



# Because Movement Is Everything<sup>sm</sup>

## The SENSE Method<sup>sm</sup> Newsletter for Horse and Rider

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### The SENSE Method and Wobblers: Ritchie’s Story

By Mary Debono

**L**ionhearted, commonly called Ritchie, is a 17-year-old Standardbred who was diagnosed with arthritis and compression of the neck vertebrae, otherwise referred to as “adult-onset wobblers.”

Ritchie’s problems began in 1998, when he suffered the first of three falls while being galloped on hilly terrain. Doreen Campbell, who had known and loved Ritchie for years, finally was able to acquire him on April 29, 2001. Doreen was well aware of Ritchie’s problems. He walked clumsily and stumbled frequently; he rope-walked behind; he dragged his left hind hoof; his tail was partially paralyzed; his spine, when viewed from behind, appeared to veer off-center; he had arthritis in his legs; his hindquarters showed signs of atrophy; his hooves were in very poor condition; and he had a sour disposition.

Ritchie’s veterinarian, Dr. David Tresser, suspected a neurological problem, and he recommended that Ritchie be examined by Dr. Barrie Grant, who is considered the world’s leading authority on wobblers. With the help of neurological testing, X-rays, a radiological body scan, and a myelogram, Dr. Grant diagnosed enlarged and arthritic neck vertebrae with compression between C6 and C7, a hot spot at the sacral vertebrae, arthritis in his legs, and damage

to both front navicular bones. Because Ritchie had no significant impingement on his spinal cord, Dr. Grant okayed a conservative approach to his problem, but cautioned that Ritchie might never be rideable.

While many people would have written such a horse off, Doreen’s intent when she purchased Ritchie was to help him as best she could. Before Doreen was introduced to the SENSE Method, she employed a trainer in the hopes of improving Ritchie’s balance and coordination. The trainer spent several sessions walking Ritchie over specially arranged ground poles and around various objects. While this can be very useful in many cases, in Ritchie’s case the strategy backfired.

Since Ritchie did not have the awareness of how to use his body efficiently, he often stumbled over the poles. The trainer felt that repeating the lessons would help Ritchie improve. But what happened was that she *inadvertently kept reinforcing what he couldn’t do*. Instead of improving, Ritchie seemed to worsen. One day, Ritchie had simply had enough. He uncharacteristically kicked out at the trainer, broke free, and ran home. Doreen got the message, and the well-meaning training sessions came to an end. Ritchie’s experience underscores the pitfalls associated with asking a horse

to do something without teaching him how to do it easily and well.

Fortunately, Doreen was introduced to Los Angeles-based SENSE Method practitioner, Amy Tompkins. Amy gently helped Ritchie rediscover how to move in a balanced, comfortable way. With the SENSE Method, we suggest movements that fall within the ability of the horse so that the horse experiences freedom of movement rather than restrictions. Laying the foundation by teaching the horse how to use his body well creates the conditions for movement to be free and pleasurable. More challenging movements are then gradually introduced and the horse learns to do them easily and comfortably. (See “The SENSE

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## **SENSE and Wobblers...**

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**Method Makes Training Easier”  
on page 6.)**

After each *SENSE* session, Ritchie's attitude improved, his body was relaxed, and he walked with greater ease and confidence. Even his tail began moving!

In September of 2001, Doreen found pasture boarding for Ritchie where he could be out 24 hours a day. However, it was in San Diego County and was too far for Amy to commute to. Since I live in San Diego County, I began to work with Ritchie.

I was told that a former owner of Ritchie had kept his head tightly restrained when he was ridden. When Ritchie first started to receive *SENSE* sessions, his neck muscles were excessively taut and sore, even though the restraining hands and gadgets had long since left the picture. My experience is that such a pattern of tension and limited movement becomes a habit and often persists even when there is no longer a reason for it.

