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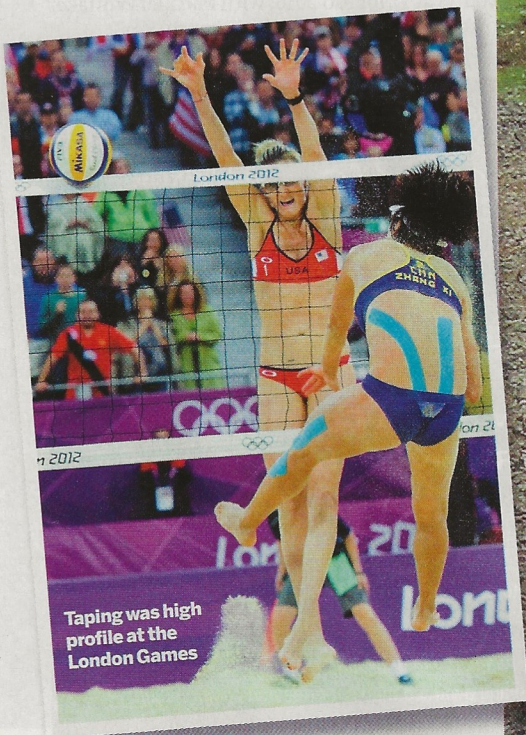
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# Can this tape help keep our horses sound?

Commonly used by athletes, despite a dearth of supporting science, Kinesio taping is increasingly used on horses and riders too. Martha Terry asks what it's all about — and if it really works



Pictures by Action Plus Sports Agency/Alamy

**T**HERE'S nothing like a beach volleyball player to sell a product. At last summer's Olympic Games, their bronze muscles were taped blue, pink and black and suddenly we noticed that everyone from tennis ace Novak Djokovic to footballer Mario Balotelli was strapped up in the stuff.

But what's behind Kinesio taping? Is it a fad — or if it does work, might it spread to equine athletes? British endurance team physiotherapist Lee Clark is convinced it has

huge benefits for horses, despite the lack of any official study.

"It's a case of following what we know works with humans and watching the results with horses," says Lee, one of the equine physiotherapists at London 2012.

While the use of elastic kinesiology tape (EKT) was commonplace at last year's Olympics, it has been around since the late 1970s.

Practitioners have been experimenting for some time on horses, but it has become more widespread since 2010. Its health benefits seem

“ It definitely worked on my own tendon. I believe it could help in the acute stage of tendon injury in horses, directly after the rupture ”

**Gil Riley MRCVS**



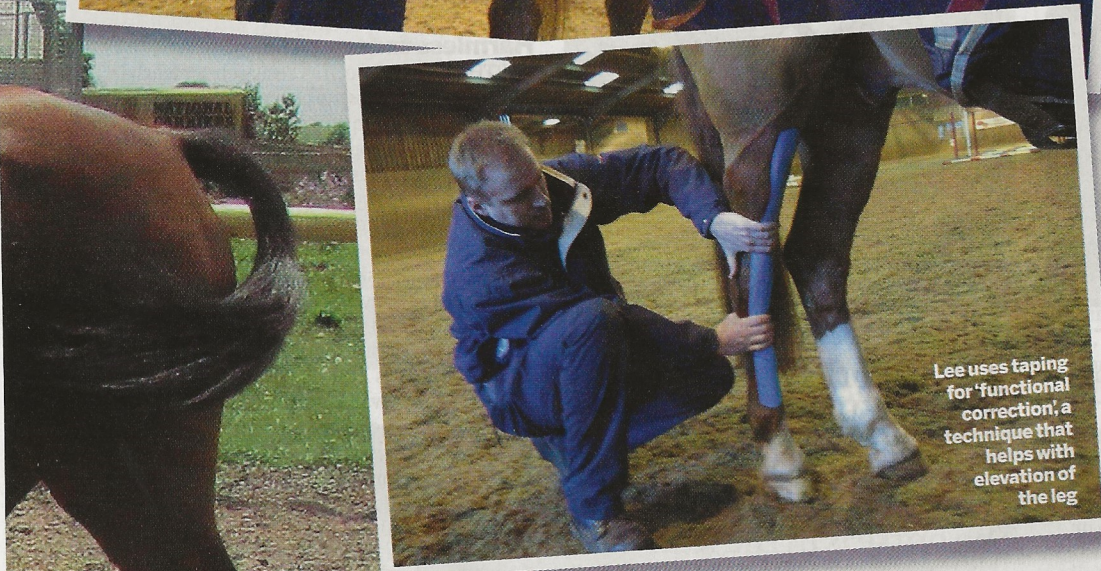
Equine physiotherapist Lee Clark is a big proponent of taping



## KEY CLAIMS ABOUT THE BENEFITS

If applied properly, proponents of these taping techniques believe:

- 1 It helps "activate" or "inhibit" muscle groups as required
- 2 It helps bruising and encourages the lymphatic system to drain
- 3 It adjusts posture and helps reduce injuries from recurring
- 4 It can help reduce pain — and a lot more besides



Lee uses taping for 'functional correction', a technique that helps with elevation of the leg

out transmission from pain receptors. Rebecca Blenntoft, a manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) specialist who uses the tape, says: "It works like a TENS machine [which uses electrical currents to ease pain], or rubbing a bump on your head; it does make the pain feel better. The horse is then in the frame of mind to relax and restore."

