

DRESSAGE, EVENTING, HUNTERS, JUMPERS

VOL. 64

PRACTICAL HORSEMAN

EXTRA



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Will Coleman's
10 Tips for Clear,
Effective and
Sympathetic Riding

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Will Coleman explains the benefits of developing a happy horse to the Olney Farm riders.

10 TRAINING TIPS FROM WILL COLEMAN

This Olympic eventer imparts lessons on clear, effective and sympathetic riding to the winners of a very special clinic.

BY KATE LIGHT PHOTOS BY AMY K. DRAGOO

A happy horse will always be more successful than an unhappy one,” Olympic eventer Will Coleman said to the assembled riders, whose mounts ranged from an off-the-track Thoroughbred and a homebred warmblood-cross to a PMU rescue horse and a Shetland Pony. “If you can get to a point where you feel like you give the horse a reason to come out and work for you every day, you’re always going to have a better chance of getting not only a better performance but a much more enjoyable and fulfilling performance.”

Will, who helped the U.S. team win a silver medal with Off The Record at the 2022 FEI Eventing World Championships, spoke about creating a willing partner in your horse through correct, sympathetic riding at a clinic for riders from Olney Farm in Joppa, Maryland. The farm had won the training session by earning the

“Best Group Spirit Award” at the Washington International Horse Show Barn Night, where enthusiastic equestrians from local stables show their pride. The clinic was courtesy of Cavalor and held at Shawan Downs in Cockeysville, Maryland.

The 18 riders were split into four groups based on their level, which ranged from Beginner Novice to Prelim. All warmed up on the flat before moving on to exercises over fences and a stadium course. The two more-advanced groups also schooled cross-country fences.



ABOVE: To improve her approach, Julie Abe counts the strides up to a flower box on Sarah.



LEFT: Patti Fenwick approaches a fence on Olney Savoir Faire with a plan to walk before reaching the volunteer standing 50 feet away from the jump.

ers shouldn't expect to fix all their issues in one clinic, he said "You'll get some ideas and some tips for how you can progress going forward."

Read on for 10 of these ideas and tips to apply to your own training.

Be Fair, Be Clear

Throughout the clinic, Will stressed the importance of being fair to your horse.

To do this, he explained, you must be clear with your aids. If you are either too aggressive or too passive with your aids, you can't expect the horse to understand what you're asking of him. "Not being

clear is not being fair," he said.

When a rider was too sharp with her rein aids, Will explained that inconsistent, aggressive aids disrupt a smooth connection, causing confusion and discontent. "You give him one of those jawbreakers, it's not clear to the horse," he said. "Try to find more shades of gray in the aids."

Likewise, aids that are too quiet for the horse to understand prevent clear communication. "Softness lends itself to being unclear sometimes," Will said. "You can be sympathetic while still being clear."

He cautioned against aids applied either accidentally or due to frustration. "You have to start from a place of non-interference on the horse. If aids are turned on inadvertently or without your expressly meaning to, it becomes detrimental to clear communication with the horse."

To make the most of their time, Will encouraged the participants to ride at the highest level of their ability, as though they were in a competition setting. Although he explained that the rid-



Will watches as Emmy McGuirk lengthens her reins down a bank on Olney St. Nick.

Be Accountable

After observing one rider who had trouble staying mentally organized when riding on her own, Will explained the importance of accountability. “You need to self-coach. Instruction will only take you so far. You have to go into the ring and do it yourself.”

Part of being your own coach is being accountable for your riding, including mistakes. Will asked the rider to focus on planning. “Whether it’s a missed jump, a missed distance, a stop or just not executing something perfectly, it’s important that you understand why it didn’t work out,” he said. “The more you start to recognize what you’re doing wrong after you make a mistake, the more you’ll start to recognize it before it happens and, hopefully, prevent it.”

Look Where You’re Going

During his initial evaluation, Will pointed out that several riders were not looking where they were going. This is often an issue of concentration, he said. When you aren’t focused on the job at hand, you stop looking. Over fences, it is crucial to look where you’re going.

