

Holistic Horseworks Live Substack Sample #2

Helping Joe: A Head-Shy, Farrier-Hating "Problem Horse"

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Holistic Horseworks Live with Marilyn and Joe (February 4th 2026)

[April Love](#)

Mar 28, 2026

Marilyn didn't set out to take on a project horse. She went trail riding with a friend, got put on Joe, and knew within minutes that something was seriously wrong. He was head shy, reluctant to pick up his hind legs, heavy on the forehand, and had already been labeled difficult. She bought him anyway.

Joe is a 10-year-old Quarter Horse. By the time Marilyn brought him to

Holistic Horseworks Live, he had a long list of issues: a history of cranial trauma, a sore SI joint, both first ribs misaligned, a ewe neck, hoof imbalances front and hind, and a body that had clearly been

compensating for a very long time. He'd been flogged for his behavior in the past — by people who didn't know he was in pain.

There's always a reason. Here's what I saw...

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Front Hooves



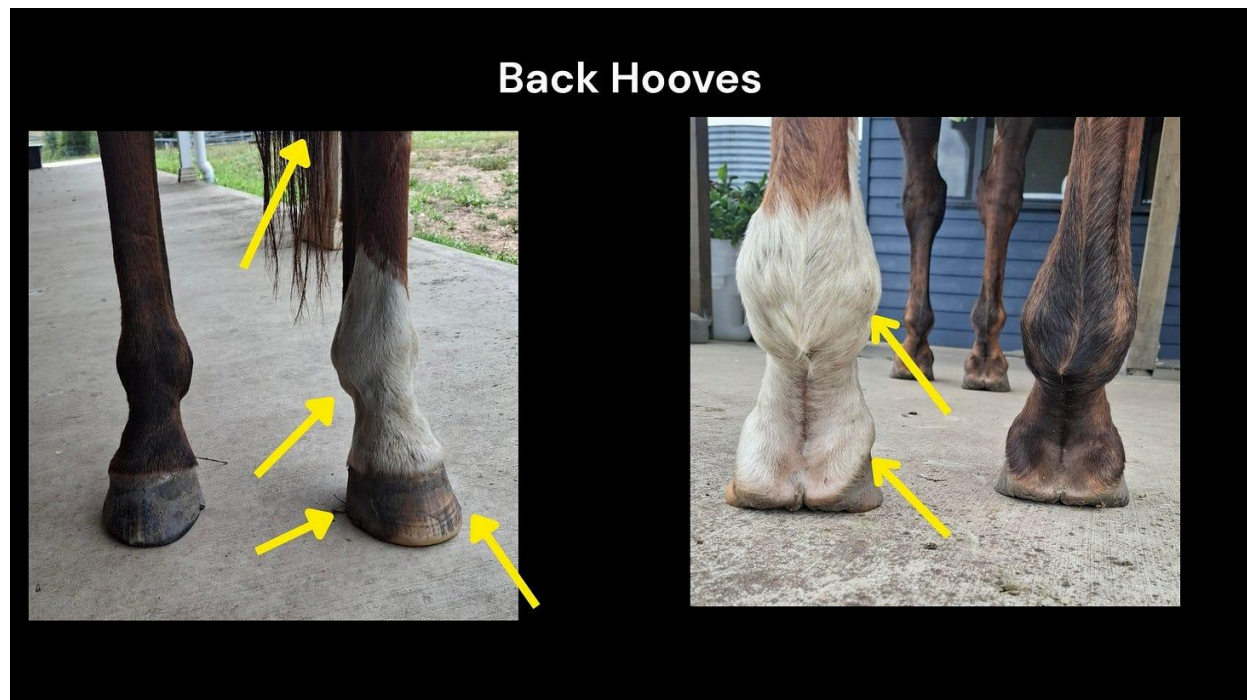
Hooves a Farrier Can't Fix

The first thing I always look at is the hooves. They tell me everything about how the horse has been loading and moving — 24 hours a day, every day of his life.

Joe's left front was the most obvious. The toe was pointing outward, with a medial flare pushing to the outside. That means he's jamming and loading on the inside heel on every step. Think about what it would feel like to walk in a shoe where the sole had been worn down on the inside

— your ankle drops, your knee drops, and eventually everything higher up starts to break down. That's exactly what's happening here. You could already see early arthritis forming at the inside of the fetlock joint, and the pressure pattern in the hoof wall told me sidebone and ringbone were already beginning.

His right front was a little better, but not by much — and that matters, because horses work on a diagonal. What happens on the left front travels to the right hind, and vice versa.



Looking at the hind hooves, his left hind showed a higher hoof wall on one side, the classic sign of uneven loading pulling from somewhere up in the groin and inner thigh. His right hind had more calcification already forming at the coronary band — more sidebone and ringbone developing there than on the left, because the right hind was compensating for what the left hind couldn't do. The fetlock joints were noticeably uneven in size.

And here's what I want everyone reading this to understand: this is not bad farrier work. Your farrier can cut and shape that hoof to look balanced, and six to eight weeks later it'll be right back where it started. Because it's not about the trim. It's about how the horse is standing on that hoof every minute of every day. Until you address what's happening higher up in the body, the hoof will keep telling you the same story.