Ritchie, like many horses (and people), held his neck stiffly in some areas and overused other areas, which may have led to the development of arthritis in those places. Since he didn't know any other way to move, each time he moved his neck he aggravated his arthritis.

One of the first things I did with Ritchie was to show him how he could have more movement in his sternum and ribs, and how this newfound movement in his ribcage could create more freedom in his neck. To help Ritchie's nervous system feel the connection between

his neck and sternum, I put a hand lightly on one of his cervical vertebrae while my other hand gently brought movement and awareness to his sternum. As his sternum moved, I would feel the movement in his neck. More importantly, Ritchie felt it too. **(See Reducing the Strain in Your Neck on page 5.)**

Then I showed Ritchie, whose neck muscles were now noticeably softer, how he could move each section of his neck independently and easily. My intent was to help Ritchie discard his



**Doreen Campbell and Ritchie (on the right)  
about to embark on a trail ride with friends  
Sharon Dial and Breeze.**

inefficient way of moving (which he had most likely developed as a way to deal with his previous rider) and instead learn new, more comfortable and efficient ways to move. Simply put, I wanted to increase his movement options.

Since Ritchie had difficulty negotiating hills, I did some *SENSE* work while Ritchie stood on sloped ground, both uphill and downhill. I then worked with him as he walked up and down gentle knolls. I wanted

him to feel how using his sternum and ribs to round his back helped his neck soften and his hind end engage effortlessly. I pushed through his skeleton and supported various parts to help him feel how easy it could be to walk up and down slopes when his whole body supported the movement.

Ritchie can now reach around and scratch his flanks, something he hadn't been able to do in a long while. His balance, ease of movement, and best of all his disposition, have improved a great deal.

Ritchie's hindquarters have muscled up since he now uses them to power himself along. His overall movement is freer, and his stumbling is virtually non-existent. Holding up his feet to be trimmed is no longer a problem. Ritchie stopped snapping at people who touched his neck. And very significantly, he happily takes Doreen out on the trail.

How can we sum up just how the *SENSE Method* helped Ritchie? When a horse uses his whole body efficiently in movement, the strain on individual parts is diminished. Now that Ritchie has learned to involve his whole spine, sternum, and ribs in movements, the strain on his neck vertebrae has been reduced, and his

neck muscles are no longer taut and sore. While he may still have arthritis there, he no longer has the discomfort and movement restrictions that usually accompany it. Most people think of arthritis as being inevitable and progressively degenerative, but the *SENSE Method* interrupted the destructive cycle of tension, stiffness, and wear and tear on joints. And helping horses move comfortably and efficiently can greatly

**(Continued on page 3)**

## SENSE & Wobblers (from p.2)

improve their athletic ability and quality of life.

It is important to note that the lifestyle Doreen provides for Ritchie does much to support his progress. Doreen has taken classes in the *SENSE Method* and works with Ritchie in between his sessions with me. Knowing that a horse can only be as free-moving as his rider, Doreen receives both unmounted and mounted sessions with me to ensure that she is balanced and free in the saddle. Ritchie lives on the beautiful 20-acre ranch that Doreen and her sister Linda now own. The ranch, *Valeroso*, offers natural horse boarding in Temecula, CA. Ritchie's shoes have been pulled and he is trimmed by barefoot trimmer, Dani Lloyd.

*This article is not meant to represent all horses that have wobbler's, as each case is unique and the symptoms can vary in severity. Please consult your veterinarian if you have any questions or concerns.*



## What is Wobblers?

By Mary Debono

The term "wobbler" is commonly used to refer to animals that have malformed cervical (neck) vertebrae that are impinging on the spinal cord, causing various degrees of problems with coordination and balance. Some horses are born with this problem, referred to as congenital Cervical Vertebral Malformation.

