

# IS YOUR HORSE 100%?

OR  
IS HE  
STUCK  
OUT OF  
SHAPE?

MARGRET HENKELS



Resolve Painful Limitations in the Equine Body  
with Conformation Balancing and Fascia Fitness



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# 4

## Your Hands on the Horse



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## Safety in Bodywork

Before you begin, it is important to consider some general safety rules and work manners:

- The Number One Rule: Only work with the horse's full agreement.
- Always be aware of the horse's power and ability to move instantly.
- Safety is first priority at all times.

### Joe: A Cowboy Hat Incident

**W**hile doing a session alone in a well-maintained barn with wide aisles, I worked with a calm, older Thoroughbred named Joe. At the owner's direction, Joe was tied to a rebar pole in the stall door (using a quick-release knot). The air was still. I was working at the hind end, standing to the side of the horse as I teach my students to do, when a sudden gust of wind lifted a white straw cowboy hat off its hook and carried it six feet in the air. As the white hat sailed past us both, the startled horse pulled back and sank on his haunches. I easily stepped farther from him. Joe bent the rebar, although the quick release knot held. The hat slid to the ground when the gust left.

This is a good example of a time I was very glad to be standing at the side rather than behind the horse!

- Never insist on meeting a goal.
- Prevent commotion: machines, dogs, and interruptions included.
- Pay attention to the horse's eyes and ears for his approval.
- Work in a large area; choose paddocks, corrals and wash-rack areas.
- Do not stand between the horse and a wall or fence.
- Keep your feet directly under your shoulders.
- Stand to the side of the horse; be able to step away.
- Avoid putting your head over parts of the horse's body, especially his head.
- Be aware of weather conditions: wind, storms, and air pressure affect horses.
- Your headgear should always allow peripheral vision.
- Allow the horse to move and turn if he chooses; it helps the release.
- Verbally encourage the horse to support his feeling of change; be present for him.
- Come to the horse with a quiet, open, and peaceful mind—not anger or tension.
- Never hurry work.
- An interruption during a stroke or release should be avoided—it insults the horse.
- Check jewelry for sharp edges or, better still, remove any.

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- Chemical odors are off putting; consider using only mild castile soap.
- Wash hands before working—and between working different horses.
- Use eye protection when handling the tail. Hair whip-lash is painful.
- Working at scheduled feeding times is not advised; meals are priority for horses.
- Bodywork should wait until fresh wounds, skin conditions, or diseases are healed completely. When there is illness in the barn, wait until the crisis is over.
- Feet-stomping or moving.
- Head-turning or swiping.
- Tension in body.
- Back-arching.
- Eye showing anxiety.

### Approval Cues

- Gurgling sounds in the guts or stomach.
- “Still Point” inner gazes.
- Licking and chewing.
- Muzzle-twitching.
- Eye-blinking and staring.
- Hind-leg flexing.
- Yawning, snorting, sighing.
- Stretching out.
- Head-dropping.
- Leaning into the contact.
- Lips quivering.

## Guarding

I use the word “guarding” for horses that respond aggressively to contact, or might do so. A non-judgmental approach helps you remember that the horse’s main concern is being protected from insensitive handling or intolerable contact. Judgment creates tension during bodywork and the horse feels this immediately (see p. 140 for telepathy).

Patience and acceptance bring the best results. When a horse is guarding, only use contact that he will accept and do not consider this a loss of authority on your part. Advancement in contact results from *trust*. Watch for “approval cues” that indicate fascia changes, keeping an eye on his eye and ears.

### Irritation Warning Cues

- Ears go back or flatten.
- Tail-swishing.

## The Body Scan

Your Conformation Balancing hands-on work starts with the body scan. In the scan, you examine the horse’s body using a flowing motion with your hands, from neck to hind. This fluid motion of feeling the horse’s body begins your session with the horse.

The body scan identifies sensitive areas, acquaints you with the horse’s condition, and informs the horse





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## HOW TO SCAN: A Photo Reference Guide



◀ **4.1** A palm is highly effective in all sensitive areas and delivers the most heat to adhesions. While it may look too easy, a palm is profoundly effective. Here, I feel the ribs, often a very sensitive area for horses.

▶ **4.2** A palm easily creates a smoothing flow for the horse, which is very relaxing and allows him to sink into his sensations while enabling me to feel the horse's structure.



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◀ **4.3** “EZ,” a Quarter Horse, is the model for the scan. I use a palm to feel the fascia under the skin. A scan can start anywhere on the horse; but I don’t choose difficult areas. EZ is relaxed and attentive.



▲ **4.4** EZ enjoys feeling my contact as my palms flow over his neck. The horse learns in the scan that this contact doesn’t hurt or irritate him. The contact flows without jerks or interruption.



▲ **4.5** I sweep EZ’s neck in the direction of the hair.



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## HOW TO SCAN (CONTINUED)



◀ **4.6** The shoulder scan relaxes EZ and his head drops. I cover the entire horse, both sides, in the scan.

▶ **4.7** Sensitive areas, such as the barrel, are treated with care in the scan; EZ is very relaxed.



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▲ 4.8 The hip is scanned, still using the palm.



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## HOW TO SCAN (CONTINUED)



▲ 4.9 Hindquarters are often sensitive; watch for guarding.



▲ 4.10 EZ is not sensitive in his flank; always stand to the side of the horse here.



▲ 4.11 I scan the gaskin; notice how relaxed EZ is.



▲ 4.12 The hock can be a sensitive area; my contact is at the horse's approval. I can offer the contact later, again.

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▶ **4.13** Most horses approve of tail contact when initiated without force. Sensitivity to tail contact is a clue to hind end imbalance.



▲ **4.14** EZ drops into a Still Point in the body scan. The horse changes even during the scan! This soft, flowing scan can be part of handling routines and create easy, progressive changes for the horse.



◀ **4.15** This poll change on EZ looks like nothing is happening. We know that horses don't relax like this with deep attention unless it's worth their time! Again, I never interrupt a Still Point change.