



Because Movement Is Everythingsm

The *SENSE Method*sm Newsletter for Horse and Rider

Summer 2003

HAWKEYE – ROCKING TO COMFORT WITH *SENSE*sm

by Mary Debono

The palomino gelding was slowly led into the barn by his owner, Catherine, who had purchased the five-year-old gelding just six months earlier. Although a veterinarian had initially cleared him for purchase and his X-rays were clean, Hawkeye was never quite right. He moved with a short, tentative stride. Even at rest, he seemed uncomfortable, constantly shifting his weight from one diagonal to the other. Over the previous six months, Hawkeye had been examined by three veterinarians who had come to the conclusion that the horse was chronically muscle sore and probably

had navicular syndrome.

With a possible diagnosis, treatment was begun, but Hawkeye's movement and comfort level remained unchanged. Upon learning that the *SENSE Method* was movement re-education, Catherine brought Hawkeye to a *SENSE* workshop.

Wendy, a *SENSE* student, was assigned to work with Hawkeye. Although he was a good-natured and quiet Quarter Horse, the palomino proved challenging. Any time Wendy attempted to touch him, he moved away from her. He may have been worried that her contact would

exacerbate the soreness he felt.

A nervous system distracted by pain and tension, such as Hawkeye's, is unlikely to learn and improve. Since such a nervous system is busy defending itself against the threat of more discomfort, it can't process new sensory information, and the on-going muscular contractions can drown out other sensations. Therefore, Wendy's first step was to quiet Hawkeye's nervous system by eliminating the background noise of chronic muscular tension and anxiety. This would give the horse the sensation that it is

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WHAT IS *SENSE*sm?

by Mary Debono

Both horses and humans develop inefficient habits of moving, with some of the joints and muscles doing more than their share of the work. Soreness, fatigue, stiffness, and increased risk of injury can be the result. Since each one directly affects the other, the movement issues of both horse and rider must be addressed.

Wishing to provide both horse and human with relief, I blended my skill as a Certified *Feldenkrais Method*® Practitioner for people with my knowledge of animal movement and behavior, creating the *SENSE Method*.

The *SENSE Method* is based on the work of Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, a pioneer in the field of improving human movement and maximizing potential. *SENSE* uses gentle, hands-on movement to remind animals and humans how they can move in ways

that reduce strain, with all body parts working together harmoniously. Freer, more balanced movement is the result. This reduces wear and tear on joints and can improve long-term soundness, even for older individuals. Horses become comfortable and happy in their work.

The ability to help both horse *and* rider provides a distinct advantage, helping to interrupt the vicious cycle of asymmetry and stiffness that often occurs between horses and their riders.

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Special thanks to Pamela Sourelis, Editor of the *SENSE Method* Newsletter. Pam is a Certified *SENSE* Practitioner/Instructor in Woodstock, IL. Her Website is www.sourelis-animalhealing.com.



Mary Debono and Spotzy

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CIMARRON FLIPS FOR THE *SENSE METHOD*sm

by Katrina Woollatt, *SENSE Method* Practitioner, Langley, B.C., <http://Rafalet.tripod.com>

Well, not exactly... Earlier in the spring, before the grass paddocks opened for the summer, a neighbor kindly offered to let my two horses have a run in her nine-acre field for a little while in the evening after her horses came in for supper. Against my better judgment, because I wasn't sure of the footing, I took my stallion Oporto out and let him go. He happily set off for a cautious canter a few times around the perimeter, taking some detours to check things out. After a little while I called him in, and he obediently made his way to the gate (it was supertime after all), carefully negotiating the creek on the way.

Reassured by Oporto's thoughtful navigation of the field, I then led Cimarron, my retired 28-year-old Thoroughbred gelding, into the field, crossed the creek with him where the other horses crossed, and made our way across the slope to where I had released Oporto. To my horror, as soon as I released him Cimarron turned and galloped on a direct course back towards the gate where we had entered. My heart sank when I realized he wasn't slowing down for the creek, nor crossing where we had come across. He jumped it in fine form—and came to an abrupt stop as he landed in mushy, heavy, knee-deep clay on the other side. He half-somersaulted over his nose, crumpled, and lay still. I just knew he had broken his neck.

But wait—he was slowly getting up . . . I was rooted to the spot, watching now for the dangling leg that would confirm a broken bone. But no, he freed himself from the mud and started walking to the gate. With relief and disbelief flooding over me, I hurried to catch up with him, noticing as I did that he had a mild hesitation in his gait. I immediately led him to his

paddock, afraid he might seize up at any moment, and examined him carefully. Unbelievably, I could find nothing to cause concern. I dug out the Rescue Remedy and homeopathic Arnica, dosed him appropriately, and waited around for a while to see how he would cope. Within a few minutes, he wanted his supper and seemed only mildly shaken up.