“The jump is the most important thing you need to be looking at. Look until a stride out” then raise your eyes to look over it, he said. “I’ve never seen a situation where looking down at the horse helps.”

For a rider who looked down before the jump instead of looking at the jump, Will stood on the landing side of a flower box roughly 30 feet away and held up fingers. He asked the rider to tell him what number he was holding up as she approached and jumped the box. By providing a place to focus the rider’s eyes, Will encouraged her to look up, pay attention and create a more balanced position. Once she developed the feeling of looking up, she was more able to look at the jump instead of down.

Ride an Excellent Approach

To help the riders focus on their approach to fences, Will set up a flower box on a circle. He instructed riders to pick up the canter, approach the flower box and count the strides to the box, which they would then jump, from eight strides away. The purpose was to set a line to the jump and develop a steady

rhythm and pace rather than become “infatuated with distance.”

The simple exercise required riders to think about the flower box well ahead of time, discouraging them from making a last-second adjustment to their horses’ pace. “I know you’re looking at the jump at least eight strides away, which is enough time to keep rhythm,” Will said. “The distance comes out of the rhythm, so pick a rhythm and keep it consistent so you’re most likely to find a distance.”

Riders couldn’t be shy about counting loudly. Any riders who forgot to count audibly were told to drop their stirrups and trot around the large grass ring until their “tongue untied,” ensuring that they focused on being heard.

Although many of the approaches to the flower box ended on “six,” “seven” or even a few strides past “eight,” Will explained that the goal of the exercise was not to accurately predict the number of strides to a fence but to help riders focus on riding an accurate line with consistent rhythm and pace. “I don’t get fussed about whether they get ‘seven’ or ‘10’ or ‘11.’ The goal is that they’re thinking along those lines and that they

Barn Night at WIHS

Dressed in matching outfits, riders from Olney Farm trooped into downtown Washington, D.C., for the Washington International Horse Show's Barn Night last October. Attended by 1,200 riders from 30 area barns, the event awards various prizes in categories like Largest Group, Best Group Banner and Best Group Video.

For their Barn Night efforts, Olney Farm won the Best Group Spirit Award and the prize of a clinic with Will Coleman, courtesy of Cavalor. "We chose Olney Farm for three reasons: the dedicated barn members, the perfect coordination of their outfits and especially their overwhelming enthusiasm," said Barn Night judge and Olympic gold medalist Peter Wylde.



Olney Farm riders pose with their sign at the 2013 Washington International Horse Show.

Based in Joppa, Maryland, Olney Farm was established in 1855 and has been managed by a member of the Shriver-Howard family ever since. Currently owned by Ami Howard, Olney Farm has an active lesson

program and a Shetland Pony breeding program. The farm participates in Shetland Pony racing at venues like the Washington International and the Devon Horse Show in Pennsylvania. Ami and her daughter, Patti Fenwick, are also the organizers of the Maryland Combined Training Association annual horse trials, held at Shawan Downs the first weekend of May.

Many of the riders who ensured the Barn Night victory also rode in the clinic. The large hand-painted Olney Farm sign, featuring a racing Shetland Pony, was on display next to the stadium-jumping arena.

Patti, an instructor at the farm, rode in the clinic. "As an instructor, it was just wonderful to hear his terminology," she said. "As a rider, I got a lot out of it. He challenged us with very doable challenges."

The 2024 Washington International Horse Show Barn Night will be held October 24 in Washington, D.C. Visit www.wihs.org for more information.

commit to being a little bit ahead of the curve when it comes to approaching an obstacle."

When the horses jumped smoothly, Will made it clear the result was due to correct approach and preparation for the flower box rather than the jumping effort itself. "The process was better," he praised.

Use a Reference Point

During the second group of the day, Will had riders canter an approximately 30-meter circle on the left lead over a vertical several times. Some riders struggled to maintain consistent-sized circles so they ended up making different approaches to the fence each time. This resulted in them rarely meeting the fence at an appropriate distance but instead alternately chipping in or leaving from a long spot.