### When is it used?

REBECKA has seen excellent results on bruising and lymphangitis when she has used EKT alongside massage and compression bandages. "Kinesio taping can augment the treatment at the end of MLD, because it raises the surface of the skin to allow the effects of my massage to continue," she says.

"The convolutions help the lymphatic system keep working faster for longer, because they take the pressure off the dermis of the skin where there are tiny lymph vessels. This gives them more space to clear interstitial debris or bruising."

Rebecka cites an example of a thoroughbred who had a rib removed after an accident. The subsequent scar tissue provoked lymphoedema, because lymph cannot drain properly through scar tissue. The horse was taped to help the lymph to drain and returned to full health.

Lee Clark is one of Kinesio taping's greatest advocates. He uses it for activating muscle, reducing tightness and changing a horse's posture to prevent injury recurring. One area for which he believes it's particularly beneficial is

rehabilitation after kissing spine surgery. "After the stitches are out, I use it to facilitate the muscles, strengthening the abdominals and back muscles to prevent the kissing spines recurring in other vertebrae," he explains. "It's useful after any surgery to reduce inflammation, but then you need to correct the posture."

Lee uses the tape on

to achieve. It can compress an area if applied at more than 50% tension, or decompress to lift the skin if applied less tightly. It can be used to activate muscles that need to work harder, or inhibit muscles that need to back off.

Unlike standard strapping, this elasticated cotton tape is designed to mimic the skin, allowing normal movement.

Proponents claim that it can prevent injury, re-educate the neuromuscular system and reduce pain — with 1,200 conditions identified as suitable for treatment by EKT.

The theory is that, as the tape is stretched over the skin, it creates convolutions (skin wrinkles), which allow the lymphatic system to work more efficiently — reducing inflammation and clearing waste.

Additionally, practitioners believe that the tape can stimulate touch receptors in the nervous system, blocking

**It is claimed that taping can help 1,200 conditions**

Kinesio tape can be used as therapy during exercise

magical, with some marketing literature claiming it can help foals with severely elongated tendons, kissing spines, lymphangitis and more.

### How does it work?

EKT is supposed to act on five major physiological compartments of the body: skin, fascia (connective tissue), muscles, joints and the lymphatic system.

The technique used to apply the tape depends on what therapeutic effect you want



The tape's 'lifting' effect on the skin can help with lymph drainage, claim its advocates



Using the tape for general rehabilitation and reduction in inflammation, with conventional treatments, seems benign at worst.

But the claim that it can affect posture is more influential. And, if so, at what point can a physiotherapeutic treatment be judged as performance enhancing?

Horse sports' governing body the FEI has put in a rule banning it for dressage – not including eventing dressage – implying it must affect a horse's way of going.

"The tape is not permitted during warm-up or in competition at FEI dressage events," confirmed FEI veterinary director Graeme Cook.

H&H veterinary consultant Karen Coumbe believes the growing interest in EKT "reflects the growing interest in complementary approaches, such as acupuncture," she says.

"These approaches are likely to become more popular when horses cannot receive conventional medication and continue in competition.

"People are looking to do 'something else' to get the best out of their horses. But with anything like this, it is important, above all, to do no harm."

Gil Riley agrees.

"The lack of scientific evidence is a concern and much more work needs to be done," he says. "But I don't think it could do any damage. At worst it will pass away as a fad – a royal jelly – and at best we'll see a lot of horses in go-faster stripes."

**4,000** Kinesio taping trained practitioners currently in the UK

countries with athletes wearing it at London 2012

**80**

**300%**

the increase in Kinesio tape sales between Beijing 2008 and London 2012

Will it catch on? At the UK's first Kinesio taping course earlier this year, the assembled chartered physiotherapists were generally convinced by the concept. But they harboured reservations on making the tape stick to a hairy coat and teaching owners to apply tape accurately and regularly.

Dr Gordon believes it's only a matter of time.

"[EKT's] use with horses is still relatively new worldwide and some disciplines will only allow it warming up," says Dr Gordon, adding that "with basic guidelines, anyone can learn to tape their horse".

"However, [its popularity] will change, as it holds a great deal of promise for the equine athlete, both for healing injuries and for training horses."

Perhaps the marketeers will tread the same path they trod with the volleyballers. If you spot Sprinter Sacre sporting tiger stripes up the gallops, every performance horse on the planet will soon be wearing it. **H&H**

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