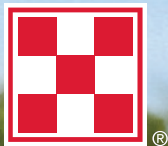
**SIMPLE
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EXTERNAL
OBLIQUE
TIGHTNESS**

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Evaluating Progress

Flashback: Read a favorite review of a Second Level combination.

Amanda Peer submitted Photo A at the time she and her Oldenburg gelding, Caliente, were preparing to move up to Second Level. She later submitted Photo B after they had successfully competed through Second Level for almost a year for help evaluating their progress.

Studying the two pictures, I congratulate Amanda and Caliente on their development. Caliente appears to have grown! His neck and chest have developed and even though the photo angle does not provide a full view of his back, his croup appears well muscled and round. The movement has changed, too. I can see that his hind legs move more pur-

posefully—with less dust and more lift—and the shoulders are carried better.

In my critique of the earlier photo (Photo A), I commented that Amanda's basically correct seat was a bit passive and she needed to become more active and part of the horse's movement in order to move up to Second Level. In the more recent photo, I can see that she has accomplished this.

Amanda's seat now looks deeper and more connected. She looks like she is supporting Caliente. Her lower leg is a bit turned out and her hands could be carried more freely, but the overall impression of more connection and higher-quality movement is what strikes me most when I compare these two



COURTESY, AMANDA PEER

▲ Photo A: Amanda Peer submitted this photo of her riding Oldenburg gelding Caliente when they were preparing to move up to Second Level.



Susanne von Dietze is a leader in equestrian biomechanics. A physiotherapist, licensed Trainer A instructor and judge for dressage and show jumping, she gives lectures and seminars throughout the world, including at the prestigious German Riding Academy in Warendorf. She is a native of Germany and now lives with her husband and three children in Israel, where she competes at the international level. She is the author of two books on the biomechanics of riding: Balance in Movement and Rider and Horse, Back to Back.



▲ Photo B: Peer submitted this photo after she and Caliente had successfully competed through Second Level for almost a year later.

pictures. Amanda's homework was well done. But as my own trainer tells me: "This looks good—now try to make it better!"

To offer insight for further development, let's study the pictures. Even though Caliente's topline has developed well, he is, again, slightly behind the vertical. Especially in this phase of the canter (the landing stride) the poll needs to be the highest point and the nose should be reaching forward.

Amanda is concentrating on performing well. She is aiming to keep the horse together, create more engine from behind and help him in a more collected balance. But she needs to be careful that she does not close his frame in the front. Her slight habit of looking down gives her seat and

Caliente a downhill focus. She should try to look up proudly over her horse's ears. This can make a difference and give the canter a more uphill focus and direction.

Another tip is in regard to the timing of her hands in connection to an upright balance in her body in canter. In an ideal canter, the horse has a round jump. Imagine horse and rider are like two balls that are stacked on top of each other. When the bottom ball starts rolling forward, the ball on top needs to roll in the opposite direction to be able to stay in balance on top. This is a very important image, because many riders roll their seat and hands in the same direction as the horse. This leads to heaviness in the movement and a more downhill canter.

To encourage self-carriage and uphill quality within the stride, Amanda should stretch up with her body and push her hands forward and up during the landing phase of the canter. With more "forward" and "up" thinking in her body, it will be easier for her to correct her leg position and have her horse more in front of her leg, too.

When the horse has jumped off the ground in canter and is in the moment of suspension, it is already determined where he will land. At this point, if the rider interferes with the landing, she can only disturb the horse's balance. The rider cannot change anything after takeoff, but she can give the next stride a better direction. That means when riding the canter, always think ahead.

Work for the next stride and stay out of the horse's way in the landing. For example, looking down slightly is focusing on the landing, but if you look ahead to where the next stride should be, you are changing the timing of the aids.

To check that you are sitting with independent hands, you must be able

to feel the exact same contact in both reins during takeoff and landing. In this picture, it looks like Caliente is jumping a bit into the rein during landing and then, to avoid the stronger contact during landing, lowers his head and brings his nose more behind the vertical.

If you were to watch this in a video, you would see that it leads to a slight up-and-down nodding of his head in canter. This nodding motion implies that he's not fully balanced from behind.

I can see that Caliente's topline and neck muscles have improved a lot within a year, and I imagine that he will continue to improve. However, in situations such as riding a dressage test, old habits often become visible again.

As I look at this new picture, I would tell Amanda to trust her horse. She can seek further improvement by pushing her hands and her horse's neck forward to achieve a more uphill frame. Her scores will improve with this.

