

## **Performance Enhancement Through the Use of Equine Sports Massage**

**Trail Blazer, Jan/Feb 1996**

All animal athletes benefit from sports massage. Massage today is just as viable as it was centuries ago as a healing art. Sports massage is divided into maintenance performance massage, pre-event massage, and post-event massage.

The equine athlete can be defined as the backyard horse, the high-level performance horse or contest horse. What all horses have in common is soft tissue pain and injuries. Soft tissues are muscle, ligament and tendons. Muscles are the soft tissues that move joints. Ligaments are the connective tissue that connects bone to bone. Tendons attach the muscle to a bone.

These soft tissues can become dysfunctional due to sprains, muscle cramps, bruising, strains, general muscle soreness, or repetitive stress injuries. Animal athletes can suffer from these symptoms just as human athletes do. In many ways, the mechanism of injury to the animal's body is very similar to that of the human body. As a result of these soft tissue injuries, many owners are seeking well-trained and highly qualified massage therapists to massage their animal athlete(s). The goal of sports massage is to return the animal to optimum performance by providing pain-free function.

Massage is the most natural means of alleviating and relieving pain. We instinctively rub a muscle that is sore or aching. Touch as a healing method appears to have been developed in many cultures. Probably the first recorded written account dates back to circa 2000 BC in China. The Egyptians, Persians and Japanese have all made references to massage in their historical medical literature since about 500 BC.

Throughout history, many systems and theories concerning the management of musculoskeletal pain and dysfunction have come and gone. However, massage has remained a constant therapy for the relief of such pain. Massage therapy styles and theories can be employed for many reasons.

The styles of Swedish massage therapy styles and theories can be employed for many reasons. The styles of Swedish massage and Sports massage each include the techniques effleurage, kneading or petrissage, and percussion. These techniques are applied in specific order, so that they impact the circulatory, respiratory, muscular and nervous systems. The resultant physiological changes are determined by several factors. Three such factors are the following:

**What techniques are employed by the therapist? How much pressure is used in the application of the techniques? In what order or sequence are the techniques administered?**

A maintenance performance massage is a combination of Swedish Massage and Sports Massage techniques blended into a unique choreography. The focus of maintenance performance massage is to impact the specific systems of the body for stress reduction, relaxation and performance enhancement.

The result is an increased circulation to the muscles and tendons enabling them to be more supple and the nervous system is quieted. Applying performance maintenance massage weekly, bi-weekly or monthly will help prevent repetitive use injuries,

enhance endurance by maintaining flexibility, and hopefully prolong the animal athlete's career.

A word to the wise...a maintenance performance massage should be performed on the animal athlete at least three days before a scheduled competition. The animal's body needs time to adjust to all the changes that occur during and after the massage.

Pre-event and post-event massage therapies are each tailored for distinct purposes. These massage styles are to be applied on the day of competition or strenuous workout.

Pre-event massage is used to enhance the animal athlete's warm-up. However, this is not a substitute for the warm-up. The goal is to fill the muscles with fresh well-oxygenated, nutrient filled blood. This increased circulation provides tissue suppleness and aids in metabolic exchange.

It reduces excess muscle and mental tension. The pre-event massage prepares the tissues for athletic competition through the application of kneading techniques such as deep compressions, and cross fiber frictions. Deep compressions are performed in a rhythmic pumping action, which helps to fill the muscles with blood. Cross fiber techniques are done in a perpendicular direction to the muscle fibers, thus helping the muscle belly to broaden.

This further results in the muscle having the ability to contract more quickly with increased strength. The outcome from the blending of these two techniques will enhance performance.

Post-event massage is geared toward reducing the trauma that has occurred during competition and workouts. The objective is to flush the toxins that are released during heavy muscle activity, speed recovery and thus reduce the risk of future injury. Often times, during heavy muscle activity, small micro-tears and other traumas occur to the soft tissues.

The use of cross fiber frictions will help release adhesions or the scar tissue, that can result from these small micro-tears, speeding recovery time. Other techniques used in post-event massage are effleurage and deep compressions. Effleurage, long stroking movements that move the blood through the veins, flushes the toxins from the muscles by increasing circulation to the area. Deep compressions, sandwiched between effleurage strokes, encourage the removal of waste products and sets the stage for the muscle to be replenished with fresh blood.

Endurance riders would find the use of post-event massage advantageous in lowering the heart and respiratory rates in their mount at checkpoints. A post-event massage can be a healthy reward for a great effort.

While the benefits to be gained through the used of sports massage and massage in general are great, it is not a substitute for veterinary care. If there is any question about the health of your animal athlete, please consult your veterinarian.

We encourage all animal professionals and caretakers to investigate sports massage and the benefits gained through its use.

*Authors Patricia Whalen-Shaw, MA, LMT, SMT and Len Montavon, MA, LMT,*