

# Hi Tech Treatment for Horses

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## Therapies to Soothe All Four Legs

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An underwater treadmill at Fair Hill Equine Therapy Center offers a low-impact workout. It is just one of the alternative therapies with which racehorses are plied to keep them happy, healthy and, hopefully, fast. The popularity of alternative medicine among humans and the sophistication of sports medicine are reflected in the barn, according to trainers, veterinarians, riders and breeders. Stricter rules about which drugs are permissible for horses, and advances in drug-testing methods may also have increased the use of alternative treatments. “We would like what’s best for the horse, however we get there isn’t the point,” said Kathleen M. Anderson, a veterinarian and an equine acupuncturist at Equine Veterinary Care. The clinic is at Fair Hill Training Center in Elkton, Md., a complex of more than a dozen racing barns about 50 miles from Pimlico Race Course in Baltimore, where the Preakness Stakes will be run Saturday. The center is most notable for being a home of Barbaro, the 2006 Kentucky Derby winner who broke down in the Preakness. “I think people are recognizing that the vet stuff is fabulous,” said Hali Jones, an animal communicator in Carmel, Calif., whose work was chronicled in Jane Smiley’s book, “A Year at the Races.” “But there must be something less invasive, maybe better.” Kathleen Rush, who breeds racehorses on her Two Sisters’ Farm Inc. in Coatesville, Pa., has used telepaths for 20 years, even though she has had her doubts. “You have a racehorse that isn’t really going along great, and you do all the diagnostics, but you can’t tell why,” she said. “It gets very frustrating.” When she is at her wits’ end, she sometimes consults Nedda Wittels, an animal communicator about 250 miles away in Simsbury, Conn. “I speak with them telepathically,” said Wittels, who predominately practices over the phone. “I can do that from anywhere in the world, it doesn’t matter where I am.” She added, “Usually by the time they get to me, their skepticism is tempered by their need.” Some remedies found at Fair Hill are horse-size versions of the same cutting-edge sports therapy technology used by top human athletes. The Fair Hill Equine Therapy Center has a hyperbaric oxygen chamber and devices that deliver electromagnetic pulses, sound waves, infrared heat and more, all thought to help mend injuries faster. There is also an underwater treadmill where horses stride through water for a low-impact workout while watched by two attendants — one to hold them in place, the other to catch droppings. As a 4-year-old bay filly peered out with one eye through the tiny round window in the white hyperbaric oxygen chamber, Bruce Jackson, a trainer who runs the center, monitored the level of pure oxygen pumping in. When the chamber was full, the filly would be breathing around 10 to 12 times the amount of oxygen in normal air, he said, which would hypersaturate her blood, healing wear and tear on her muscles faster. Inside the pressurized chamber, the filly would feel as if she was “at the bottom of a swimming pool,” he said. Some high-tech treatments are modern updates on practices long used by horsemen, like Jackson’s cold saltwater spa, a Jacuzzi kept just above freezing. Horses stand in it for up to 15 minutes to relieve swelling. Jackson said it was a lot like standing them in the sea, a longtime practice among horsemen in Chichester on the South Coast

of England, where he grew up. Lisa and David Figueroa, who run a small training business, use a complement of ancient and herbal remedies along with traditional medicine. On a bright morning in early April at the Fair Hill center, the couple was out gathering dandelions from the roadside to feed to their horses. The plant is thought to cleanse the liver. When Lisa Figueroa comes across a pebble of quartz — a stone some believe has healing powers — she pockets it to later place on the windowsill of one of her horses' stalls. "People think you're kooky or something," said David Figueroa, who recently moved the couple's business to Saratoga, N.Y. His wife added: "Humans have all these physical therapies. Why not horses?" Not all horsemen have jumped on the bandwagon. Alex Brown, an exercise rider and a contributor to The New York Times's horse racing blog, said he was concerned about the use of alternative therapies "at the cost of more rational diagnostic tools." Anderson, the veterinarian, who is studying to become an equine chiropractor, echoed his worry. "The balance is what we need to find," she said. In the old-boys' club of racehorse trainers, few use, or at least admit to using the more "out there" methods like telepaths or equine reiki, a type of Japanese energy healing, Brown said. Even so, formerly marginalized treatments like acupuncture and massage are nearly standard in many horses' training regimens now. The litany of treatments is expensive, but so are racehorses, and an injured or poorly running animal will not earn its keep. Many trainers spare no expense on their horses' good health. Jackson said a soak in the saltwater Jacuzzi cost \$85, a 5- to 25-minute spin on the aqua treadmill was \$50 and a half-hour session in the hyperbaric oxygen chamber was \$300. Nevertheless, it can be booked with 10 to 12 horses a day, Jackson said. An in-person consultation with Jones, the animal communicator, is \$500, and she said her business was growing. With new treatments cropping up all the time, many are as yet not regulated, a potential danger to the horses. Figueroa drew the line at energy healing when she saw a practitioner roughly manipulate a racehorse's limbs. "Horses are as delicate as they are strong," she said. "The person that we saw was absolutely a quack."