To encourage more focus on the circle, Will stood about 30 feet away from the final turn to the fence and asked riders to use him as their point of reference. The incentive to avoid trampling him encouraged the riders to be exacting in the geometry of their circle, which resulted in a consistent approach to the fence.

A "human cone" was also used to help riders develop their horse's attentiveness after a fence. Will asked a volunteer from the auditors to stand 50 feet away from a small vertical on the landing side, centered with it. The riders were to trot to the fence, jump it and come to a walk before the volunteer. The impetus to not stampede the person compelled riders to focus on riding the downward transition effectively. After riding the exercise a few times, the horses became more attentive and willing to respond to the riders' aids.

Will preferred riders to slow to a walk rather than a halt after a fence. A horse could associate a halt with punishment rather than as a test to see if he is listening. Halting could have an especially negative effect for sensitive horses, he added.



Olivia Giachini keeps a consistent rhythm on Olney Peggysue for a smooth jump.

Let Your Horse Go

Some riders focused too intensely on dictating their horse's every move, often losing sight of the task of jumping.

One rider on an excitable horse excessively worked on getting him to become calmer. Will explained that by paying so much attention to the horse's behavior, she lost sight of the point of the exercise. "You're trying to get him feeling just right," he said. "You then miss the boat, which is the fence coming up right in front of you."

Will had the rider canter on a circle over a small vertical, asking her to pay attention to the approach rather than worry about her horse. When she stopped making constant adjustments with her aids, her horse settled into a steadier canter. Another rider with a very obedient horse also adjusted her mount too much. Approaching a Training-level brush jump, she adjusted her horse's speed multiple times instead of developing a consistent rhythm.

"Rideable horses can let the rider

take the easy way out and encourage you to pick, pick, pick," Will said.

By allowing her horse to keep one rhythm, the rider was rewarded with a smoother jump because she was able to focus on the jump instead of his speed.

Ride the Horse You Are On

One rider struggled with her sensitive horse who tended to back off from fences. As a result, she rode aggressively forward to all jumps. Will cautioned, "Be careful not to get myopic about what you're feeling. When it's always 'attack, attack, attack,' that can make a horse back off."

Will encouraged the rider to work with the horse she was on that day rather than assume he would always back off. If you assume too much, he explained, you might lose focus of what the horse needs that day or even at a particular fence.

Since the rider was using a driving seat at fences to push her horse into her hands, Will asked her to stay up off his

back for one jump, saying, "Don't create a strong horse when you don't need one." The result was a smoother approach and jump.

Warm Up for Success

During the ring sessions, many of Will's jumping comments related to warming up correctly for the stadium phase. He asked riders to pay close attention to how their warm-up fences rode. "Your warm-up [jumps] are all clues," he said. "I make my students jump very few jumps in the warm-up, so they need to count. They jump no more than eight fences."

When warming up a horse who tends to get strong before the stadium phase, Will suggested riding one to two long, straight approaches to establish rhythm and then riding the rest of the warm-up jumps off a turn. Approaches off a turn allow the rider to ask the horse to wait more easily than off a straight approach, encouraging the horse to listen to the rider instead of barrel over the jump. "When you don't like the distance you see, wait for the right one. That's the beauty of jumping off a turn," he said.

Some of the riders believed they had to correct jumping faults, whether the horse bulged to one side before the jump or wasn't completely square over the fence. Will acknowledged the importance of improving a horse's way of jumping at home but said that the show-jumping warm-up is not the time. A rider should not try to address these issues at the last minute at a competition, he said, where the goal is to leave the rails up. "Letting a horse jump the way he wants to jump gives him the best chance of jumping clean."

Slow it Down

The atmosphere of the clinic excited a few of the horses, resulting in some overly enthusiastic efforts over a single vertical Will had the riders jump early in the clinic to assess their form over fences.



Ellee Perri looks up while riding Olney Noelle over a flower box to see what number Will is showing.