However, many horses develop wobbler syndrome later in life. Their problems often stem from impingement on the spinal cord as a result of the development of arthritic lesions (bony growths)

**T**iki, my 7-year-old Arabian gelding was bred, and broke to ride, for a racing career. When I bought him as a three year old, he was very resistant to being girthed. He would toss his head, flatten his ears, bloat, twist his body, and exhibit any number of behaviors to show his discomfort. Because Tiki really enjoyed his *SENSE Method* sessions, I decided to see if I could recondition his response to the girth. I hoped to change his response from one of dislike and discomfort to one of acceptance, and maybe even enjoyment. So I began doing *SENSE* with him only when I was girthing him up. At first I used the

## Saddling Made Easy

By Janice Mills, Certified *SENSE Method* Practitioner

loosest girth hole and would begin the session by working on the movement in his sternum. Within a few sessions, Tiki began to relax as soon as the saddle, or surcingle, was placed on his back. Over the period of about a month, I continued with the slow tightening of his girth interspersed with the *SENSE* session. One day, I just tightened the girth at the very beginning of the session and began gently moving his sternum side-to-side and in small circles. There was no resistance or bloating. It was wonderful



**In addition to making saddling easier, *SENSE* helped improve Tiki's movement, allowing him to win top honors in sport horse classes.**

to see the change in his attitude, and acceptance of his tack. Naturally, this accepting attitude carried over into his work.

A few weeks later, Mary and I had the opportunity to really appreciate how Tiki had learned to associate being girthed with the ability to relax and allow his sternum to move freely. Mary was doing a *SENSE* session with Tiki, and when she got to the sternum she asked if I had noticed how it was reluctant to move. I then remembered we had been doing all our sternum work using the girth. As soon as Mary held a girth on Tiki's sternum, it moved easily. What a great gift to give my horse that he could associate his tack with being able to move more freely!



# The *SENSE* Method Helps a Thoroughbred Racehorse

By Janice Mills, Certified *SENSE* Method Practitioner

When my horse, Easy, began to show signs of neurological problems, I contacted Mary Debono, creator of the *SENSE* Method. I was impressed with Mary's ability to help my horse coordinate his movement so that his parts worked together more harmoniously. This reduced stress and strain on his individual structures and led to more comfortable, balanced movement. Mary's whole-horse approach does not focus on the horse's conformation faults or a specific veterinary diagnosis. As she supported my horse's habitual patterns of movement, and then gently introduced more effective options, my horse seemed to be visibly improving.

This experience led me to enroll in Mary's certification program for *SENSE* Practitioners, which involved four five-day intensive trainings and at least one hundred hands-on case studies. Since I needed a number of horses to work with during my internship, I contacted thoroughbred racehorse trainer Susan Bump to see if I could work with some of the horses she had in training.

I knew I would be getting excellent feedback on any changes or improvements from Susan since she also rides the horses in her barn. One of the first things that I noticed about Evening was that he rarely took full breaths. Not only was he a somewhat shallow breather, but he also tended

immediately, he began to take deeper breaths. I moved my hands higher on his ribcage with the intent of having him breathe not only into my hands but also into his back. Soon he was taking deep full breaths—sighing, licking, and chewing. The rest of the session focused on giving him the experience of a softer more supple musculature and connecting with his skeleton in such a way that he would be able to move in a functional manner.

The following day, Susan reported that Evening felt much more fluid. There was also a change in his warm-up. Susan usually tried to begin each exercise session by jogging Evening to loosen him up and check his soundness. However, he was uncomfortable jogging and preferred a small canter instead. The day after his *SENSE* session Evening jogged easily through the entire warm-up, accepting posting on either diagonal equally. During his gallop, he made smooth changes and felt strong on both leads. A couple of days later, he raced a great third (he had to go six wide to pass horses) and recovered well.



**Thoroughbred racehorse, Evening Majesty, enjoys a romp.**

Fortunately, I also had the best farrier and veterinary support.

