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## **The Horse Massager: Bringing balance to horse, rider**

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SANTA CRUZ — Last August, when Cristie Thomas of Aptos got her 10-year-old horse, Sally, and started to ride her a lot, she noticed Sally was moving funny at higher gaits and was having a terrible time moving to the right.

Suspecting the problem was physical rather than behavioral, Thomas called Jackie Iddings, a certified massage therapist specializing in myofascial release and craniosacral therapies for horse and rider. Iddings started her business, Balanced Bodywork, in April, tapping into an emerging field of therapy that treats horse and rider as an athletic team.

Thomas had started seeing a bodywork practitioner for humans because she herself was having a hard time going to the right.

"With my body being realigned so that I could be balanced and level and even, and Sally being realigned the same way, we can now go pretty much whatever direction we'd like to go," Thomas said. "There's a marked improvement in making that right turn."

That change, said Thomas, made riding, and her relationship with Sally, "so much more fun."

"We don't have to argue about where we're going to go," Thomas said.

Taking the reins Myofascial release and craniosacral therapy claim to eliminate pain and restore motion by using a light touch to remove tightness and soft tissue restrictions throughout the body.

"Over the years I've seen horses with so many physical problems because of the way they're ridden," said Iddings, 60, sitting behind a desk in her massage office for her human clients, a soothing indoor fountain bubbling beside her.

She names repetitive motion as one of the sources for the problems a horse might experience, with symptoms including stiffness on one side and the inability to make a good turn because of inflexibility.

In riders, Iddings says symptoms of soft tissue restrictions and structural imbalance may include one leg functioning differently than the other, or holding patterns the rider unconsciously uses to maintain balance while riding.

"If the rider has a structural misalignment, you're not going to be balanced on the horse, and the horse will try to compensate, which causes them to tighten up their body, and vice versa," Iddings said.

Iddings considers herself a beneficiary of the bodywork method Rolfing, a soft tissue therapy that aims to improve posture and structure.

In 1988, she was in a vehicle accident where she was rear-ended twice in a two-week period. An avid equestrian since she was 12, Iddings was forced to quit riding for a year because of the accidents. She started riding again but by 1993 had given up because of chronic pain. With the pain and muscle spasms she was experiencing, combined with her sedentary freelance technical writing profession, she entered what she called a "downward physical spiral."

The treatments she tried didn't provide any major breakthroughs, but knowing she had to make a change, Iddings decided to try Rolfing in 2000.

"The only thing that kept me on that table sometimes was visualizing riding again," Iddings said of the treatments, which could be painful.

From the horse's mouth When Rolfing provided relief for her pain, Iddings decided she wanted to go into the bodywork industry and combine it with her love of horses.

She attended Geary Whiting's Equine Massage School in Douglas City, receiving a credential in equine sports massage in 2001, and also took equine craniosacral and myofascial massage at Equinology, a school for equine therapies in Gualala.

For her human clients, she studied at Twin Lakes College of the Healing Arts in Santa Cruz. In February she traveled to Sedona, Ariz., to study myofascial techniques with practice pioneer John Barnes of Sedona, and has studied craniosacral treatment through the Milne Institute in Big Sur.

Since she began working with horses in 2002, Iddings has seen more than 100 horses — she makes house calls — and estimates she works on about 40 people per month, both equestrians and non-horse riders.

For a horse's appointment, she watches the horse move, checks its alignment, looks for anomalies, examines its body and begins the treatment. She'll note any lameness, but will refer the horse to a veterinarian if necessary.

"My service is not a substitute for veterinary care," she said.

She does much the same thing for her human clients.

Francis Padilla of Ben Lomond, a non-horse rider who has been receiving treatments from Iddings for several months, said his sessions with her have given some relief for his chronic headaches.

"When I went in the first time, I didn't feel like she was doing anything," said Padilla, 52, a carpenter and artist. "But when I sat up, my socks were knocked off. I could tell I was worked on."

Sally, Thomas' horse, was "terribly skeptical" the first time Iddings worked on her, said Thomas. The second time, "she's moving around putting her sore spots where Jackie could work on them."

Now Sally exhibits behavior that tells Thomas she enjoys the sessions.

"Her ears get soft, all the tension goes out of her body, she lowers her head and her lip flops down," said Thomas.

Business at a prance Starting Balanced Bodywork has consisted mainly of going through training, and Iddings estimates she's spent about \$15,000 on training so far and will spend another \$10,000 this year. Business was slow when she started in April, she said, but it picked up in September, mainly through word of mouth. She plans to continue her work in technical writing until the massage business can support her, and she would like to add bodywork practice consulting to her offerings. Her hopes are to double her business volume, scheduling up to 80 appointments per month.

Iddings, who has pursued three other careers in her lifetime, says her business is her life's calling.

"This work is very powerful," she said. "I'm just going to continue doing it until I'm so old I can't do it anymore."

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Balanced Bodywork WHAT: Practice specializing in bodywork for horse and rider.

OWNER: Jackie Iddings.

LOCATION: Santa Cruz.

SERVICES: Myofascial and craniosacral therapies.

PRICE: \$80 first session, which goes two hours; \$65 per hour for sessions afterward.

INFORMATION: 421-9628; [www.jiddings-ink.com](http://www.jiddings-ink.com).