

Adjusting the Horse

Veterinary Chiropractic and Dr. Judith Shoemaker.

by Carol A. Loomis

Horsepeople have a new and very powerful tool to improve their horses' training and performance: veterinary chiropractic. Veterinary chiropractic is becoming more and more available, and horsepeople are becoming more and more aware of it.

The reason for this is simply that it works. There is not and never will be any substitute for correct training, and in time, good training can correct a lot of stiffnesses and asymmetries in a horse. But if the horse has a structural problem, veterinary chiropractic adjustment may relieve the problem in minutes—which, if it could be done at all by training, might take months of work. Problems caught before training may also be kept from developing into limitations in movement or outright lamenesses. More importantly, attitude problems in the horse that can arise from his frustration at not being

able to perform as asked or from chronic pain may be prevented.

Veterinary chiropractic can help heal injury by relieving asymmetrical stress on an area and allowing the horse's nervous system to deal appropriately with the problem. It can help prevent injury and illness by making the horse use himself evenly so that he is less likely to strain himself moving and more likely to function properly internally as well. It can free the horse's movement for ease in training and optimum performance and give the horse a sense of well-being that shows in the brilliance of his movement.

Moreover, we usually train our horse athletes for competitive performance. That means we are seeking to get not only relaxed, sound performance but also that extra little stretch that will give victory over the other competitors. To do this, we want to be sure

that the mechanism is functioning to the utmost of its capability, with not even a little physical limitation, just as athletic trainers do with their humans athletes. We want the mechanism to be as good as we can get it.

If one is going to put a horse into training, it may be a very good idea, and a financially sound one, to have the mechanism examined, not only to see that the horse is sound but also to make sure that the skeleton does not have asymmetries that limit movement. Caring for and training a horse costs \$5,000 to \$15,000 a year, sometimes much more, and that doesn't include show entries, hauling fees, equipment costs, or unanticipated veterinary expenses. An initial investment to avoid some potential problems and make uninterrupted and physically trouble-free training more likely seems something we should all consider.

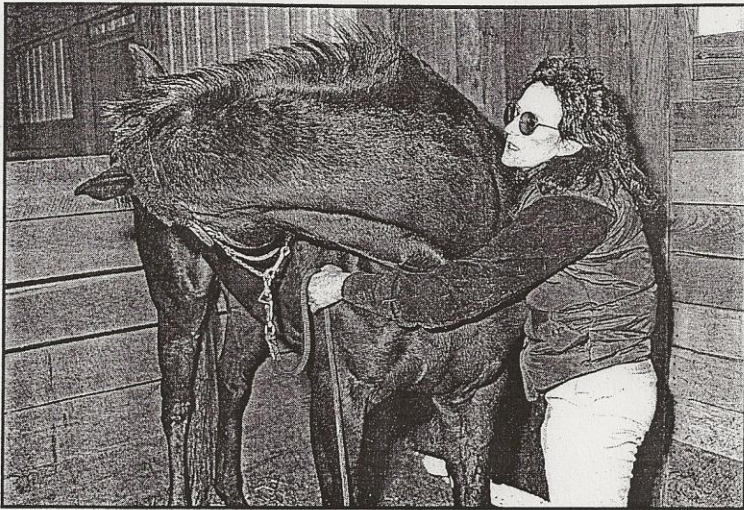


Dr. Shoemaker feels for misalignment in the spine of a young mare who was pushed too hard and too fast in beginning training.

The adjustment is a small movement, guided by knowledge, the success of which is determined by the skill of the practitioner, not by the force.



Photos by Erik Nelson



Horses learn "flybitching" easily and become responsive to the lightest touch. Here, the mare learns an exercise she can do for her own neck and becomes responsive to the practitioner's touch so she can learn base-of-the-neck and back lifts.

Dr. Shoemaker

Dr. Judith M. Shoemaker, a well-known veterinarian from West Grove, PA, and a member of the board of directors of the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association, has been in the forefront of bringing chiropractic into the mainstream of accepted veterinary practice. Her awareness of the need to deal with large structural asymmetries in horses came through her work with acupuncture.

Although its use is relatively new in this country, acupuncture has a long and respected history of over 4,000 years in China and is accepted as an appropriate therapy for a variety of conditions by both the American Medical Association and the American Veterinary Medical Association. Acupuncture is concerned with the electrical energy (Qi, pronounced "kee") pathways through the body that can become obstructed or rerouted so that areas of the body do not function properly. Acupuncture at critical points on these pathways can switch on a shutdown circuit so that the energy flows correctly and the affected parts of the body function properly again.

