

Training for Courage

by Paul Dufresne

ENDOTAPPING: A NEW AGE TECHNIQUE

Why would endotapping be considered a “new age” technique? Many horse training techniques have been invented over the centuries and later revisited. Yet, few are as strikingly different as endotapping.



Endotapping for bombproofing



Softening of the poll with head down



First halter training session. This foal was asked to lie down at end of session, he was that relaxed.

Endotapping consists of percussing the horse's body with a soft ball attached to a whip. It somewhat resembles the tapotement technique used in massage therapy. The first area I usually tap is located where the legs hang when sitting in the saddle (offset a few inches from the centre of the topline to about two-thirds of the way down toward the abdomen). A regular tempo works best. Changing the tempo can be used to regain the horse's attention. I tap the horse lightly enough so I don't frighten him, yet not too softly that it is irritating. It is normal for the horse to want to move in the beginning and this should be allowed but slowed. I continue to tap the horse until he lowers his head. It is important to stop the percussion as soon as the horse begins lowering his head. I wait a few seconds and then resume the process. One can encourage the horse to lower his head by gently applying downward pressure on the lead rope. I gently ask the horse to bend his neck towards me throughout the process. These are mild suggestions with no forcing.

Most horses go through predictable phases when they first receive endotapping. However, the rate at which they do so is highly variable among individuals. In general, their first reaction is to be fidgety. They may be irritated by the tapping sensation or by the noise the ball makes, or by previous negative experiences with whips. These reactions are usually short-lived with a calm handler. In the second stage, horses become indifferent to the tapping. This is a good time to change the percussion to a stronger tap. The final stage is what we strive to achieve with endotapping: the horse begins to display evident relaxation responses which include chewing, salivating, lowering the head, yawning and softening of the eyes, lips, jaw, stretching the poll and the back.

Endotapping can be viewed as a conditioned response. The percussion becomes a cue for the horse to lower his head, which in turn starts a cascade of other relaxation responses. Through continued exposure, the relaxation responses are displayed more quickly and with more strength. Again, note that it is important that the horse be bent towards the handler. Horses in a counter flexed position seem to take longer to develop the conditioned relaxation

responses.

Endotapping is a great technique to use when a horse needs to remain calm - for example, when receiving physical therapy or a treatment for colic. It is a terrific adjunct to any training program. Most contemporary trainers recognize that horses are prey animals that are hard-wired for the fight or flight response. Endotapping assists training by promoting a state of relaxation in the horse. In turn, relaxation helps the horse to be more tolerant of frightening stimuli and to learn new tasks. Hence, endotapping instills resilience in the horse and promotes learning. Furthermore, a relaxed horse is more likely to improve his gaits.

One advantage of endotapping resides in its simplicity. Almost anyone can positively influence the well-being of a horse. The fact that many of my beginner students have had quick success with this technique speaks volumes. Endotapping is best started on the ground, laying a good foundation. Later, it can be used mounted. The relaxation responses generalize very easily from the ground to mounted work.

The underlying mechanisms of endotapping are not yet fully understood. The tentative explanation that follows is based on my fairly large volume of personal experience as well as on the accounts of the technique's founder (to my best knowledge, J.P. Giacomini). We can speculate that the rhythmic percussion stimulates the horse's neuromuscular pathways, which induces the secretion of endorphins, the so-called “feel good” neuro-hormones. The endorphins encourage the relaxation behaviours that I mentioned earlier. As the horse relaxes, he increasingly enjoys the percussion, stimulating the secretion of more endorphins, leading to more relaxation responses, and so on. Thus, what we create with this tool is a powerful, positive feed-back loop.

I see a horse that has developed very strong relaxation responses to tapping as having a “reset button.” Indeed, when the environment or a particular task I am trying to perform creates stress in my horse, I simply cue the animal to relax by applying taps. The horse quickly relaxes and offers little resistance to the

Training for Courage, cont'd



Amateur horse owner getting nice, soft, effortless carriage at the jog



Endotapping for a soft poll with a bit of a swirl-poll flexion

environment or to my lead, which I might further modify or repeat.

Down the road, I would like to see researchers in a lab setting measure some of the various effects of endotapping, such as:

1. Muscular level, cell changes from normal states to relaxation levels, effects on muscle spindles and golgi tendon apparatus.
2. Physiological levels, heart rate, respiratory rate, salivary and plasma cortisol levels (stress hormone), and endorphin levels.
3. Inter-species differences in response variability, especially comparing prey animals to predators.

Endotapping is a technique that goes far beyond that of other training tools. It is a powerful, yet simple, technique that can

promote physical, intellectual and emotional well-being. When incorporated in foundation training, the effects are very impressive. They may be even more impressive with high-level competitive sport horses.

I will be doing a series of workshops on endotapping at the Saskatoon Equine Expo in February as well as multiple exhibitions on both nights. Endotapping is integrated into all of my clinics; my previous articles on the topic can be found on my website www.trainingforcourage.com or in past Saddle Up issues.

Paul Dufresne is a writer, performer, trainer and clinician in Pritchard, BC, who educates in Natural Horsemanship, Classical Arts, Liberty and Circensic Dressage. He teaches people to understand horses and, more importantly, how to tap into their relaxation reflexes in ways seldom seen in North America. In doing so, he is able to guide people in creative experiences where the human learns to be an effective, safe leader. The horse learns to be more emotionally secure and will respectfully follow while developing athleticism in a mutually courageous manner by having a deeper understanding of how they affect each other. Visit his website at www.trainingforcourage.com.