



# *Equine Touch* **The Touch that Heals**

*by Jane Clothier*

**A positive effect on a horse's physical, mental and emotional wellbeing can be achieved through touch.**

**O**ver the past decade, a growing body of horse owners and equine workers have been learning a new form of bodywork for horses: the Equine Touch. In recent years, its influence has spread from the UK, USA, Canada, Europe, Africa and New Zealand to Australian shores. Several hundred Australian horse owners and equine professionals have now learned to contribute to their horses' wellbeing through this form of hands-on bodywork.

#### **WHAT IS THE EQUINE TOUCH?**

Equine Touch is a series of unique, gentle, vibrational moves, made in patterns over specific points across the horse's body, primarily muscles, tendons and ligaments. This whole-body sequence is called a 'body balance'.

Observation and experience have shown that making this particular move – 'the ET move' – leads to a rebalancing of the horse, bringing about positive structural and functional changes, releasing tension, improving blood and lymphatic circulation, allowing brain-to-body re-education and optimising the performance of the horse's various systems and organs.

When these moves are made, they are directly relieving tension while sending signals into the fascia. This is the tissue that wraps the whole body, its organs, vessels and muscles (it is the whitish film you can see running through the fibres of steaks and other meat). Signals are also sent to the nervous system via the receptors in the muscle cells - the body's way of communicating with the brain.

The overall effect is that the Equine Touch triggers the healing processes that are inherent to the horse, whose body is genetically programmed to heal itself so that it can work to its best ability and thereby survive. Think about how our own bodies repair themselves: an open cut on the hand will heal itself without us telling it to do so. This is the natural process of physical

Right: The 'feelgood factor' is obvious as this horse 'licks and chews' while accepting the effects it is feeling.



Left:

The immediate effects of a treatment are usually muscular relaxation and relief from pain.

Equine Touch is about working with the horse, rather than imposing work on the horse.

healing at work. The physical body beneath the skin does the same thing, always striving to get back to what we might call the 'genetic blueprint'. The difference is only our awareness, in that we are so used to seeing the cut heal that we no longer think about it.

## INTRODUCTION

An initial session with an Equine Touch practitioner can involve the following: discussion with the owner, visual observation and hands-on palpation of the horse, a body balance, additional moves for areas of concern, stretching (sometimes, but not always), as well as discussion about other factors affecting the horse.

During the initial body balance, the practitioner usually starts work on the horse's hindquarters, followed by the withers and girth areas, the neck and finally the saddle area. Areas of concern moves that might follow include the hamstrings, shoulders and forelegs, throat and jaw, as well as many others. (The Equine Touch is an evolving approach, meaning that new moves and procedures are being added annually.) Further sessions may involve different moves, according to the responses displayed by the horse.

When a horse receives the Equine Touch, the immediate effects are usually muscular relaxation and relief from pain. Blood

circulation and lymphatic drainage improve rapidly, while toxins and waste products are often eliminated in urine or manure. It's even possible to see the muscles becoming more rounded as the session continues.

Horses can display some or all of the following signs. Most obviously, the eyes can become drowsy. The animal 'licks and chews' as it accepts the effects it is feeling. The head drops and the ears turn back, as if it is listening to its own body. Some will yawn repeatedly. There can be a visible increase in circulation, with raised veins in the lower body and pulsing in the neck. There are often twitching movements in different parts of the body. The horse may raise and stretch its hind legs, or stretch its front legs as it goes up into a cat stretch. Some animals sweat up on the flanks and neck.

Most dramatically, the horse may totally 'zone out' for a few minutes, its eyes open but not seeing, the head nodding or twitching occasionally. Some actually lie down. Geldings and stallions may drop their penis, as when sedated. Many horses urinate or empty their bowels.

The reaction depends on the individual horse, how it is feeling that day, what it is coping with and what is happening around it. What is interesting is that even if horses resist displaying signs of any effects during the session – for whatever reason – they will

*Continued*

## About EQUINE TOUCH



The Equine Touch was born in 1997 through the work of Scotsman, Jock Ruddock, a former wrestler, policeman, entertainment director and human body worker. Jock immediately achieved dramatic outcomes when applying this simple technique to horses. Within the first couple of years, an Austrian vet, who includes the Spanish Riding School horses as his clients, advised Jock to start teaching the approach, stating that "it's simple, easy to learn and it works".

Shortly after, Jock was joined by his wife, Ivana, a Czech Republic veterinarian and University lecturer. Ivana's deep knowledge of anatomy and physiology complemented Jock's instinctive bodywork skills and together they studied, refined and researched the modality. They launched and began teaching an international program of courses, their motivation being to help horses worldwide by educating as many people as possible in this gentle yet powerfully effective technique.

Today, many horses have already been helped as thousands of people worldwide have gained the ability to perform this technique.

Saddlers, trimmers, therapists and other practitioners have discovered how they can blend new skills into their work, for the Equine Touch integrates well with many other practices and modalities. A number of veterinarians are using it alongside their conventional approaches. Training staff involved with sporting horses have seen dramatic results in heightened performance. Others have found simply that the communication and relationship between human and horse can reach a new level of understanding through touch.