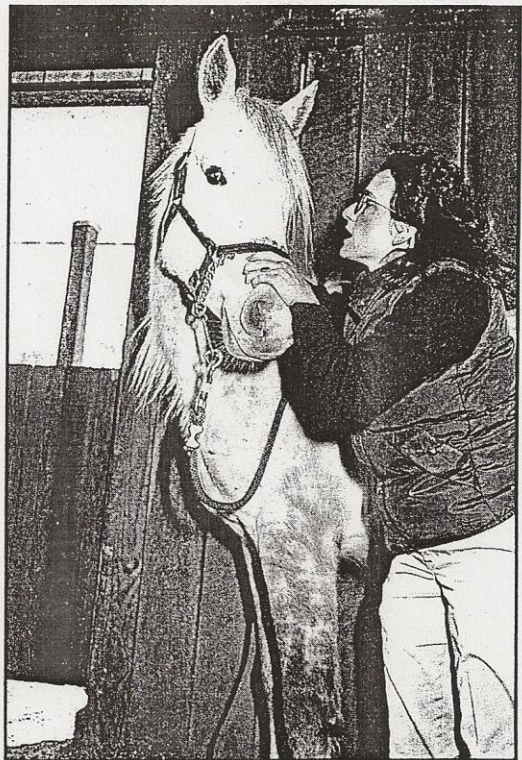
Dr. Shoemaker observed that acupuncture did not work as well, nor did its effects last as long, on horses who had large structural asymmetries or unevenly balanced movements. She began to explore techniques with chiropractors and physical therapists and to adapt and develop those techni-

ques for horses. Dr. Shoemaker points out that the skeleton, or as she calls it, the body "hardware," is the basis of the body's mobility and performance. If the hardware is out of alignment, the biomechanical forces will not be balanced or efficient, and the electrical energy that runs the body will not flow

uninterruptedly; muscles will often go into spasm to hold the misaligned body up, and certain areas will receive stresses they are not designed to withstand. "If the hardware is aligned," she tells us, "many times, the 'software' [the electrical energy] will spontaneously start to run correctly; sometimes, I jump-start it or balance the flow with acupuncture."

Chiropractic has had slower acceptance from the medical community than acupuncture, although conventional medicine is now recognizing its value. As an osteopathic surgeon explained, when the skeletal structure comes out of alignment, muscles go into spasm (called "splinting") to maintain the structure. Before therapy can be undertaken, these muscle spasms must be relaxed. Traditional medicine employs chemical relaxants and then proceeds to physical therapy and/or surgery. Chiropractic relaxes the muscle spasms by realigning the skeleton: as soon as the skeleton is in alignment, the muscle spasm relaxes, because the nerves are relieved and the necessity for splinting is eliminated.

It is true that the alignment can come undone again, but followed by correct physical therapy and maintenance chiropractic as needed, the alignment can be maintained



Dr. Shoemaker tests for range of motion in the neck. The neck is easily fixated by hard hands and neck-shortening riding. It is especially important because it is the electric energy and nerve pathway between the body and the brain.



Above: As the mare lifts the base of her neck, her head lowers.



Left: Lifting the back helps the mare find her way all the way to the ground and "play in the dirt."

and the mechanism developed. "I prescribe drugs if they are needed," Dr. Shoemaker continues, "but I find that with chiropractic, the necessity for their use in my practice has gone down about 70%."

How Do You Know You Need Veterinary Chiropractic?

If you are acquiring a horse and are going to put him into a training program, it is

thrifty in terms of both money and time to have a chiropractic examination as opposed to, or in addition to, the traditional soundness exam. If the horse's skeleton is aligned so that the movement can flow through it freely and symmetrically (and if he is shod so that the bones of his legs are aligned and the joints can bend freely), the horse will perform sound and freely, even if previous pressures had caused certain types of problems in the joints. Conversely, a horse who starts

out sound, even with clean X-rays, may begin to go tense, stiff, restrained, and uneven if there is a misalignment of the skeleton, and this may lead to problems in training and performance and then pressure and damage to the joints.

If you already have a horse, you don't have to look for a big problem, or just for a structural problem—you may not see that. If your horse is not training to the potential of his mechanism, seek help. A misalignment can put pressure on nerves, which can cause illness or behavior problems. Consider a chiropractic examination if your horse is:

1. asymmetrical, even the slightest bit (for example, if he looks at you crookedly, goes through his stall door always to one side, or consistently favors one foot),
2. dumb; if he doesn't learn easily and then gets upset about it, or
3. crabby, which indicates overt pain.

