

We Recommend These Massage Products

They're costly, but they can give your horse a suppling massage.

Last month we described how to give your horse a relaxing massage with curry combs and how to supple his muscles with movement, something everyone should do for their horse. Now, we'll tell you about three more expensive devices designed to give your horse a more rigorous massage.

For more than four months we used the Equilibrium Massage Pad, the Equilibrium Massage Mitt and the Equisports Massager in our barn. We worked on more than half a dozen horses, ages 4 to 10, of various breeds, ranging from 15 hands to 17.3 hands. All were in regular training, from a green 4-year-old to four horses competing in eventing.

During our field trial, we found the Equilibrium Massage Pad effective in relaxing and suppling the back and the Equisports Massager effective in suppling the back (especially the lumber region), neck, shoulders and hindquarters.

FOUR VIBRATING MOTORS. The Equilibrium Massage Pad and Massage Mitt are designed and manufactured in England and marketed in the USA by World Equestrian Brands. The Pad was released in early 2008, and the Mitt was introduced in 2011.

The Massage Pad has four vibrating motors, while the much smaller Massage Mitt has two vibrating motors. Both products have a high-density foam filling that carries the massaging vibrations over the entire surface.

Each also has three settings (low, medium and high). The manufacturer recommends 30-minute sessions, six days a week, to achieve the best results. The Massage Pad



The Equilibrium Massage Pad has a 30-minute cycle at three different settings, which our horses enjoyed.

runs an automatic 30-minute program that you can stop at any time. The Massage Mitt doesn't have an automatic program.

You can use either device as a warm-up prior to work or to help cool down the horse after work. The manufacturer recommends using the medium setting before work and medium or low after.

Robin Moore, of World Equestrian Brands, said that they developed the Mitt after customers asked for a less-expensive product that they could use on more than just the horse's back. She said that horse owners who use the Mitt "generally prefer to use it in conjunction with the Massage Pad in one therapy session. They usually find 10 minutes to be the optimal time that they're able to use the Mitt before their arm becomes fatigued." She said 10 minutes is enough time to give the horse a massage benefit.

"The majority find that using the Mitt in a stroking action (in the direction of the hair growth) evokes a more relaxed response from the horses (judged by visual signs such as a lowered head, half-closed eyes, slower breathing), rather than hold-

ing the massage mitt in one area of the body," added Moore.

The manufacturer submitted the Equilibrium Pad to testing by Myerscough College in England. The researchers there used the "arch-and-dip test," a standard test of flexibility in horses' backs introduced in

2006. The test involves the use of a pressure stimulus to generate a reflex in the horse's back. Pressure applied to a specific region results in the horse "dipping" away from the pressure. A more flexible back allows the horse to exhibit a greater ability to dip away from the pressure source. Similarly, the arch test involves the application of pressure to the horses' midline, to stimulate an upward arch reflex in the horses' back, away from the pressure.

The researchers used 10 horses who were competing at the preliminary level or above in eventing. Five were the control group, who received no treatment at all during the six-week test. The control group showed an average

"dip" improvement from .032 centimeters to .035 centimeters, while the group treated with the Equilibrium Pad six days a week showed an average improvement from .035 centimeters to .052 centimeters.

For the "arch" test, the control-group horses showed decreased flexibility, from .05 centimeters to .042 centimeters, while the treated-group horses showed improved flexibility, from .042 centimeters to .064 centimeters.

The Myerscough study also showed that the horses treated with the Equilibrium Pad showed an increase in stride length during the testing, from an average of 2.15 meters to 2.27 meters. The control group increased only from 2.24 meters to 2.25 meters. The test horses also demonstrated a lower heart rate while wearing the Equilibrium Pad during similar 30-minute periods, indicating they were likely more relaxed.

USE AT HOME OR AWAY. The Myerscough study and our field trial each indicate that the Equilibrium Massage Pad is an effective massage tool, a product that has a



The Equisports Massage might feel heavy, but we felt it had a good therapeutic effect.

beneficial effect on the sensitive tissues of the horse's back. It's also compact and lightweight, so it's easy to use or to take on the road.

Plus, the battery charge should last for eight hours (16 sessions), meaning it's easy to charge it at home before leaving for a competition and then be confident of its duration, even if you use it on several horses. We took it to two competitions and used it on three or four horses during four days.

