

## **Horses Inside Out – The Back and Beyond**

**Marguerite Old, REMT**

Horses Inside Out's vibrant painted horses jumped out at me years ago while I was mining the internet for equine anatomy visual aids. Gillian Higgins, owner and founder of Horses Inside Out, seemed to rise above the rest. With artistic flair and an eye for anatomic detail she brought the inside of horses to life. Her quest for excellence in what she does shone through in her work and my decision to "cross the pond" to The Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester, UK to attend the 2014 Horses Inside Out Annual Conference was easy.

Based on the theme "The Back and Beyond", Gillian and her team secured an impressive lineup of veterinarians at the top of their fields to delve into the evolution, biomechanics and health of the equine back. They also took this theme a step further to include an Olympic trainer's approach to training for good back health, as well as examining the possibility that symptoms of back pain may be stemming from gastric ulcers and the importance of understanding core stability for riders.

In addition to content, what impressed me the most was the collegial atmosphere and the diversity of my 200 fellow conference-goers. I met and shared experiences with equine bodyworkers, saddle fitters, coaches and veterinary professionals from all over Europe, Western Canada, the US and, of course, Great Britain. All were educated, positive and extremely keen to learn. It made me think of how many equine professionals in North America could benefit from a similar opportunity on home soil.

I'll share a few of the concepts and ideas that resonated with me the most:

From Dr. Theresia Licka, MRCVS, University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna:

The most important role of the back is to couple the movement of the forelimbs and hindlimbs at all gaits, with the damage limitation being more challenging at the gallop due to increased dorso-ventral flexion. If there is lameness the back has

to take on an additional function which is to aid in distributing forces from the painful limbs to the non-painful limbs as Dr. Sue Dyson went on to cover in detail.

*As a Registered Equine Massage Therapist the key message for me is to ensure our horse's caudal spine is massaged and stretched regularly to keep the dorso-ventral flexion and extension movements elastic, fluid and to decrease the chances of injury.*

From Sue Dyson MA, Vet MB, PhD, DEO, FRCVS:

Dr. Dyson dove further into the subject of how lameness can masquerade as a back problem. Primary back pain from a poorly fitting saddle, a difficult jump or a fall can cause limited hindlimb propulsion and back stiffness, however lameness can cause the same symptoms. Discovery of a root cause calls for a very detailed assessment taking everything possible into account such as tack assessment, viewing the horse ridden at the sitting and rising trot, rider assessment (are they crooked?), lunging in circles at all gaits, careful palpation and the list went on. The method was exhaustive but necessary

*I was pleased to hear Dr. Dyson include manual bodywork/physiotherapy as part of the overall assessment of the back, with the goal being to relieve the pain so that the underlying lameness could become more visible and therefore, treatable.*

From Dr. Wilfried Bechtolsheimer, Olympic Dressage Coach:

Dr. "B" as he is affectionately known, coached his daughter Laura and her horse Mistral Højris, aka "Alf", to Olympic Team Gold and Individual Bronze at the London, 2012 Olympics. He believes in a "fair partnership" approach to training, don't overwork a horse; if they are good at something don't needlessly work at it. Instead, focus on things that need improvement and don't wait until they are too tired to do it, this will only cause frustration and could lead to injury. Also, give them a variety of things to do, including hacking and as much time outdoors as possible.

*I loved Dr. B's common sense horsemanship and he was a delightful speaker. He believes that as equine health professionals we need to ensure that we are always*

*communicating with riders and coaches well, and that confidentiality, reliability and trust are of paramount importance. I also thought it was interesting that he invested time to learn some massage techniques himself, which he uses regularly on Alf.*

I was truly grateful to have had the opportunity to attend this conference. It was an excellent event and I walked away a more knowledgeable practitioner. Gillian Higgins' enthusiasm and dedication to equine therapy was contagious and I hope to find myself back in 2015, and look forward to learning about Training, Therapy and Performance!

Marguerite Old is a Registered Equine Massage Therapist (REMT) and operates Equine Edge Massage Therapy in the Greater Toronto Area and southern Ontario.

<http://www.horsesinsideout.com/conference2014.html>

<http://www.equineedge.ca/>