To help one rider develop better communication with her horse, Will had her walk her mount over a small vertical while talking to her horse to help them both relax. “Slowing it down allows her to get to a place mentally where things aren’t happening so fast and she can hopefully try to find some peace with the horse,” he said.

After walking over the fence a few times, the rider trotted the fence (“not a dressage trot, just a piddly little trot,” Will said) until she was ready to attempt the fence at a relaxed canter. By jumping the fence at slower gaits, the rider was able to “realize maybe the jump didn’t need to be such a big event,” Will said.

Will explained that for many quick horses, he finds slowing down the jumping process to be successful, especially when riding courses. “Any horse I’ve got that is impulsive, I trot the course up to 4 feet,” he said. “It’s good for your balance and teaches you to wait in a gait that’s more controllable.”

After having riders work over single fences, Will set up a course, which he had the more excitable horses trot. “If you’re not at a place where a course can be done with precision and control, I

mix in the trot.”

Once the horses completed the course in a relaxed manner, he allowed riders to thoughtfully incorporate some canter. “Be very mindful about what jumps to canter. You’re always getting him to think about coming back.”

Be Flexible with XC Rein Length

Following an initial session in the ring, the two more-advanced groups set out onto Shawan Downs’ cross-country course, which includes fences from Beginner Novice to Advanced. After warming up over some basic fences, one group jumped up and down a small bank. Will encouraged them to feel comfortable riding down the bank with longer reins. “I lengthen my reins 4 to 5 inches to give myself room to open my hip angle and sit behind. I want to feel like I let the horse jump out in front of my hips.”

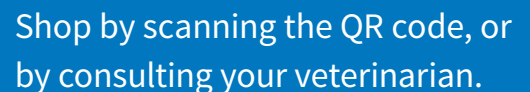
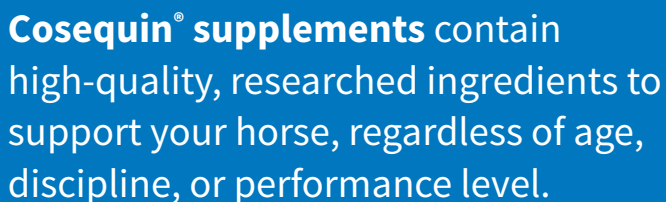
Will said lengthening his reins can be beneficial for horses who don’t back off at cross-country fences by creating a sense of independence that helps them to think more critically about what’s in front of them instead of looking to the rider for guidance. He acknowledged

that while it’s harder to lengthen your reins on a stronger horse because you don’t want to release control, you can think about letting the jump hold the horse instead of holding the horse with your reins.

Will also stressed the safety component of being able to slip your reins. “Things can happen cross country, whether a horse can stumble on landing or running over terrain. The footing isn’t arena footing, where it can be predictable,” he said. “You have to always be prepared for something to happen. As you watch any great rider cross country, when things go wrong, a lot of times the first thing they do is slip their reins and get very much out of the horse’s way.” When a rider slips her reins in a dangerous situation, she allows the horse to regain balance on his own rather than interfere with his mouth.

Riders left the clinic with new insights and tools for clear and fair riding. This will help them earn ribbons in competition but, more importantly, it is something horses deserve, Will said. “Horses are rewarded by good riding. I think they’ve earned that.” 🐾

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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

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.