Amanda should be proud of her development and should reflect this in her own posture, too. Then her upper body will open up and she and Caliente can shine with more power and harmony. 🐾



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Eliminate EXTERNAL OBLIQUE TIGHTNESS

This common often overlooked problem that can cause performance issues has a simple solution.

BY JO-ANN WILSON WITH JOCELYN PIERCE



J. STANLEY EDWARDS

Do you find yourself needing to use one leg more than the other to help keep your horse straight?

Or maybe he's reluctant to move one or both legs forward or has started knocking down rails. What's going on? While there are many factors that could explain these symptoms, a very common issue that affects horses across all disciplines is a tight external oblique muscle.

A horse's external oblique is a broad, triangular-shaped muscle located over the lower abdominal area of the horse that connects from behind the fourth rib to the point of the hip. There are two external obliques, one on each side of the horse. Its functions are to bend or flex the trunk laterally and compress the abdomen. But when this muscle is tight, it can have major implications for your horse. Fortunately, tightness can easily be relieved by using a basic Sportsmassage technique.

Signs of Tightness

As a Sportsmassage practitioner, I often point out that the most overlooked factor in diminished performance is simple

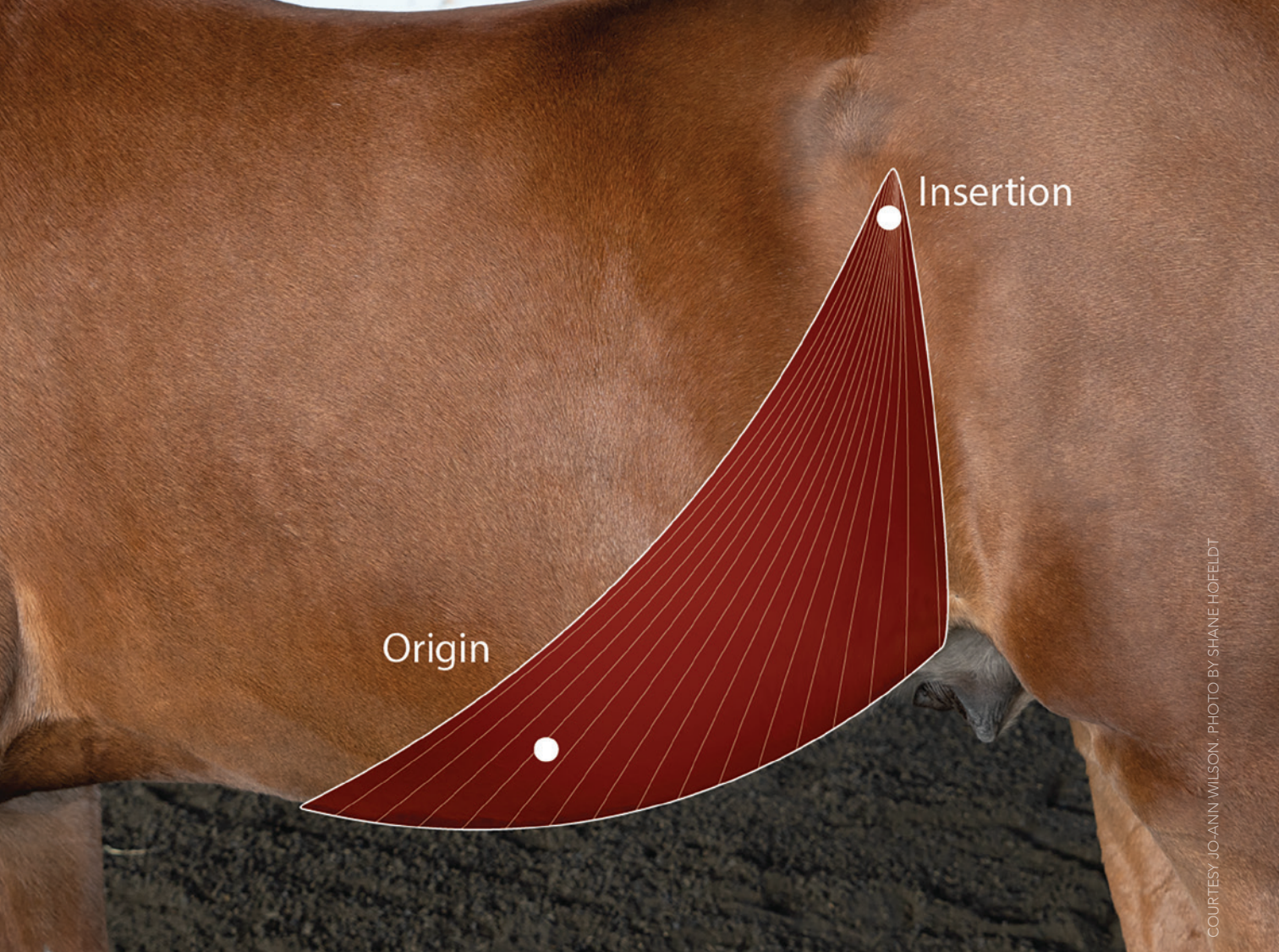
◀ External oblique tightness can easily be eliminated by using cross-fiber friction. This helps to mechanically break up a spasm or knot by separating the muscle fibers that are stuck together.