The next morning when I arrived to give the horses their breakfast, Cimarron could barely move his left foreleg. He seemed completely unable to move the leg towards his body and could

only move it outward a very small amount. But he could move it back and forth enough to hobble around precariously, lifting his foot only about an inch off the ground. But I still couldn't find any heat, nor any swelling. It was now Sunday and my vet was away for the weekend, so I decided to wait until the next day to call him, rather than bring in a strange vet. I had to work most of the day, so I gave Cimarron more Arnica and reluctantly left. When I returned in mid-afternoon, there was no change in Cimarron's condition.

Since I still couldn't detect any heat or swelling, I thought I would give him a brief *SENSE* lesson to help him be more comfortable. I quickly discovered that he was quite sensitive where his withers leveled off into his back, and I could imagine the crunch that his shoulder area must have experienced when he came to such a sudden stop. I started out with the idea that gently moving his sternum would allow me to address the ribcage and spine to relieve the withers area. While Cimarron initially accepted this, he soon made it clear that he wanted me to concentrate on his hindquarters

instead. His tail was extremely rigid, so I focused on helping him feel how each tail vertebra could move relative to its neighbors. His tail quickly softened, which allowed me, through the tail, to gently move his spine in a way that suggested that the vertebrae in his back could also move relative to each other, as well as his ribs of course, since they are attached to the vertebrae. I also showed him a few other, brief movements that further helped him rediscover how his back and ribs could move, and how his back and ribcage could move in relation to his limbs. He just blissed right out while I was doing all this.

I kept the lesson brief so as not to overwhelm him, and I left him snoozing until supertime. The next morning, he greeted me near his shelter and I had to laugh because he was almost gleefully waving his left foreleg at me! His range of motion had improved by about 80 per cent and he was getting around almost normally, with just the odd trip on the uneven ground. By that evening his range of motion had improved to about 95 per cent, and by the following morning he was pretty much back to normal. I know how *SENSE* can help

an animal, yet when I see responses like this I'm still overwhelmed and delighted.

Although there's no way of knowing for sure, the thought has crossed my mind that Cimarron survived his fall with so little damage because of his previous *SENSE* experiences. When I was kicked in the head by a difficult horse a few years ago, and knocked unconscious, it was suggested that the force and angle of the blow should have caused more damage than it did. My *Feldenkrais* practitioner suggested that because I had been taking regular *Feldenkrais* lessons (which, like the

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“He half-somersaulted over his nose, crumpled, and lay still. I just knew he had broken his neck.”

“Did Cimarron survive his fall so well because the *SENSE Method* had taught his body how to go with the flow, too?”

ROCK YOUR HORSE

by Mary Debono

The quieter you become, the more you will be able to hear.

Benefits for Your Horse

Gentle, rhythmic rocking may help:

- Reduce your horse's muscular tension
- Your horse stand and move in a more balanced way

Benefits for You

- Reduce muscle tension
- Enhance body awareness
- Soften your hands
- Improve your riding

Practice with a Friend First

Before you do *SENSE* work with your horse, I strongly suggest that you work with a human partner so you can fine-tune your touch and pressure based on your friend's feedback.

Stand facing your human partner's left shoulder. You will be perpendicular to each other. Putting a hand on your partner's left shoulder, rock her a little side-to-side.

Put your hand down.

How did this feel for your partner? Did she resist the movement? How did it feel for you?

Now let's do it again, but this time we'll walk through the steps together.

Stand as before. Let your hand settle gently on your partner's left shoulder, "melting" to conform to her exact shape. Wait a moment. Take a breath and let your hand soften still more.

Now gently rock your pelvis forward and back. You'll feel yourself rock over your feet while your hand stays soft. With your hand resting on your partner's shoulder, you are just inviting her to come along with you. You are not pulling or pushing.

Do the smallest rocking movement you can make, just feeling your partner's weight shift slightly over her feet. What is the least amount of effort you can use?

What is different this time? How does it feel for your partner? For you?

Trade places with your partner and repeat. How does it feel to be the one

rocked? As the one who is doing the rocking, how can you make it more pleasant and inviting?

Now Partner up with Your Horse

For the following exercise, you will need a horse.

For both you and your horse's sake, lower your arm and rest many times throughout this exercise.

Stand facing your horse's withers. Rest a hand *very lightly* on the withers. Let your hand settle gently on your horse, "melting" to conform to his exact shape. Wait a moment. Take a



Rocking your horse

breath and let your hand soften still more. Make sure you are not gripping your horse.

Slowly rock yourself forward and back. Move from your pelvis and feet, keeping your hand soft. With your hand resting on your horse's withers, you are just inviting him to move with you. You are not pulling or pushing your horse.

Please note that the rocking is done very, very lightly. *If your horse resists the rocking movement, please do not continue, as your horse may have pain or structural instability.* Consult a veterinarian if you have any questions

about your horse's soundness.