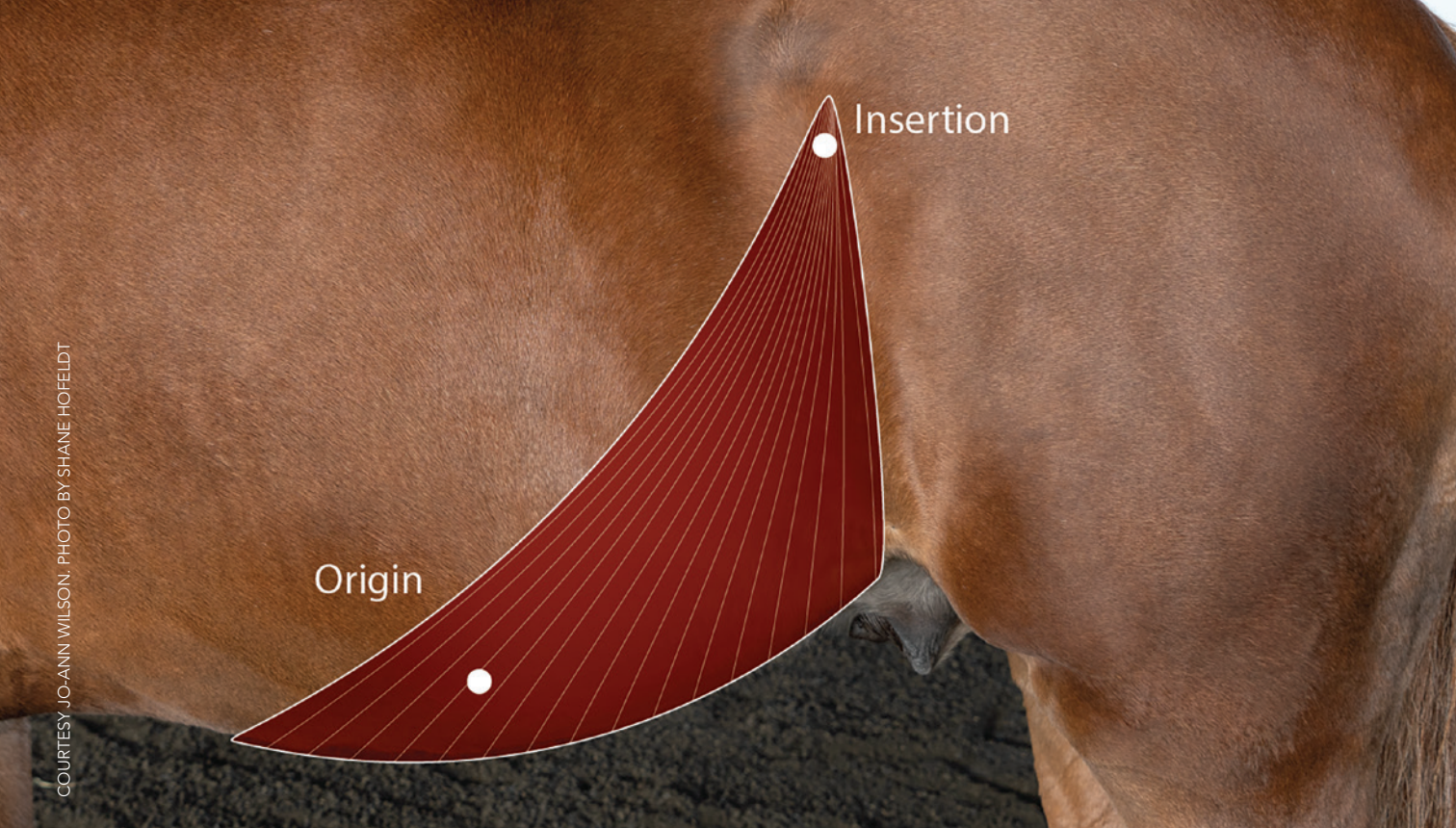
A horse's external oblique is a broad, triangular-shaped muscle located over the lower abdominal area of the horse that connects from behind the fourth rib to the point of the hip. There are two external obliques, one on each side of the horse. Its functions are to bend or flex the trunk laterally and 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 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.

► 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.





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.

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



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 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.



▲ 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.

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
- 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.



▲ 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.

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 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

► 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.