## About the Author

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probably do so later that day or after the practitioner has left.

Further effects occur over the following two to three days. The session only triggers the start of the horse's inner self-correction. While changes are happening, the muscles may feel sore and the horse may also feel different and need to readjust its own sense of coordination. For this reason, it is advisable that horses are not worked on the same day and only lightly over following days.

Ultimately, the effect is of rebalancing the whole horse and helping its systems move towards optimum functionality.

### RECOVERY FROM INJURY AND ILLNESS

When the horse is injured or ill, we frequently respond by limiting its movement, either in a small paddock or the stable. While these actions prevent further damage occurring and enable enough stability for tissue to heal, they can also limit some of the body's natural healing processes.

We all know how physically tense we become if something hurts – that tension then makes movement more difficult and the pain increases. This is what is called the 'pain spiral'. Muscular relaxation as a direct effect of Equine Touch breaks that spiral and resolves the tensions that have sprung up elsewhere, caused by the reaction to pain and the restrictions of injury.

#### Lymphatic

When the lymphatic circulation is boosted, inflammation can be reduced because the body is coping more effectively. Inflammation is there to protect the damaged area, but we are already protecting the horse by removing it from the activity of the paddock. Therefore, the injury will heal faster if the fluids leave the injured area. Sometimes limbs have visibly decreased in size by the end of the Equine Touch session.

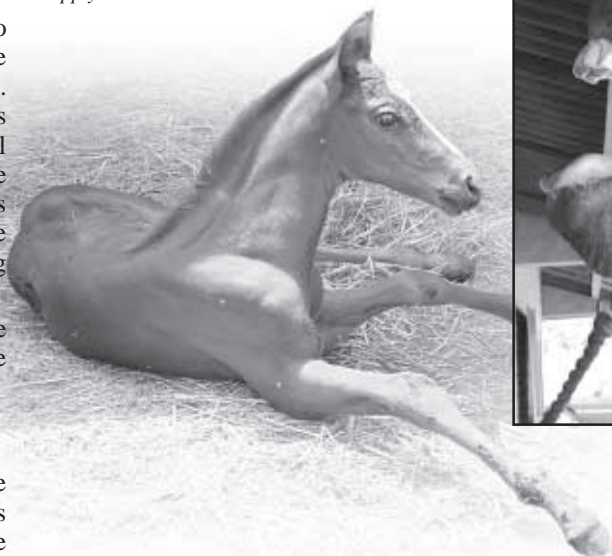
#### Cardiovascular

Blood circulation is also important. We walk injured and ill horses around stable yards to keep them moving and maintain circulation at a healthy level. The Equine Touch steadies the heart rate while opening cardiovascular vessels and improving circulation. This is vital for resting horses.

#### Feeling Good

Does anyone ever feel better while they are stressed? The 'feelgood factor' is important: we all know how frustrated the horse can become when confined, pacing, weaving or just worrying about separation from its mates. Equine Touch leaves the horse more emotionally relaxed, better able to cope with its situation and therefore better equipped to recover.

*Below: There is a beneficial effect for younger animals with non-matured limbs and growth plates, as it can stimulate fluid circulation and improve the oxygen supply.*



*Above: The classic sign of relaxation is the yawning the horses display while receiving Equine Touch.*

*Left: Regular sessions help to reduce stress on the veteran horse's system, enabling it to function to the best of its ability.*



session, their horses suddenly start moving with greater scope, suppleness, range of movement and symmetry. This goes for trail horses just as much as for competition horses.

### MANAGING WELLBEING

The Equine Touch is beneficial to healthy horses throughout their lifecycle. Throughout its days, the horse's body is a repository of all the various conditions and stresses we subject it to, as well as being an outward expression of its own physical and emotional responses

### THE COMPENSATION FACTOR

The effect of past injuries or traumas can remain present in the horse's body. Many of us know from experience that what starts as a blister on the heel can end up as a painful back, as we try to walk without causing more pain. When a horse's movement is restricted, there will be flow-on effects across the body as the horse compensates for a painful injury.

Remember, horses are prey animals that are hard-wired to survive by continuing to move – and therefore escape danger – in adverse circumstances, so most will do their best to continue functioning by moving in this altered way. The difficulty is that often, once the injury has healed, the horse continues to move in the amended fashion, thereby creating additional stresses and pressures in other parts of the body. These may worsen, creating further need for compensation, and so on. The horse becomes locked into a pattern of unevenness with layers of problems creating bigger problems.

Riders report that as the compensatory factors are relieved after an Equine Touch

to the conditions of its life. Everything we do with a horse – hoofcare, dental care, tack fitting, rider issues, training issues, nutrition and environmental factors – can cause stress or pressure on its body.

As a dynamic organism, the equine structure reflects these in the way it compensates or even distorts – bone is living tissue and can change its shape (just think of John Wayne's legs!). Equine Touch can minimise the effect of daily stresses placed upon the animal, working to ensure that the outcomes are positive in terms of the horse's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.