Left and Right Sides



This Isn't Conformation: This Is Compensation

Joe presented as a downhill horse — heavy on the forehead, neck shortened and tight, struggling to lift through the shoulder. But I want to be clear: this is not his conformation. This is his posture. And posture comes from the body.

Both of Joe's first ribs were misaligned. The first rib sits deep under the point of the shoulder, and when it's out — which it is in virtually every

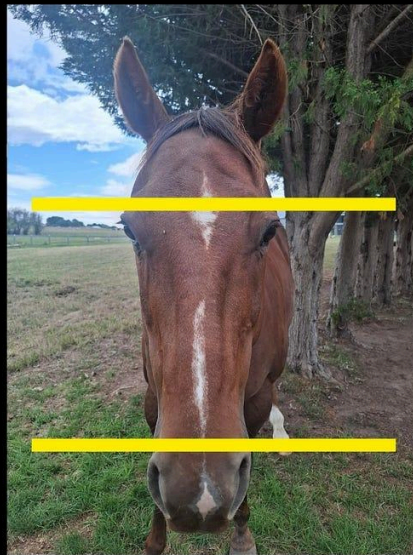
horse by the time they're four to five months old — the shoulder can't come through forward the way it should. When both sides are misaligned, the horse has to recruit the rhomboid and trapezius muscles to move the shoulder at all. Those muscles overdevelop just in front of the withers, and the neck starts to shorten. The result is what people call a ewe neck or ewe neck — that dip right before the withers where the neck should be rising and it isn't.

You could see it clearly on both sides of Joe. The topline where the withers should be prominent was flat. There should be a one to two inch gap between the top of the scapula and the withers — the withers should be taller. In Joe, those muscles had pulled everything so tight that the withers had essentially disappeared into the shoulder.

When a trainer sees a horse like Joe and tries to use the bit to bring him back to the hind end and lighten the front end, they're working against a physical restriction. The bit can't move the first rib. What it does instead is put the psoas into spasm. And when the psoas is in spasm, the hips get pulled out, the hocks start coming closer together, and you end up with

kissing spine developing in the withers or the lumbar — 90% of the time, that's what's behind it. This is why he didn't want to pick up his hind legs. His SI joint was sore. Standing on the other leg while one is lifted hurts when that much tension is running through the hind end.

Head



Why Joe is Headshy

By the time I got to Joe's head, I'd already seen enough to know this horse had been through a lot. The head confirmed it — and then some.

Looking straight on, his left eye was pushed out and dropped. His left nostril, though, was sitting higher than the right. When I see asymmetry going in two different directions — eye dropping one way, nostril pulling the other — that tells me this horse has had more than one head trauma. One incident doesn't do that. Multiple compressions do.

The forehead muscles told the same story. They were overdeveloped and prominent — what I call the up-down two muscles. Those muscles should be flat. When they're developed like that, it means the horse is chewing up and down instead of in the lateral grinding motion that horses are built for. The masseter muscles on the TMJ were hollow and atrophied on one side, exactly the way I'd expect. His equine dentist had been finding severe hooks and waves every visit. That's not a dental maintenance problem. That's a structural one. When the cranial bones are compressed and the jaw can't move laterally, hooks and waves are the predictable result — and they come back every year no matter how well the teeth get floated, because the underlying issue hasn't been addressed.

The dropped left eye meant the lacrimal bone had shifted, compressing the nerve and blood supply to that eye. That eye throbs. Joe had been head shy his whole life — not because he was difficult, but because he had a headache every single day. Marilyn figured that out. The people who flogged him for it did not.

There was also nerve involvement visible lower on his face, around the nose. This is the horse that doesn't want to be touched on the face, doesn't want the halter on, doesn't want to be caught. There's always a reason.

The Truth About Most “Problem Horses”

Joe had both first ribs out, a sore SI joint, hoof imbalances front and hind, cranial compression from more than one trauma, a locked jaw, and a U neck built entirely from compensating muscles. He'd been labeled a

problem horse. He'd been punished for behavior that was his only way of saying he was in pain.

Marilyn saw through all of that. She rescued him, started working with him, and signed up for all three levels of classes with our Australian instructor to learn how to address everything she's been seeing. And she's going to be able to.

This is exactly what the Holistic Horseworks program is built around — learning to read what the body is telling you, tracing each issue back to where it actually started, and working on root causes instead of managing symptoms that keep coming back. Level 1: Equine Musculoskeletal Unwinding addresses the skeleton — the first rib, the atlas, the pelvis. Level 2: Cranio Sacral Unwinding and Advanced Applied Kinesiology goes into the fascia, the organs, the SI joint, the hind end. Level 3: Equine Cranial Decompression addresses the head — moving the cranial bones back up, opening the TMJ, restoring nerve and blood supply to the eye.

Joe's story isn't finished. We'll be checking back in with him after the classes to see the new and updated version.

Want to Learn How to Do This for Your Own Horse?

Everything I walked you through in this article — reading the body, connecting the dots from hooves to head, and knowing what to do about it — is covered in [Level 1: Equine Musculoskeletal Unwinding](#). You can do this at home, on your own horse, starting today.

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