Finally, a misalignment can occur at any time and does not have to be a big thing. Your horse could just slip in pasture and, when he comes in and you work him, feel "wrong" to you. Any time you feel your horse has changed and is performing even slightly wrong, seek help. It is better to correct a small problem quickly than let it grow into a big one.

Finding a Veterinary Chiropractor

Selecting a veterinary chiropractor is as important and difficult as selecting a doctor. Chiropractic adjustment is, as we have said, a very powerful technique; it can very quickly do a lot of good, or, improperly done, it can do real damage. *Never* try to adjust your horse yourself; you could hurt him. *Beware* of individuals who are inadequately educated in either veterinary medicine or chiropractic; advanced training in both fields is necessary. Good and reputable veterinary chiropractors work through veterinary referral or, when brought in by the owner, in conjunction with the horse's regular veterinarian. In most states, chiropractic on animals can legally be done only by a licensed veterinarian or under the direct supervision or prescription of one.

The American Veterinary Chiropractic Association was established to:

1. Provide training in chiropractic care of the animal patient.
2. Provide certification in veterinary chiropractic.
3. Promote the application of chiropractic.

tic in animal health care.

4. Provide information about animal chiropractic care to animal owners.

5. Encourage and sponsor research in animal chiropractic.

6. Encourage interprofessional interaction and cooperation for the betterment of animal health.

To locate an accredited veterinary chiropractor in your area, ask your veterinarian or contact AVCA President Sharon L. Wiloughby, DVM, D.C., P.O. Box 249, Port Byron, IL 61275, or AVCA Board Member Judith M. Shoemaker, DVM, 498 East State Road, West Grove, PA 19390.

When the veterinary chiropractor comes, use your common sense and evaluate the work.

1. Adjustment should be made by hand, at most with the aid of an activator, which is a small, handheld instrument for applying an adjusting thrust. The veterinary chiropractor must demonstrate both knowledge and physical skill in the adjustment.

It cannot be said too often: veterinary chiropractic is an extremely powerful technique. It is practiced from knowledge with precision and accuracy, not by massive force used against the horse, either by grossly cranking on the long levers of the horse's legs to adjust the spine or by hitting the horse's body with heavy hammers, certainly *not* by pulling on his spine with a tractor. There are people who do this; be careful.

2. The horse should have some relief from the adjustment within a reasonable period of time. Most horses will show they like the adjustment, because it makes them feel better. Yes, look at the horse; you'll be able to tell.

3. You, too, must feel good about the practitioner. You need to trust and like the practitioner, as the horse must, as you must your own doctor. The veterinary chiropractor must be available, care, and work with you, your horse, and your veterinarian.

4. The good veterinary chiropractor will take a history of the horse and develop and maintain his or her own clinical record in clear written form.

Of What Does the Veterinary Chiropractic Program Consist?

Dr. Shoemaker's first prescription after adjustment is for shoeing. If the horse is not shod to permit the natural functioning of the foot, no adjustment will hold. Dave



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Duckett, FWCF, who works closely with Dr. Shoemaker, has pointed out in his published work and lectures for farriers that the shoe must be placed according to the internal alignment of the horse's bones and ligaments to reduce stresses to a minimum and for the horse to move most freely and to stay sound. The application of these shoeing techniques is of the utmost importance in the maintenance of spinal alignment and normal biomechanical function, as well as in achieving optimum performance.

The most prevalent shoeing problem leading to misalignment and joint, ligament, and muscle stresses is too long a toe. This is a traditional way in which we have tried to improve our horses' movement, but it is not biomechanically sound and actually impedes the horse's use of his hind legs, back, and shoulders to move long and free. With his heel low and his toe too long, the horse feels as though he is standing with his toes up on an inclined plane and leans his body forward to stand over his toes and keep his balance.