Sadly, I later had to euthanise my horse due to complications from a fall, but I was hooked on wanting to learn more about *SENSE*, and how I might be able to help other horses gain more freedom of movement, comfort in their environment, and soundness.

to hold his breath when something distracting happened. Lacking the ability to take full breaths can deprive the blood of its optimal amount of oxygen. This can result in a decrease in strength and stamina, and an increase in anxiety. With this in mind, I began the *SENSE* session by placing my hands on Evening's ribcage and following the movement of his breath. Almost



**Show your animal friends how much you love them! Check out Mary's *SENSE* Method workshops hosted by Rancho Coastal humane Society on Sunday, February 8th!**

Canine workshop: 10am to noon;  
Feline workshop: 1pm to 3pm.  
Contact RCHS at (760) 753-6413  
or [www.rchumanesociety.org/](http://www.rchumanesociety.org/)



# Reducing the Strain in Your Neck

By Mary Debono

**H**umans, like horses, get into habits of movement where they overwork certain parts and under-use other parts. The overworked parts then get burdened by excess stress and strain. Fatigue, stiffness, soreness, arthritis, and/or acute injuries can result from this disproportionate work. The following movement lesson is designed to help you distribute your effort more appropriately, reducing strain in your neck.

If any of the positions or movements feel uncomfortable, please discontinue doing them.

1. Lie on your back with your legs long. Notice how much space is behind your lower back. You can put your hand under your back to get an idea of how much space is there. Notice which vertebrae touch the floor and which are held off the floor.
2. Lift your head to look at your feet. Notice how high your head goes and how much effort it takes to lift it. Don't hold your head up; simply lift and lower your head once.
3. Bend your knees so that your feet are flat on the floor.
4. Cross your hands, one on top of the other. Place your crossed hands directly over the center of your chest, near the upper part of your sternum (breastbone). The heel of your bottom hand should be directly on the sternum.
5. With your hands in this position, press down on your sternum. Please be gentle, not forceful. Think of your sternum going both closer to the floor and moving down toward your feet. Breathe deeply and press down on your

sternum as you exhale. Do this several times.

6. The next time you exhale, lift your head a small amount as you press on your sternum. Do this movement a few times, slowly and gently. Notice if you can feel your sternum move downward as you lift your head. Imagine that the movement of the sternum initiates the lifting of your head. Only do what's totally comfortable for you to do.
7. Rest for a few moments with your knees bent.

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*“Using ourselves more efficiently...can help eliminate back and neck pain.”*

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8. With your knees bent and feet flat on the floor, cup your hands around your lower ribs. As you exhale, gently press down on your ribs, so that they move both closer to the floor and closer to your feet. Now lift your head as you exhale and press down on your ribs. Can you feel the connection between your ribs moving downward and the rounding of your lower back? You probably will feel your lower back get closer to the floor as you press down on your ribs. Imagine that the movement of the ribs downward is what makes your head rise up off the floor and your back round. Do this movement slowly several times.
9. Rest for a few moments and take a few nice, deep breaths.

10. Straighten your legs. Cross your arms over your chest and simply lift your head to look at your feet. How does this movement compare to the first time you lifted your head? Did you raise your head higher? Was there less effort in your neck when you lifted your head? Did you feel your ribcage participating, allowing your back to press against the floor? Notice how much space is behind your lower back now. Has your back gotten closer to the floor? If so, this indicates that unnecessary muscular tension has been reduced.

This movement lesson can help you experience how the larger parts of yourself, such as your ribcage and spine, are designed to do most of the work of moving the head. This allows the smaller, more delicate muscles of the neck to be free to sense and direct movement. When the neck muscles are free, the neck can turn more easily, and compression and other degenerative changes may be reduced.

As with our horses, using ourselves more efficiently in this way reduces strain and can help eliminate back and neck pain.



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](http://www.sourelis-animalhealing.com).