The drawback to the Equilibrium Massage Pad is its price of \$495.

The Mitt is far less expensive and far more flexible tool, but we're not convinced it has an effect beyond relaxing the horse.

DEEP-TISSUE MASSAGE. The original Equisports Massager was manufactured by Morfam, a company that makes other massage devices. About a decade ago, Dick Huntzinger, of Phoenix, Ariz., was at an Arabian horse show, where he first saw the device. Huntzinger had been searching for a deep-massage unit for horses, and liked what he saw, so he and a fellow retired aerospace engineer revamped that original unit. The device has been manufactured by Core Products International since 2007.

The technology is orbital, accomplished by an offset bearing housing that spins a vertical shaft, set perpendicular to the massage pad, 3,260 times per minute, creating a high-frequency resonance through the tissues and blood. "We were looking to develop something that wasn't an aggressive therapy, especially for post-operative use, so we went to something that is orbital," said Huntzinger, who said the Massager is made entirely in the USA.

The Equisports Massager operates only with electric power—it doesn't have a battery—but it does have a 25-foot cord to facilitate moving around the horse. The model we used has only one speed, but Huntzinger said they have a brand-new model with variable speeds. At the one speed (which is the high speed in the new model), the motor is roughly as loud as most body clippers and produces a strong oscillation. So Huntzinger recommends taking a few minutes to gradually introduce the device to the horse, and our experience confirmed that.

Using the device is pretty instinctive, and it's not any different from using a human massage device: You move the device over the different muscle groups, generally in the direction of the hair growth.

"We basically tell people that you don't have to push very hard into the horse," said Huntzinger. "We've found that, generally, after three or four minutes, the horse will lean into it anyway. They'll usually lower their heads, and sometimes you'll see their lips quiver."

Huntzinger recommends dividing the body into four quarters and spending four minutes on each

The Massage Devices In Our Trial

Product	Price	Description	Comments
Equilibrium Massage Pad www.worldquestrianbrands.com 888-637-8463	\$495	Looks like a thick dressage pad with a pocket to hold the battery and a pocket to hold the controller on the left side. Four straps go around the chest and belly to hold it in place. Dark blue plastic cover with heavy-duty straps and buckles. Runs a 30-minute cycle, on low, medium or high setting. Manufacturer states that the charge in the small, light battery lasts eight hours. Comes with slim dark blue, plastic carrying/storage case, with battery-charging cord.	A professionally designed, well-made product. Pad is lightweight, even with the battery (2"x5", weighs less than 1 pound). Makes a barely audible hum when running. Comes with two cards of instructions (one about operation, one about usage) that are clear and simple to follow. Easy set-up; little to go wrong. Horses seem to enjoy and react positively to the therapy.
Equilibrium Massage Mitt www.worldquestrianbrands.com 888-637-8463	\$150	Looks like an oven mitt without the thumb. Hand slides inside the mitt, which has controls built in on top and a pouch for battery (1" x 3" and weighs half a pound). Offers three settings (low, medium, high). Manufacturer states battery lasts for 12 sessions of 30 minutes before it needs charging. Comes in blue plastic carrying case similar to the Equilibrium Massage Pad, with battery-charging cord. Clear, simple instructions are printed on a card that fits in a clear plastic sleeve on the case.	A solidly built, durable product. It's easy to use and light to hold in your hand. Using this product certainly can provide a relaxing effect for horse and rider, and the horses we used it on seemed to like the sensation, but we're not convinced of its therapeutic or sport-massage efficacy.
Equisports Massager Core Products International www.horsemassagers.com 928-632-9654 www.valleyvet.com 800-419-9524	\$349	Looks somewhat like an electric wood belt sander. Two handles on top to hold, with the motor, with a black vinyl, oscillating massaging head (4 1/2" x 9 1/2") in the middle. One speed, controlled by on/off switch; 25-foot cord for power. Weighs 7 pounds. Clear, simple eight-page User's Manual included, with sleeve to hold it on black carrying case. Also comes with poster-sized fold-out sheet of how-to massage instructions. Also available with leg adapter (\$30) and Hot & Cold Pack (\$19).	A useful product. We found that it creates a therapeutic effect on the horse, relaxing and supplying the muscles to which it's applied. Manufacturer recommends 20-minute sessions, which will be as good a workout for some users as it is for the horse. The motor and vibrating heads make what we consider a loud hum (similar to body clippers, and it is rhythmic and soothing), and we would describe the vibration as a rather strong sensation.