Feel how little effort it takes to shift your horse's weight slightly. *Find the smallest rocking movement you can make, rocking your horse as lightly as possible.* What is the least amount of effort you can use? How are you rocking yourself? Are you moving evenly over both feet? Is one foot in front of the other? If so, which one? Alternate putting your right foot in front, then your left foot. Then stand with both feet side by side. Which position feels the most comfortable?

Are you breathing comfortably or holding your breath? Can you relax both shoulders? Can you soften your jaw and let your teeth come apart slightly? Are your eyes hard and staring, or can they soften too? Is your elbow fixed or moveable? Is your neck stiff or free to move? All of these details will play a role in both your comfort and your horse's comfort and willingness to move. The same concept applies to riding. *The freer you are to move, the freer and more willingly your horse can move.*

You are looking for just the smallest shift in your horse's weight from one side to the other. If you look at your horse's front fetlocks, you should see a very subtle sinking of the fetlock on the side that you are shifting the horse's weight toward, and a slight upward movement on the side that is getting lighter. Both forefeet, of course, remain on the ground.

When the movement is slow and easy, your horse will be better able to feel subtle differences in shifting weight and will also be less apt to resist you. If you rock too quickly or too strongly, your horse is likely to brace. Remember, it takes *very little pressure* to induce rocking. Find the *smallest* movement you can make. The less force you use, the more inviting it feels to the horse. Also, when you do it slowly and gently, your horse's nervous system has time to choose the most efficient way to accept the

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Hawkeye – Rocking to Comfort*(Continued from page 1)*

possible to feel differently. Simply put, *quieting the nervous system sets the stage for learning and improvement to occur.*

My experience has shown that many horses that disliked being touched will allow contact with bony areas, such as the withers. Skeletal contact is usually not as threatening to them as muscular contact, especially when there is a history of sore muscles.

Understanding this, Wendy gently placed her hand directly on Hawkeye's withers. She began to lightly rock Hawkeye back and forth, *using the lightest possible movements.* During the course of the *SENSE* workshop, she had seen how rhythmic rocking helped many horses release unnecessary muscular contractions. Wendy's instincts were accurate, because not only did Hawkeye accept this contact, he began to visibly relax, lowering his head and half-closing his eyes, the tension around his mouth and nose dissipating. It appeared that the *rhythmic oscillations were interrupting Hawkeye's usual habit of muscular tightening.*

Catherine was pleasantly surprised at the turnaround in her gelding's demeanor. For six months he had resisted human contact, and even grooming with the softest of brushes was met with displeasure.

After rocking him very lightly from the withers for a short while, Wendy placed her other hand on Hawkeye's croup and rocked him from both places simultaneously. Hawkeye continued to look content.

Wendy wanted to support the gelding's overworked muscles by gently lifting and holding them, but if she stopped the light rocking movements, Hawkeye became agitated. So she used one hand to continue to rock Hawkeye from the withers while she placed her other hand gently on the horse's right shoulder. It took a bit of coordination

to maintain a steady rocking rhythm, but Wendy began to ever so slightly lift Hawkeye's tight shoulder muscle. The rhythmic rocking helped quiet Hawkeye and reduce his tendency to tighten his muscles.

Once Hawkeye was at ease with her touch, Wendy gradually stopped the rocking movements and placed both hands on the horse's shoulder muscle, about a foot apart. She delicately and slowly brought her hands together, slightly *shortening* the muscle. Her intent in doing so was to *relieve the horse's effort.* Wendy used her hands to provide support to a muscle that was overworking, thereby making Hawkeye's muscular contractions unnecessary.

This approach can serve two purposes: One, it gives the horse the feeling that someone else is doing the work of the muscle, so the continuous firing of its contractions can cease; and two, it brings awareness to an area that may have been "tuned out" and lost from the horse's body awareness.

When she felt the muscle soften, Wendy gradually let go, careful not to abruptly abandon her support. She then moved her hands a few inches over and repeated the process. All the while, she was aware of Hawkeye's reactions. As long as he stayed calmly attentive, she would continue. But as soon as Wendy recognized an increase in anxiety, be it shallow breaths, a tightening of the mouth, or a flattening of his ears, she would return to rocking him and supporting an area that she knew he was comfortable with.

It is important to note that the *SENSE Method* engages horses in the process of learning how to move more comfortably and efficiently. Wendy's intent was not to manipulate Hawkeye's muscles but to make him curious about how his body felt and moved. She was helping to increase his awareness of all the different parts of himself since a tendency to tighten muscles unnecessarily often means

that these areas have been "tuned out" or lost from the body's self-image. Keeping the movements pleasurable is essential to this process.

