



Guinness painted to demonstrate what's under his skin. Future articles will describe what all the markings represent.

Text and photos by Linda Hazelwood, with technical input from Carolyn Kutchyera.



Megan Nunn demonstrating the effect of the "cat stretch". Left: before. Right: after. It may take time to find the "sweet spot" on your own horse.

Getting under Guinness's skin...

A picture is worth a thousand words, and recently 'body worker' Carolyn Kutchyera, horse owner /dressage maven Megan Nunn, and patient Belgian/Hanoverian Guinness⁽¹⁾ gave us their thousand-words worth and more.

The opening night clinic of Dressage Winnipeg's recent training camp gave us Guinness painted one side to depict his superficial muscles, and the other side to depict the deep muscles. Bony landmarks were noted on each side. Guinness was painted with non-toxic chalk and child's paint, and we caught these pictures outside prior to the clinic, before the humidity started to make his colours run.

In the clinic, Carolyn took time to explain the how all the parts of the horse are connected. A fascia (silvery skin such as you find or covering a piece of chicken under the skin) covers all the organs and muscles like a knit bodysuit.

It is important to be aware of what passes for "normal" in your horse so that if there are any changes from what you see on a regular basis the red flag is raised. Why is there a difference? What is causing it? Horses are prey animals and will mask pain as out in the wild the predator (the wolf or cougar) will note the weakness and make that animal the target. It makes life difficult for us humans because we are the predator and horses will hide disabilities for as long as they can. What makes it more confusing to detect the original location of an issue in a horse is that pain works in a compensation pattern. For instance, a soreness on the left hind will show up in another limb, usually starting with the diagonal limb but not always.

Carolyn pointed out the bony landmarks of the horse and suggested that the clinic attendees relate the landmarks of the horse to their own bodies. For instance, the carpal

joint [commonly and incorrectly referred to as the horse's knee] equates to the human wrist. The front cannon bone is equivalent to our middle finger (third metacarpal), the stifle joint is our knee and the hock is our heel. The horse is the same as most other mammals (including humans and the giraffe) in having seven cervical vertebrae⁽²⁾.

Carolyn also explained the muscle groups and demonstrated to clinic attendees how flexor and extensor muscles work together contracting and relaxing to move bones (or open and close joints), thus creating movement. She suggested that riders train their eye to look at the muscle groups and understand how they work together. For instance, the trapezius contracts to lift the shoulder either forward and upward or backward and upward. If these, and the other shoulder muscles are working together without any restrictions, the leg movement will be smooth and efficient, and working with a full range of motion. A longer stride means more power and therefore a healthier movement.

She described the muscle actions on the underside of the pelvis, hamstrings, quadriceps and informed the group that there is little flexibility in the trunk, and that the neck is the most flexible part of the spine. She quoted from Kirsten Nelsen⁽³⁾ on the importance of lifting the spine.

When going on to discuss massage therapy Carolyn told the group that massage can be carried out on most muscles (apart from the psoas minor and major which are deep on the underside of the pelvis and can only be reached by a vet rectally).

Massage can be as simple as a thorough grooming session, as the stimulation of the skin helps to increase

circulation and provides relaxation to stressed areas. Regular grooming is also a chance for the rider to become familiar with their horse's "normal", in order to be able to detect abnormalities.

When doing a formal assessment prior to a bodywork session Carolyn is looking for restrictions as the horse walks. How do the hips rise, the hocks move, are they the same height? She may put dots on the shoulders of the horse to be able to see if movements are equal. A key point in identifying shortened stride is whether the horse makes equal "A"s with its front and back legs in normal movement. (See right.)

Guinness (still being very patient despite all the attention and the flies!) was then rewarded with some demonstration stretches as Carolyn showed how to hold a limb, relax and breathe, before stretching a little more.

She advised that a limb should never be pulled into a stretch but allowed to arrive naturally, and the limb must never be allowed to drop back to the ground, but be placed there to avoid damage to the stretched muscle. After the session two more horses were brought in so clinic attendees could do "hands-on" practice and ask more questions of Carolyn.

Upcoming issues of Horse Country will carry articles by Carolyn about, firstly, understanding the bones and muscles of your horse and how they interact with your riding, saddle placement, collection, etc. Secondly, Carolyn will demonstrate how to help your horse relax and move better through the use of easy muscle stretches and massages.



Notes: (1) Guinness is 8-years-old, an ex-hunter jumper and now dressage horse, bred by Delbert Grasby).

(2) Most mammals have only seven neck bones (cervical vertebrae), but there are exceptions to this rule. The manatee and the two-toed sloth have only six cervical

vertebrae, the ant bear has eight cervical vertebrae and the three-toed sloth has nine cervical vertebrae. <http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/spinal.html>

(3) <http://kirstennelsenhorsetraining.com/2011/03/17/how-the-horse%E2%80%99s-spine-lifts/>

Thank you to Carolyn Kutchyera, EBW, CCM, Backstretch Equine and Canine Massage. 204-297-9448. carolyn@backstretchmassage.com.

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