Younger animals can also develop skeletal problems before their bodies have matured. The Equine Touch has a beneficial effect when performed on the non-matured limbs and growth plates, as it can stimulate fluid circulation and improve the oxygen supply. It also encourages correct alignment during these vulnerable phases. The sessions establish a warm and trusting contact with a human, while helping the young animal develop its 'body awareness'. This will help in its future training, as it will have greater

awareness of how to use its body and position its feet.

Veteran horses often thrive on the Equine Touch. Their bodily systems are frequently working less efficiently, meaning they cope less ably with adversity. Many also develop conditions naturally associated with old age. Regular sessions help to reduce stress on the systems, enabling the horses to function to the best of their ability.

Especially worthy of mention is the support given to the horse with degenerative arthritis. Touch one of these horses and you will often find that their musculature is wasted, but rock hard. The tissue is often in spasm due to joint restriction and pain. This in turn causes more restriction, so greater pain and potentially greater ossification occurs. Equine Touch can release the tension and break the pain spiral, while helping the joints through the enhanced supply of nutrients to the cartilage. These horses can be rejuvenated beyond recognition as their body softens, movement frees up, energy levels go up, eyes regain their brightness and coats recover their shine. Life can feel good again.

In horses of any age, the immune system is strengthened with the Equine Touch. Toxins and waste products are shifted, while the function of organs is supported. It has been seen to be successful with horses experiencing allergies, with the histamine reaction reducing as the lymph system works at a more productive level.

#### **OPTIMISE PERFORMANCE**

A significant benefit offered by the Equine Touch is that the performance of healthy horses can be heightened because the approach helps to optimise the functionality of every horse, whatever its strengths.

This approach can support the equine athlete by preparing its body to deal with the tasks asked of it. Once a horse's muscles are working at their limits, the chances of injury increase (think of human athletes pulling up on the track). Muscle tension and spasm, often caused by overstretching, can be the root cause of many problems. On the other hand, fit but relaxed muscles are less prone to being damaged, because they have greater flexibility and the ability to stretch without suffering damaging tears or the painful build-up of lactic acid.

After Equine Touch horses remain more supple, are capable of true flexion in all their muscles, display better post-event recovery times and have lower, steadier heart rates. Optimised performance has been evidenced by Irish event horses competing at the UK's Badminton International Horse Trials – they receive regular Equine Touch sessions although there is clearly nothing wrong with them! A former Barrel Racing World Record-holding horse was also an Equine Touch client. Some Equine Touch students go on to do nothing other than working in



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*The head drops and the ears turn back, as if the horse is listening to its own body.*

the Thoroughbred racer training yards that employ them.

In Australia, one instructor works exclusively with harness racers, both in training and on race days. In these instances, a different sequence of moves is used that 'tunes up' the horse rather than sending it into deep relaxation (which would obviously not be the best option for a horse about to run!). This has the effect of increasing respiration rates and enabling re-oxygenation of the working horse's musculature.

Endurance horses have also benefited from this tune-up effect. Equine Touch instructors and students used this to great effect with horses participating in the 2007 Tom Quilty Gold Cup. Riders reported that it made their horses calmer and more relaxed, providing a greater, steadier ride with far less pulling. Horses' recovery time was altogether shorter.

#### **THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE**

The Equine Touch is known to have a positive effect on horses' physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, so it is no surprise when owners report improvements in behavioural issues with their horses. A percentage of these can be attributed to the resolution of painful problems that were influencing the horse's behaviour. In other instances, it is apparent that the horse is overcoming the memory of an incident or trauma that affected it deeply. Sometimes, but not always, this is a 'muscle memory' – the superficial injury may have healed, but the underlying tissue is still in recovery mode, and the horse knows this.

For instance, during an initial session, the horse may give a distressed response when the practitioner's hands work on the site of an old injury. During the second session, the same horse may remain calm and even welcome the contact in that site, as it now knows the pain is truly over. In a subtle way, it has 'let go' of the emotional trauma.

Positive emotional changes happen in many ways. They cannot all be explained, although many people hold their own views as to the process of emotional healing.

For these reasons, the Equine Touch has been a valuable tool when working with abused and neglected horses. As well as physical problems, these rescued horses have often had severely traumatic experiences that remain with them long after life has changed. They benefit on every level, improving physically while starting to learn that human beings can bring good experiences that make them feel better. The communicative power of touch is often as important as its restorative effects.

#### **WORKING WITH YOUR HORSE**

The Equine Touch is a hands-on technique for your toolbox that you can use to maintain and condition your horses, so they can be the best they can possibly be. It can reduce the risk of injury and speed up recovery from illness or injury, if and when it does happen. Just think: there will always be something you can do to help while waiting for the vet to arrive.

It can relax your horse and help it to offload stresses that may have been taken on minutes, months or even years ago. Your relationship can improve and the bond strengthen, as you grow more in tune with their wellbeing. In training, the horse can be helped to use its body to the best of its potential. When competing, muscles working to their limit will be at lower risk of injury. After competitions or work, the horse can recover more rapidly.

In short, you can use the Equine Touch to benefit nearly every area of your horse's life and activity. This pretty much meets the brief for the Ruddocks' goal: to see as many people as possible using this simple but powerful discipline to help their horses. To help horses by educating humans. 🐾