J. STANLEY EDWARDS

ABOUT JO-ANN WILSON

Jo-Ann Wilson is a licensed massage therapist, clinician, author, teacher and researcher whose work includes serving horses and riders of all levels and disciplines for over 30 years. She was a longstanding associate and partner of the late Jack Meagher, pioneer of Sportsmassage, and is the director of Wilson Meagher Sports Therapy, which offers clinical and educational programs in the Wilson Meagher Method of Equine Sportsmassage. She has served as the sports therapist for the U.S. and Canadian Eventing teams at multiple Olympic, World Equestrian and Pan American Games. Wilson also offers online video training on her website and YouTube channel, as well as live workshops. For more information, go to sportsmassageinc.com.



COURTESY JO-ANN WILSON. PHOTO BY SHANE HOFELDT



MEG MCGUIRE

▲ The external oblique is a broad, triangular-shaped muscle located over the lower abdominal area of the horse that connects from behind the fourth rib to the point of the hip.

◀ Dressage rider Rebecca Reed saw a big improvement in Simply Sinatra after his external oblique tightness was addressed with a Sportsmassage technique.

muscle tightness. To understand how tightness develops, knowing how muscles work is important. Every muscle has two ends, and each end is connected to a different bone by a tendon.

One end is the anchor, which stabilizes the muscle to the bone. The other end is the insertion, where the motion occurs. The middle part of the muscle, which lies between the two ends, is called the belly. The belly is the power or action of the entire muscle and creates overall movement.

Muscles are made up of many thread-like fibers that run parallel to each other. A muscle is loose and functioning properly when the fibers have equal and appropriate spaces between them and do not lie very close or touch one another. When the fibers are close together without much space between them, the muscle is in a shortened state and is tight.



When the muscle is tight, less blood can circulate through the limited space between the fibers. Since blood carries oxygen, the diminished blood flow affects the level of oxygen available to the muscle tissue. Oxygen provides the fuel and energy to the muscle necessary for the required exercise. As the physical exercise increases, the body's demand for more oxygen increases. Diminished oxygen creates fatigue and discomfort in the muscles when they are being used. It is similar to stepping on a hose. The less space in the hose, the less water can flow through.

When muscles are functioning properly, they contract (shorten) and release (lengthen) in synchrony. Muscle tightness affects the release process of the muscle. When a muscle is tight it resists letting go, or releasing, to accomplish the required motion. The tighter the muscle, the greater the resistance. And the greater the resistance, the harder it is for the horse to move and perform.

Olympic eventer Lauren Nicholson and dressage trainer and rider Rebecca Reed have experienced this issue firsthand.

For Rebecca, she noticed her 13-year-old Oldenburg gelding Simply Sinatra, currently competing in Prix. St. Georges, was having trouble bending, particularly in the left half-pass.

For Lauren's 2022 FEI World Championships team silver medalist partner Vermiculus, a 16-year-old Anglo-Arabian, his tight obliques led to him compensate in other areas to keep his balance. This resulted in atrophy of certain muscles that he wasn't using correctly. "He's little and everything is quite close

together, so when his obliques were out of whack, everything went out of whack," explained Lauren.

A horse with a tight external oblique will not be straight in his body. If the muscle is tight on one side, the rider will need to use more leg on the side of the tightness. For example, if a horse has a tight left external oblique, he will shift his haunches to the left and will not be able to release the haunches to the right to straighten his body, requiring the rider to use more left leg to keep him straight. Many riders accept this as natural crookedness. The horse will also not back up straight, and he may fall in or out on a circle depending on the affected side.

