



Hey Neighbor



For The Love Of Horses

By Frank J. Buchman

Horse performance can improve with massage therapy

Massage may improve a horse's performance and overall well-being.

Although some might have reservations about the statement, and others could even smirk at the connotation, it is proven that massage can benefit horses and humans.

Jacqueline Wilt, a 10-year certified equine massage therapist from Paxico, discussed the practice in workshops at the recent Equifest in Wichita.

"Massage is a non-invasive therapy that has become a popular and widely accepted alternative therapy for humans as well as animals," explained Wilt, who operates the Equine Training Center for Equine Massage Therapy.

"Equine is dedicated to the betterment of equine health and performance, public education and awareness and instilling the highest level of skills and judgment in students," said Wilt, who is also an animal science graduate and registered nurse.

In addition to conducting classes at the Paxico location, Wilt teaches at other locations around the country.

"The muscular system is responsible for movement," she said. "Whenever a part of this system is not functioning at its best, problems can arise."

When a horse has performance problems, lack of enthusiasm for a job, is

fussy or just plain acts uncomfortable, an owner should consider massage therapy.

"Massage therapy seeks to achieve maximum muscular performance, thus increasing athletic potential, comfort and well-being of the horse," Wilt said.

Benefits of massage are increased range of motion, reduced muscular spasms and decreased muscular recovery time after exertion.

"Performance problems may be alleviated and overall behavior improved using massage therapy," Wilt said.

In addition, Wilt related that massage can reduce strain on the heart by increasing circulation, pro-

mote release and removal of toxins in tissues, assist in relief of pain and inflammation and sometimes even prevent injuries.

"Massage may also improve digestion and feed efficiency," Wilt added.

Specific problems which massage can help include lead change difficulty, poor balance, shortened stride, stiff necks, resistance to bend and flex, refusal of commands and negative response to hand and leg cues.

Deep tissue, or sports massage, is taught by Wilt, who uses her hands and body to press and move muscle tissue. She demonstrated several massage strokes on a horse.

"I use different strokes, depending on the area of the body to be worked and the acceptance level of the horse," Wilt explained. "I use my hands and thumbs along with my body weight to apply light, moderate and heavy pressure to tightened muscle tissue."

With her fingertips, she made small circles along the backbone from the withers toward the rump. The general procedure is to begin with light pressure, gradually increasing

the working depth and then lightening up again. The more intense the pressure, the smaller the area to be worked.

She suggested talking softly while working and watching for reactions that indicate pleasure or discomfort. Quivers could mean a tender spot, and pressure needs to be lightened.

Massage is safe for horses of all ages. However, it is not recommended in horses with cancer, open wounds, fever, coughing and nasal discharge.

"If a horse is sick, the body does not need something else to think about," Wilt said. "Mas-

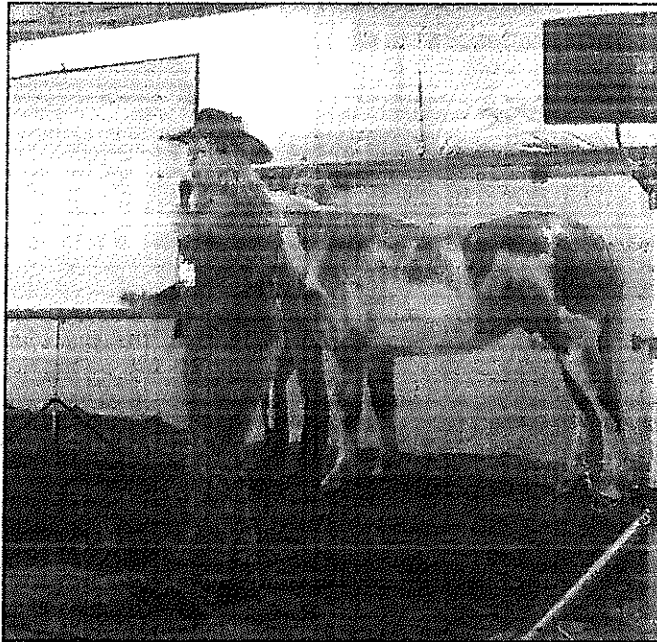
sage can even spread cancer."

However, massage may be used to help a horse with cancer to feel better, and such therapy is used on human cancer patients to help alleviate pain and discomfort. In such a case, massage should be used with recommendation from a veterinarian.

Wilt emphasized that massage is not intended to replace proper veterinary care.

Actually, routine brushing and combing are forms of massage and will help relax horses after stressful or strenuous work.

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Jacqueline Wilt, equine massage therapist from Paxico, demonstrated massage strokes to help improve a horse's performance and well-being in a workshop at the recent Equifest in Wichita.

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While she is interested in training horse owners to do massage, Wilt made several recommendations about what to look for when hiring a therapist to massage a horse.

"Education must include anatomy as well as knowledge of strokes," she said. "They need to have experience handling horses, be willing to work with veterinarians and farriers and respect the boundaries of massage."

A massage therapist should not diagnose problems or prescribe needs. "However, it is important for them to be willing to educate the owners about problems and treatments," Wilt added.

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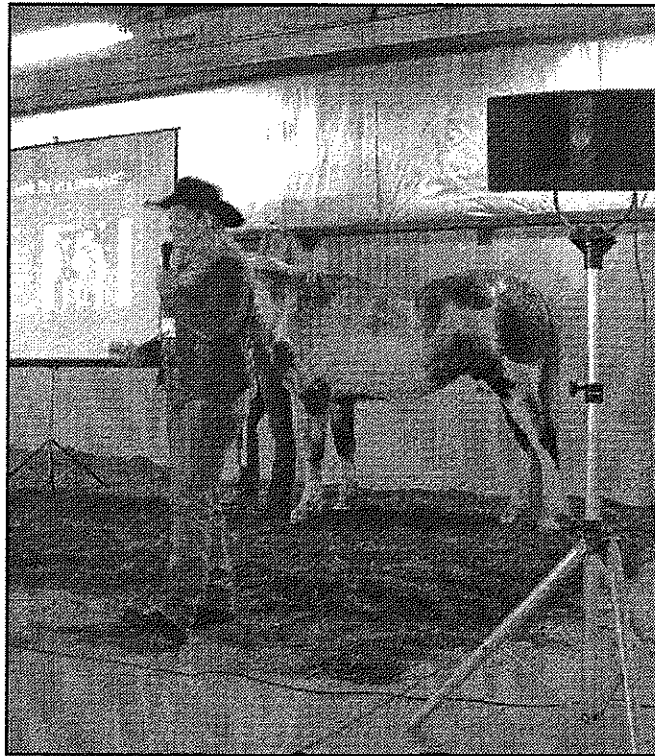
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