

Canine Structural Integration

with Michael Reams

By Anne F. Hoff, Certified Advanced Rolfer™

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I recently took my dog Vajra to see Michael Reams, a Certified Advanced Rolfer who works with quadrupeds as well as humans. She's received two sessions from him thus far, and is scheduled for a third. Although I've had my dog for nearly eight years, I've not worked on her myself for two reasons. First, my training as a Rolfer practitioner was entirely about people, and while I understand the biped structure, I don't feel qualified to improve structure in a dog without a similar understanding of quadruped structure. Second, whenever I switch from petting or rubbing my dog to any kind of therapeutic touch, even just a listening touch, she knows something is up and I get a sense that she doesn't want me messing with her homeostasis.

My dog has some structural issues. Even my untrained eye could compare her conformation with other dogs and see that her butt was too narrow, her hind legs X shaped ("cow-hocked"), and her front end more developed than her hind end. Further, as an Akita, she's susceptible to the hip dysplasia and other issues of the large breeds. So it was great to move to Seattle and learn that we had a local Rolfer who regularly worked on dogs. Michael started his quadruped structural integration with horses, but extended that to also work on dogs and cats (and even a goat whose torticollis he resolved in three sessions).

Michael started the first session by watching Vajra walk. He says that in doing this he is primarily "watching for translation through from the hind to front end and [seeing] what's not working – the blank spots." He quickly noted that she swings her left leg externally while taking the right one too much to the midline. He also reported that she was loading her front end while not engaging her hips – effectively pulling her hind end.

The next step, Michael says, is "to correlate what he sees with palpation." He got Vajra up on his Rolfer® table for an exam (he does the first session on the table; subsequent sessions can be on the table or on the floor). His palpation revealed more muscle development at the left adductors/hamstrings and less on the right, and a hole in the fascia in that area on the left, possibly the result of a tear/trauma to an adductor when she experienced a bad fall out of a car. He also found some vertebral rotations and a section of her thoracic spine that was too anterior.

Michael said that in working with quadrupeds he holds the basic goals of a regular Rolfer series, but works to address what's going on. In Vajra's case, he started working at the groin, with the goal of getting her some "hind-end relief, but not so much that she'd lose her stability or couldn't integrate it all." Then he addressed the dip in her lower thoracic spine as that was also part of the overall picture.

As Michael worked, I asked him about

Rolfing and dogs. He reports that horses and dogs have similar structures as quadrupeds, but different energetics and roles in the world: dogs developed from predators while horses are prey animals (cats fulfill both roles). However, movement may be very different among dogs, depending on breed – such as the difference between a coursing dog like a whippet or greyhound and a stocky northern dog like my Akita.

He notes that animal bodies respond more quickly to Rolfing than humans. He believes this is because they are more kinesthetic (note how a horse responds to a fly on its hide), and because in nature they need to change quickly in response to their environment in order to survive. While this is especially true for prey animals, it is also true for predators: "If [they] don't respond to positive changes quickly [they're] not going to get to eat." He says that animals' fascia is more responsive also because they "don't hang onto things emotionally," but he cautions that when working with an animal you may encounter an emotionally charged area that spurs a "virtual response" – such as a horse who went into panic when he worked where it had been attacked by a cougar.

I ask Michael whether he uses the same touch with humans and animals. He relates that you have to touch differently, and struggled to articulate the differences. Finally he says, the touch is "softer but more direct," explaining that "you get focused on a finer line or point of work, [then] they take it and spread it pretty quickly on their own." As an example, he says that when he's working on a horse's rump, he'll see the withers (shoulders) start to shake and



release in response. Recently one horse displayed a medial rotation in his left hind hoof but work near the sacrum and hip caused the hoof to straighten.

How long he works in each canine session varies from ten to fifteen minutes to up to thirty minutes, depending on the dog's history, breed, and individual temperament. He notes that usually the dog's system will adapt so that it can take more and more work over time. He cites the case of two Rhodesian ridgeback clients: "The first few times their nervous systems were easy to 'push' so I did shorter sessions, but after a few sessions they relaxed more and [the work] didn't wind their nervous systems as much. [Now] in some cases they want their owner's session."

Signs to watch for in canine structural integration sessions include breathing patterns, yawning or tongue/nose dripping (relaxation), licking the practitioner (approval), and anxiety. In Vajra's case, Michael noted times when she was sensitive about certain areas being touched (he would back off and sweet talk her), and times when she would yawn and relax. When she started breathing more heavily, it indicated that the nervous system was being pushed quite hard and that she was "almost done." Another sign of completion was that she was trying to pay attention but starting to fall asleep. He says some dogs will get up as a way to clearly tell you "that's enough."

When Michael got her off the table and onto the ground, the difference in her structure was stunning. She had more dimension through her hind quarters and her hind legs were much straighter. It was a profound amount of change for a short time – about thirty minutes – and Michael cited this as an example of how animals take the work and spread it through their bodies.

As follow-up advice, Michael tells me that a dog may "blow fur" during the session and shed more for a few days after. It's okay to walk the dog that day, but note that it may be tired, or frisky, and to adjust exercise accordingly. He says he will see a dog for a second session in one to two weeks, depending on its circumstances.

For Vajra, we did her second session about a week later. She eagerly ran into Michael's office to greet him and office partner Certified Advanced Rolfer Stephen Evanko. Her second session was done on the floor, with Michael positioning himself creatively



to work. This session focused on linking her hind and front ends better, with extensive work in the forelimbs, armpits, and along the longissimus. Michael says that in quadrupeds the hind end is the engine. If the animal "can't get that to translate through, then [it] loads up the front end and ends up with all kinds of problems." Specifically, "the longissimus muscles are not so much postural as movement muscles" in a quadruped, performing this translation. When there is this proper front/hind end relationship, the shoulder girdle becomes like a sling to allow necessary turning movements.

Although dogs don't sweat, Michael had me feel the right armpit area where there was slight moisture after a significant tissue release. This was a sign of the nervous system allowing him deeper access than in the first session, based on the trust established then. He notes that even though dogs are predators, they will build trust quite fast. And while Vajra let him do more this time, she also had her limits. As Michael revisited a sensitive area along the spine, she got up off the sheet and went to the other side of the room to wander around and take a little break before deciding it was okay to let Michael do a bit more.

After the session we saw Vajra challenging her gait pattern. Although she always runs with a contralateral gait, she sometimes walks in a homolateral pattern. She now seemed unsure which way to walk, and Michael suggested we wait a couple of weeks before her next session while she builds strength in muscles being newly challenged and reorganizes from the work done so far.

Michael works with approximately six dogs each month. How many sessions he does with each is a case-by-case determination. He doesn't have a dog himself now, but lives with four cats and is involved with

horses and dogs where his daughter rides. Interestingly, he finds "I can't [give Rolfing to] my cats," a parallel to my own experience with Vajra. He attributes this to the pack nature of dogs and cats, where the owner is part of the pack and the pet will not tolerate certain things, but "a stranger can come in and do things [the owner] can't." (In contrast, he reports that in the case of horses, you often have to be considered "a member of the herd" to work on them.) Michael says that in his experience working with animals, "taking on the role of 'passive leader' helps build a trust and positive working relationship. In Vajra's case, she has certainly accepted Michael and trusts him to significantly reorganize her structure.