If both the right and left external obliques are tight, the horse will be quite resistant and have a harder time going forward in all movements and especially in collected work. Jumping horses may also knock down rails.

Causes of Tightness

There are several reasons for tight external obliques. Some of the most common are:

- repetition of lateral work
- cow kicking at flies

▲ For eventer Lauren Nicholson's Vermiculus, his tight obliques led to him compensate in other areas to keep his balance. This resulted in atrophy of certain muscles that he wasn't using correctly.

AMY K. DRAGOO



▲ To assess your horse's motion, have a handler walk him in a straight line about 50–75 feet away from you. Here, the horse is not straight and is shifting and holding his haunches to the left, suggesting his left external oblique is tight.

- repeatedly kicking in the stall or trailer

Tight external obliques can also be caused by veterinary issues, such as:

- hindgut or gastrointestinal issues
- problems with the sacroiliac area
- lower lumbar vertebral issues

Gait Analysis and Assessment

To assess your horse's motion, have a handler walk him in a straight line

about 50–75 feet directly away from you and then turn around and walk back in a straight line. Make sure to do the assessment on soft but firm footing that is flat and even. The walk is the best gait to assess muscle tightness because the slower the horse moves, the more muscle he has to use, and the easier it will be for you to see any resistance in motion. If the horse has external oblique tightness, you should be able to see that he is not straight and is shifting his haunches in one direction. So if he's putting his hips to the left, it suggests that his left external oblique is tight.

Relieve Tightness with Cross-Fiber Friction

Eliminating tightness in this muscle is very easy by using cross-fiber friction. This helps to mechanically break up a spasm or knot by separating the muscle fibers that are stuck together. The entire muscle then becomes more pliable and functional, helping to increase the range of motion and improve specific performance problems.

To locate the external oblique, feel for the bony landmark of the point of the hip, then drop your thumb down on a diagonal in front of the point of the hip about 1 inch. This

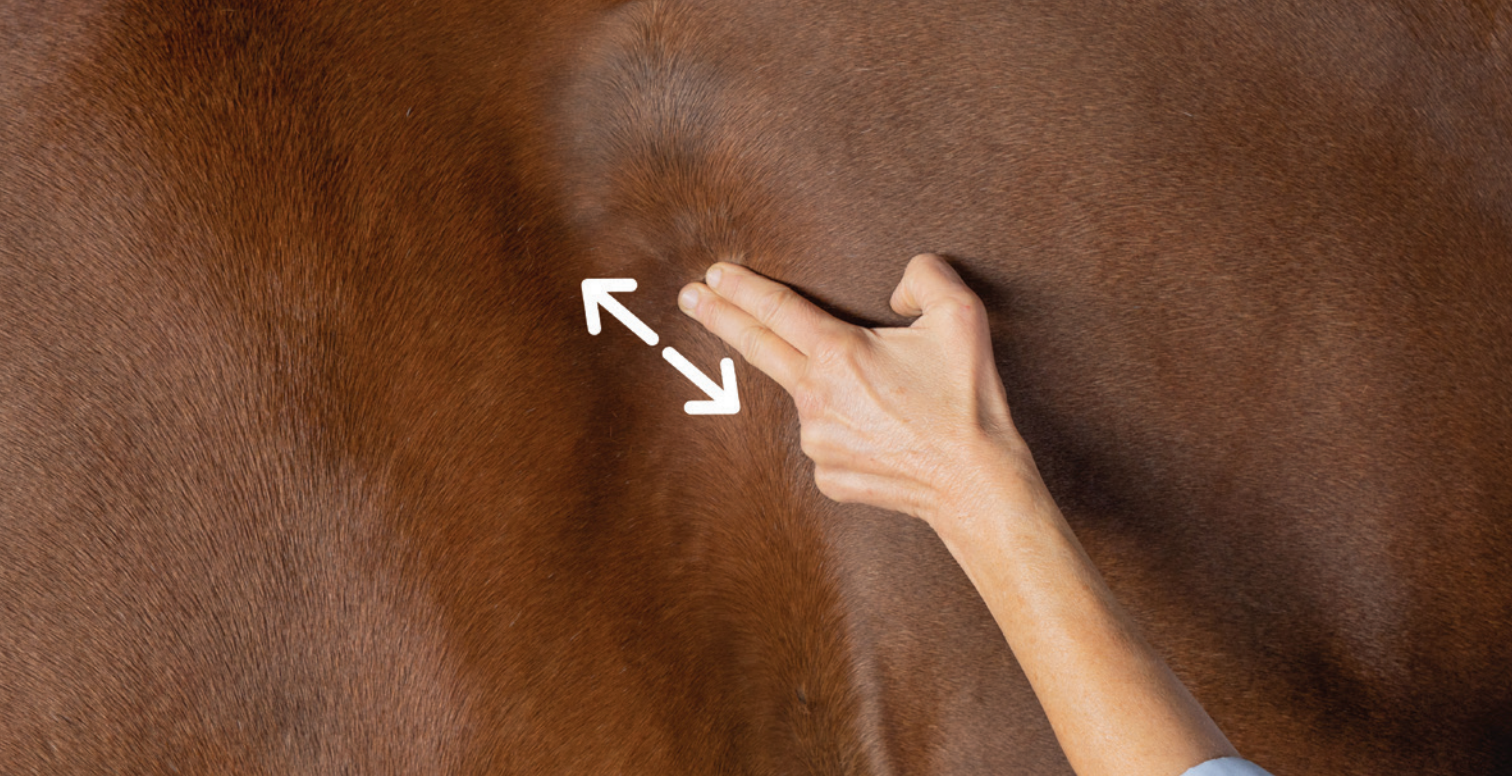
is where the tendon fibers and muscle fibers meet, at the insertion. Another way to locate it is to imagine the point of the hip is the face of a clock. The insertion can be felt at 7:00–8:00 on the left side, and 4:00–5:00 on the right side. If this muscle is tight, you should feel a small piece of tissue close to the bone that feels like a thick chord or guitar string. If it is not tight, the tissue will feel soft and rebound into your hand.

