

Holding the upper

Could craniosacral therapy help to overcome a multitude of problems in event horses? British Olympian Sharon Hunt believes so. JULIE HARDING finds out more about this non-invasive, hands-on therapy

EVENT rider Bente Hardman's three-year-old Ad Lib just wouldn't come right. The gelding had trapped a foot under a fence and wrenched his whole frame trying to escape.

Over three years Bente contacted every therapist she could think of to get him right. Chiropractor. McTimoney chiropractor. Osteopath. Farrier — for remedial shoeing. But nothing worked. Even Bente's own treatment — she is a qualified equine sports masseuse — proved fruitless.

One day she fell off Ad Lib and the pain in her hip prompted a visit to a craniosacral therapist. It was a fateful trip. In a few days Bente was pain free and so she reasoned that if such a treatment could work for her wouldn't it also be effective on Ad Lib?

Equine craniosacral therapist Este van Heerden treated the son of Catherston Liberator and he is now a changed horse according to Bente. The treatment even stopped him headshaking, which Bente believed had begun due to irritation of the trigeminal nerve.

"Craniosacral therapy [CST] is so gentle that the horse accepted it when he hadn't been happy being manipulated by other people. Este realised that he was offset in his whole body and she went in under his radar and he relaxed into the treatment."

Bente has been so impressed with the results of this paradoxical therapy — soft hands/powerful results — that in April she intends to train as a practitioner herself by attending a course run by US-based equine craniosacral guru Maureen Rogers who travels to the UK just twice a year.

"I'm already practising on my own horses as through my massage qualifications I know their anatomy so well," says Bente.

So what is craniosacral therapy? How does it work? And was Ad Lib's amazing transformation a lone successful result?

Definitely not, says Shastra Raven, a CST practitioner who treats humans, dogs and horses.



Shastra Raven practises craniosacral therapy — a hands-on method known to have benefitted both people and horses

‘I can “feel” the animal’s system so that I can find maybe a twist or a vertebra that is out of alignment. You can tell where the energy is not flowing’

"I have treated a horse with a twisted tail that straightened almost completely, brought relief to a 30-year-old horse with arthritis who no longer needed to be on

Bute; I've helped horses with gut problems and transformed the behaviour of a very naughty horse who I found had his C4 vertebrae out of line."

This is a heavily edited list of Shastra's success stories, the result, it appears, merely of her laying her hands

on a horse as she practices CST. To a population used to being pummelled, pushed, yanked and filled full of powerful drugs for a quick fix, such an apparently benign action obviously has its sceptics.

"Some of the builders I treat for bad backs can be the most sceptical but within

six weeks they are usually transformed," says Shastra.

However, when treating two-legged or four-legged patients, beneath her still hands Shastra is feeling "the rhythm in every bone and organ and tuning in to the cerebrospinal fluid which runs up and down the spinal cord. By tuning into this I can 'feel' the animal's system so that I can find maybe a twist or a vertebra that is out of alignment. You can tell where the energy is not flowing freely".

Not everyone is a fan of craniosacral therapy. When his Hong Kong Olympic mount Gandalf was sick (he later died) Mark Todd called in a practitioner but says: "I can't say it had any noticeable effect."

Olympian Sharon Hunt, though, is a huge supporter and at present she uses nothing else on her large string of horses.

Sharon met Maureen Rogers at Badminton in 2009 just after her top horse, Tankers Town ('Jasper'), had refused to go into the startbox, incurring elimination.