Wendy worked very slowly and began to alternate rocking with holding various muscles. Sometimes she did both together, using one hand to rock Hawkeye while the other hand gently *lifted* a muscle. Wendy used two hands to softly lift Hawkeye's rock-hard forearm muscles and then ever so slightly rolled them in the direction that they moved easiest. She wanted him to feel how these muscles could soften and slide. Wendy continued lifting muscles all along Hawkeye's body and was pleased to feel Hawkeye's muscular tension continue to give way under her hands.

But even more satisfying was that Hawkeye had repositioned himself and adopted a comfortable-looking, square stance. He no longer shifted his weight continuously, trying to get comfortable. Instead, he now *was* comfortable because his muscles were no longer working against him. The muscles were free to contract when needed and to relax when at rest.

Hawkeye was now ready to learn how to move more freely. Wendy touched and moved the gelding in specific ways so he could feel how his different parts could work together smoothly. This would give his nervous system the opportunity to form new neural connections to these areas, allowing for more comfortable, efficient movement.

When Catherine walked Hawkeye after his session, gone were the mincing, painful-looking steps. Instead, the palomino gelding moved with a confident stride, his hind feet reaching beyond the hoof prints left by his fore feet.

Catherine reported that the improvement in Hawkeye was apparent under saddle as well. His stride was longer, and he went forward willingly. Catherine planned to build on Hawkeye's progress with additional sessions from a local *SENSE* practitioner.

Cimarron Flips for the SENSE Method (Continued from page 2)

SENSE Method, teaches movement education), it might be that my body had learned how to "roll with the punches," minimizing damage. Did Cimarron survive his fall so well because the *SENSE Method* had taught his body how to go with the flow, too?

Note from Mary:

As a matter of fact, Cimarron's previous *SENSE* experience probably did save him from serious injury. By fine-tuning Cimarron's awareness and use of his body, he was more likely to make split-second corrections in his body positioning to minimize the impact of his fall.

In addition, *SENSE* sessions provide sensory information that helps the nervous system operate at a higher level. When you improve the functioning of the nervous system, you improve the physiological condition of the whole individual since it's the nervous system that controls all the bodily systems. A better functioning nervous system may equal faster healing.

What is SENSE?

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The *SENSE Method*:

- Is a holistic approach that provides horses and riders with relief from strain and tension, helping them discover more comfortable, efficient, and elegant ways of moving.
- Addresses the *causes* of discomfort and movement restrictions.

SENSE means Strength with Elegance through Natural Somatic Education.

SENSE helps small animals too! See www.SENSEmethod.com/dogscats.htm to learn how *SENSE* can help your dog, cat, or rabbit.

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Rock Your Horse

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shifting weight. This is how learning occurs. If the movement is rushed or forced, there is no time to learn a better way and the old, possibly inefficient and uncomfortable habits are exacerbated.

The lighter the movement, the more both you and your horse will feel and the greater the benefits to both of you.

Rocking to Improve Your Riding

As you continue rocking your horse, change where you initiate the rocking movement from. Start the movement from each of these places in turn: your pelvis, feet, back, shoulder, elbow, wrist, hand. Then return to moving from your pelvis. How does each place compare?

Put the back of your free hand on the small of your back. Tuck your pelvis under so that the small of your back rounds out. Rock your horse. How does this feel?

Stick your pelvis out so that your lower back has an arch to it. Rock your horse. Do you need more effort to produce the same movement?

Rest your free hand.

Now allow your pelvis to be in a neutral place, neither tucked nor sticking out. How does this feel? How easily can you rock your horse now?

Tighten each of these places in turn: your hand, wrist, elbow, shoulder, back, pelvis, and feet. How does this change the movement? Can you still invite the horse to move with you, or do you feel you are pulling and pushing now?

Now relax each of these places. How does softening each of these places affect your movement?

Rest with your arm by your side.

Now rock your horse using your other hand. How is it the same? How is it different?

Now use both hands to rock your horse. How is it the same? How is it different?

Rock your horse from his other side.



Rocking your horse with two hands

How is this side different? Which side did you choose first? Why?

You can learn what you used here to improve your riding. In the saddle, think of moving from your pelvis, keeping your hands soft. Use the lightest aids possible. How softly can you ask your horse to move forward or to halt? Remember how easy it was to influence your horse's movement on the ground? The less you do, the less background noise both you and your horse have to sift through, and the more responsive you both can be.

Suggestions for How Long to Do This Exercise

- Explore these *very light* rocking movements for no more than three to four minutes.
- Please stop and rest whenever you or your horse needs to.

Suggestions for When to Do This Exercise

- As a way to connect with your horse and help reduce tension before you groom and tack up.
- After tacking up and just prior to mounting, to help your horse feel more balanced and ready to accept your weight.

Special thanks to Deni David and her horse Lorenzo for demonstrating how to rock your horse.



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