Next, I'll explain the cross-fiber friction technique, but if at any time when applying the technique, the horse threatens

▲ After the correct application of the Sportsmassage technique, the horse will immediately be straight in his body, as seen here.



▲ To locate the external oblique, feel for the bony landmark of the point of the hip, then drop your thumb down on a diagonal in front of the point of the hip about 1 inch. You can also think about the hip as the face of clock. On the left side, it can be felt at 7:00–8:00.



▲ Use moderate pressure with two fingers to cross the fibers diagonally back and forth on the tissue, without taking your fingers off, as if you were going across the grain of a piece of wood.

and forth across the tissue without taking your fingers off of them. Use the cross-fiber friction technique for no more than 10 seconds. Stop and feel the tissue to determine if the chord has softened or changed. If it feels softened or changed, do not repeat the technique. If it still feels tight, repeat cross-fiber friction one more time for no more than 10 seconds.

Once the technique has been completed, it is best to ride or longe the horse afterward. Exercise may enhance the treatment because it further lengthens the muscle. If you've relieved the tightness, you will see new or improved range of motion. The change is immediate. Canter the horse in a connected long and low frame two times in both directions around an arena—as long as horse and rider are safe to do so. The canter is the most concerted exercise in lengthening all of the horse's muscle groups. That is why the trot always feels better after the canter. You may choose to trot or longe the horse if cantering is not an option. If you cannot ride the horse following the

to kick, moves away, pins his ears or obviously doesn't like it—stop immediately.

Start the technique by using moderate pressure at the insertion with a thumb or two fingers. Cross the fibers diagonally back and forth on the thick chord as if you were going across the grain of a piece of wood.

To do this, move your fingers back

technique, then ride him when you are able—there is always another day.

Both Rebecca and Lauren saw marked changes in their horses after their external obliques were loosened. After the Sportsmassage technique was used on Simply Sinatra, everything became much easier right away. This allowed his right hind to come underneath and cross over to the left. “The

Eliminating tightness in this muscle is very easy by using cross-fiber friction.

[half-pass] was easier, it flowed much better, the connection was better, everything was better,” said Rebecca. Lauren agreed that the effect was instantaneous, but also had benefits over time. “The other muscle groups aren't compensating and they can develop properly and they get better long-term, too.”

If your horse continues to have this problem in motion, seek a veterinarian assessment to help address the cause. 🐾

Practical Horseman thanks Kristina Watkins of Firefly Farm in Reddick, Florida, for use of her farm and horse for the demonstration.



Jo-Ann Wilson recently wrote and released her book, “Keeping Horses At Their Best: A Hands-On Guide to Equine Sportsmassage.” Parts of this article were adapted from her book. To purchase a copy, go to sportsmassageinc.com/Purchase-Book.htm.