The Equilibrium Massage Mitt gave our horses an enjoyable massage, but its effect pales when compared to the pricier units.

quarter. He said research by veterinarians at Colorado State University and Gary Kaufman, DVM (Scottsdale, Ariz.), as part of the design process, showed that little more effect is achieved after four minutes, “because the tissues can’t absorb any more oxygen after about that time.”

He explained that the researchers drew blood on the test horses before and after using the Massager. The tests showed increased oxygen level and a lower percentage of toxins and lactic acid after use. The researchers also tested urine and manure and found that the Massager increased the rate of excretion for toxins post-work.

“This machine is so deep-penetrating that four minutes on one side is almost the same as doing it on the other side. Less is better than more—you can’t get more blood,” said Huntzinger. “If you stand on the other side and touch the horse, you can feel the massage going through him.”

Researchers and veterinarians found that using the Equisports Massager reduced the time needed for post-surgical recovery, and that’s one reason why Huntzinger developed a leg adaptor. This device is a piece of hard foam that can be applied anywhere from hoof to knee or hock.

NO BATTERY. The Equisports Massager is a high-quality product, and our usage suggested that it did make horses suppler and more comfortable. We found it particularly

effective on our horses in heavy training and competition, probably because of the device’s deep-penetrating oscillation.

However, we wish the unit were lighter, as many users will find it difficult to hold at or above shoulder height, especially for 16 minutes. Huntzinger said that, in order to keep the weight at the current 7.5 pounds, they couldn’t install a battery. Consequently, the Equisports Massager requires electricity, which not all horse barns and competition sites have. You can run it off a generator, auto battery or portable power pack, though.

BOTTOM LINE. We found the Equilibrium Massage Pad especially useful because all you have to do is turn it on, cross-tie the horse, and work around the barn while it does

the work for you in 30 minutes.

But we also really liked the Equisports Massager, too. We could feel it working deep on the tissues, and we felt horses responded well to it. It can be effective on the entire body, not just the back. But it’s heavy and requires time to use it.

Since the Equilibrium Pad costs \$150 more than the Equisports Massager, you’ll want to evaluate your horse’s needs (back or body needing massage) and your own time vs. your physical strength.

The Equilibrium Massage Mitt has a relaxing effect, but we aren’t convinced that you couldn’t accomplish as much by basic massage techniques or through Jim Master-son’s book *Beyond Horse Massage*, which we reviewed in October. [HJ](#)

Article by John Strassburger, our Performance Editor.

Know Equine Anatomy

No matter what technique or product you choose to try to massage your horse, remember that it helps to be familiar with equine anatomy. You don’t have to know the names of the muscles, but you should be familiar with where they attach and how they work.

“Anyone can do massage. I think everybody should be educated enough to keep their own horses loose, so that you don’t get the spasming and the stress at the anchor,” said Jo-Ann Wilson, a professional equine and human massage therapist from Camden, Maine.

A horse owner who isn’t intimately familiar with anatomy can loosen the belly of the muscle with lifting or pumping motion and compress the muscle belly so that it widens the fibers. That allows more blood to flow and makes the muscle freer to move because it’s not tight from the fibers lying too close together.

“It doesn’t take strength to massage a horse. But it does take power. It’s deep, but not that deep, not as deep as you think—5 to 10 pounds of pressure, that’s about it,” Wilson said. “You can’t change the way a horse moves by just stimulating their superficial nerve endings, but you can probably change their level of relaxation.”

Muscle stiffness or tension is usually caused by a small, knotted piece on the tendon at the anchor. All muscles have an anchor and an insertion, which is where the action occurs. If a muscle is tight, it will pull on the anchor and cause stress.

“So what I do is go to all the anchors. I put pressure on them to break up the fibers,” said Wilson. “The horse then typically has a lot more range of motion.”

Wilson emphasized that exercise is the final part of a massage treatment. Exercise further activates and lengthens the muscles. “The canter is the best exercise to lengthen all the muscle groups,” she said.