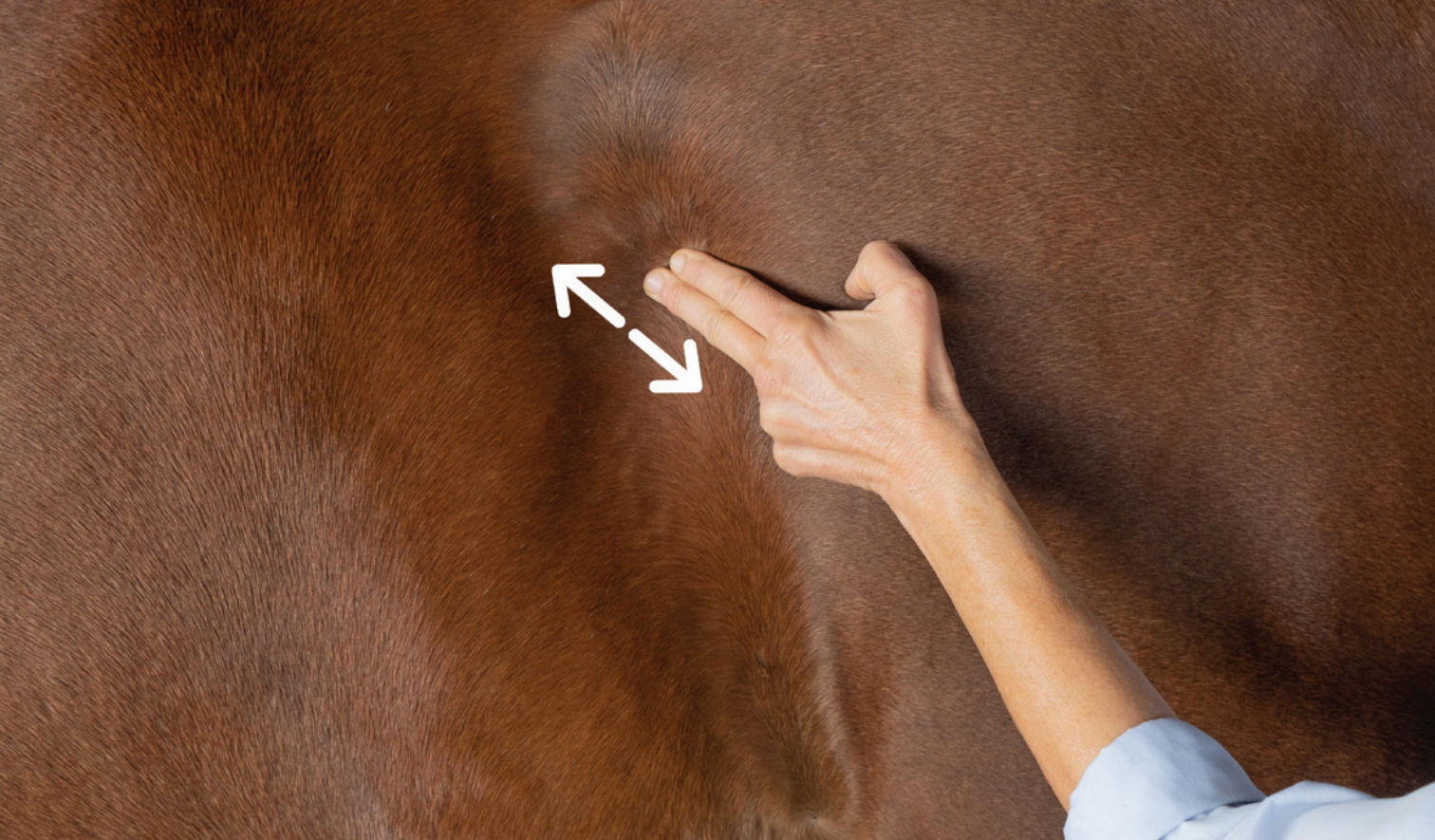


applying the technique, the horse threatens to kick, moves away, pins his ears or obviously doesn't like it—stop immediately.

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 and forth across the tissue without taking your fingers off of them. Use the cross-fiber friction technique for no more

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





▲ 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.

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 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. For Simply

Sinatra, everything became much easier right away and allowed his right hind to come underneath and cross over to the left.

"The [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

Exercise may enhance the treatment because it further lengthens the muscle.

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.

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