## The SENSE Method Makes Training Easier

By Pamela Sourelis, Certified SENSE Method Practitioner and Instructor

When I first met Nikos, the 18-year-old bay thoroughbred who would become my equine companion, he was so quiet and gentle, he would follow his rider out of the ring like a puppy dog. But under saddle, he carried his head high and bent to the left, his back hollow, rushing, rushing, his rigid body twisted into a crescent in a clear attempt to avoid pain.

When Nikos became mine, I had just begun my SENSE training with Mary Debono, and so I shared SENSE with him every chance I got. It took time, but he began moving more freely, more comfortably. With time, he no longer rolled his eyes back in his head under saddle. His sternum and ribs softened, and he could lift his strong back; his long, beautiful neck softened, straightened; he was able to bend, to thrust his hind legs deeply under him, to swap leads without tossing his head. A horse who had been so of balance that he could barely canter right in an arena, who would rush off at top speed, tilting into corners like a speeding motorcycle, had slowed down, was now comfortable in the canter in either direction. What had been a cacophony of sound was now a symphony.

Nikos and I have been together five years now, and he is comfortable enough in his body that we generally do SENSE together about every three months. He continues to surprise me from time to time: About six months ago he demonstrated an extended trot I had no idea he had. He is 24 now, relaxed, more balanced than he's ever been, fluid in his movement.

Several months ago, a natural horsemanship trainer friend of mine was giving Nikos and me a lesson. She is a wonderful, soft trainer, and

although Nikos already has excellent ground manners and is very soft under saddle, I thought it would be fun to take a few lessons with her. In this lesson, she was showing me how to use a soft rope to teach a horse to give to pressure. She placed the rope around one of Nikos' legs at a time, gently pulled, and Nikos lifted his foot. Then she draped the rope around his hind end, gently pulled to one side, and Nikos stepped over with his hind legs. It took very little pressure. As I said, Nikos is very light.

Then the trainer placed the rope around Nikos' barrel and gently pulled to one side. She wanted him to move laterally, but he didn't. She applied more pressure. Still Nikos stood, clearly thinking, beginning to look perplexed.

Knowing my horse, I said that I was sure Nikos knew what she was asking him to do, but that for some reason he was unable to do it. I continued watching him. She applied more pressure to the rope. Nikos clumsily stepped over with his hind legs. She released and tried again. He stepped over with his front legs, just as clumsily. Aha! Now I understood. I told my friend again that Nikos was unable to do what she was asking. She told me, very kindly, that he had to learn.

"But," I said, "You aren't teaching him. You are asking and asking, but you aren't teaching him how to do what you are asking."

From watching Nikos, it had become apparent that he, for whatever reason, was feeling a disconnection between his front and his hind. He could move the front, he could move the hind, but he simply could not perform the simple lateral move she was asking for (a movement that he ordinarily has no problem

with). "Let me show you something," I said and asked her to remove the rope.

Standing behind Nikos, I placed one hand on the left side of his tailbone and gently pushed toward his head. When I released, just as gently, I watched for the tiny head bob that would indicate the movement had traveled along his spine all the way from hind end to front. *There.* I then stepped over and placed my hand on the right side of his tailbone. Again, I gently pushed, gently released. Again his head gently dipped and raised.

I stepped away. "Now try again," I said. My trainer friend placed the soft rope around Nikos' barrel and applied gentle pressure, asking him to step to the right. He gracefully stepped over, crossing his left feet in front of his right. The trainer's eyes widened. She moved to the other side, placed the rope around Nikos' barrel, applied gentle pressure. He gracefully stepped to the left.

"See," I said, "you had to *teach* him how to do it. I don't know why, but he was disconnected today." Perhaps the rope itself, draped as it was around his middle, had disconnected his front end from his hind. (In much the same way that a girth does over time.) My pushing through his tailbone, sending a gentle force up along his spine, had reminded Nikos of the connection between front and back, and in less than a minute he had been able to gracefully and willingly comply with the trainer's request.