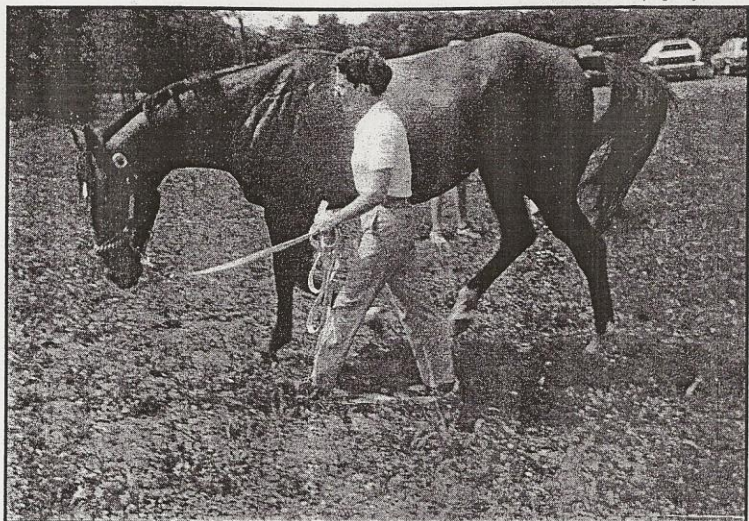
After the adjustment, Dr. Shoemaker finds that in order to keep the horse from reverting to the original problem, she must almost always also teach the horse how to carry his body comfortably again. "Even in our earliest handling of babies," she informs

us, "we take the lead shank and pull on it. The horse, feeling the pull, will automatically hollow his back, tighten his topline muscles, and lift his head." This is a position of fright, resistance, and tension, which becomes habitual. We have to teach the horse to lower his head and lift the base of his neck and the middle of his back. When the horse finds this natural head position again, he will retain it, because he will be more comfortable, and the "nose below the knees" will relax the sympathetic nervous system and lengthen his spine further.

Dr. Shoemaker teaches the horse to lower his head and lift the base of his neck and middle back. It may seem strange to start by working on the neck. We have all heard over and over that you must work your horse from back to front, and some chiropractic is done this way. The neck appears to be the great pathway of electrical energy and nerves between the body and the brain. In children with cerebral palsy, for example, if doctors can get the neck posture correct, there is a significant effect on the mobility of the limbs. It is for this reason that doctors so often use neck braces on these patients. After the neck is released, Dr. Shoemaker goes on to further longitudinal and lateral mobilizations and stretchings of the spine.

PREVENTIVE EQUINE MEDICINE

Photos on this page by author



mechanism, so Dr. Shoemaker is confronted with teaching the rider/trainer, too. Like all good teachers, she has discovered that it is the attitude of the rider/trainer that counts above all. Riders must be free of their own psychological problems (at least in working with the horse), have a philosophy of educating (not just disciplining) the horse, and be flexible enough to adapt their techniques if they are not working. This is the absolute base without which attempted training is futile.

More than this, riders must become aware of their bodies. Dr. Shoemaker tells us that "60% of the horses have the same malalignments as, or compensatory malalignments for, their riders." The rider is part of the moving mechanism, and blockages or pains of the rider must be removed, "or the rider will ride them into the horse." This must be addressed by human chiropractic and physical therapy. The techniques of Sally Swift, explained in *Centered Riding*, help to translate human body balance onto the horse. At this point, the rider can begin the performance training of the horse.

Dr. Shoemaker feels that it is important to get the posture corrections made reflexively and voluntarily on the part of the horse rather than just manipulated, so that the horse learns to adjust himself to postures that are more comfortable. We have all seen horses throwing their heads and rolling in pasture and adjusting themselves. They do many things to help themselves already. We can just add to their arsenal.

Range-of-motion exercises to stretch the neck laterally to prevent fixations in the cervical vertebrae, particularly the third and fourth vertebrae, which tend to fix in resistance to a rider's too-heavy hand are also done.

Finally, Dr. Shoemaker is ready to let the horse exercise his stretched muscles by moving on the lunge. Usually, the horse must learn how to carry himself moving, too. Too often, the defensive resistance of hollow back and high head will reappear as soon as the horse moves forward. Dr. Shoemaker teaches the horse by encouraging him to reach down, rewarding him with praise whenever he does so and driving him forward at the same time so that his spine (including his neck) begins to undulate and the base of his neck lifts and frees his shoulders to move forward. This creates correct/good movement, with parallel cannon bones of the forward-moving hind and forelegs, rather than the unbalanced "good" movement of unsupported throwing of front legs and kicking of toes.

The rider/trainer must continue the handling, exercise, lunging, and then riding of the horse to continue to develop the movement in the horse's now correctly balanced



With the aid of veterinary chiropractic, training will be begun or continued on a horse with a freely moving body and happy attitude, devoid of frustration or pain. ¶

Carol A. Loomis is a horse-woman and freelance writer from Macungie, PA.

The pictures on this page show Dr. Shoemaker teaching the horse to stretch his spine and muscles in motion on the lunge.

