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TO THIS

place to the idea of working with the horses, even though I'd never been around them before. It's not really about horses, it's about movement, but the races are the acid test for my work and that makes it exciting."

HUNT took his ideas to Boyle, who recognised the intelligence, the possibilities and the passion, and let the man loose on Alfie Tupper on a trial basis that has now become a long-term arrangement, despite ignominious beginnings.

"I'd told a few people to watch out for this horse I'd been working with," says Hunt, "and after the first session, he went to the races and was dripping with sweat, and when he came out of the stalls his saddle slipped and he had to be pulled up. It wasn't an impressive start, but he's come a fair way since then."

That was in July, and since then Alfie Tupper has won three times, most recently at Wolverhampton a fortnight ago off the highest mark he has ever scored from.

The somatics ethos doesn't involve massage or the crunching and popping of bones and joints. It's a gradual, continual process that involves a lot of hands-on support from head groom Louisa Allen, but Boyle, with his vet's hat on, is quietly impressed. "It's a novel approach that certainly seems to be having a positive effect," he says. "It's fairly subtle changes in posture and movement. You're not going to go in and say 'wow', but you can see the method in what he's doing."

"Alfie lives on his nerves a little bit, but he's a calmer horse now. A lot of it is down to Louisa's efforts, but the treatment is a part of the jigsaw and if you can get a small percentage improvement, if something works, then you go with it."

Jonathan Hunt went with it and the positive effects are lasting.

Hunt, who has become an equine somatic educator, with Cavalry Guard at trainer Jim Boyle's yard

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movements but not ones they used to be good at.

"These unconscious movements fix a pattern in our muscles and the muscles become contracted around those movements. Somatics is a process of contracting the muscle more than it is already contracted and then slowly releasing it, that has the effect of softening and lengthening the muscle and teaching the brain to regain control of our movements."

"It's the constant repetition of the exercises that will give him that understanding. You have to give him a moment to process what's happening, but you can see he starts to do it for himself. I'm just working with his brain."

Alfie sighs as if in relief and satisfaction. His posture slightly but surely alters. He intermittently achieves an impressive erection that nobody mentions but that, Hunt assures me later, is a sign of

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his feeling good about himself. Perhaps we've stumbled upon a new-age alternative to Viagra.

Eventually, Alfie sends out a few restless signals that the session is over. "There's no point trying to make him do it," Hunt explains. "Already I can feel him resisting me wanting to be near his neck. That's where his main issue is and I think the best time to do it would be the morning after he's run or an afternoon after he's worked."

As he walks, Alfie's muscles ripple with an increased looseness. His stance is slightly wider and squarer, he puts his hooves down flat and lazily chews on his lead rope. Head groom Louisa Allen says he is more relaxed, both at home and at the races. Jim Boyle dreams of the few pounds of improvement that make the difference between winning and losing.

►►For more details about somatics, go to somaticliving.com