polo, hunted, evented – I know what the horse needs to do and I know what the rider needs. I'm pleased there are more physiotherapists treating animals, but don't want people thinking it's easy – thinking they're fed up with the NHS so they'll go and pat a horse; it's not like that.'

GOING FOR GOLD

Victoria Spalding also has a life-long love of horses and was inspired to do her physiotherapy training because she wanted to be a physiotherapist specialising in equine therapy – even if that meant working with humans first. Now the physiotherapist with the British Olympic equestrian team, and with her own private practice, her interest was sparked as a teenager.

'I took my pony, Minty, to a physiotherapist and decided that was what I wanted to do. I started treating people to gain experience – humans can give feedback, which helps with things like palpation and observational skills. So once I'd practised on humans, I moved on to animals.'

Having competed in eventing herself, she has a good understanding of what's required. And she has no doubt physiotherapy makes a difference. 'In dressage, for example, one point can mean the difference between a medal and no medal. We're working on optimising performance, making sure the horse is fit, smooth and relaxed – tension can make you lose a medal. Of course, it's not about winning,' she says, before adding that 'well, actually, it is.'

Travelling to Hong Kong (where the equestrian events were held) for last year's Beijing Olympics was an amazing experience, she says. 'It really was up another level. Our eventers took the individual and team bronze, which was great and yes, I did cry – I always blub. But you get very attached to the horses, working with them so much.'

And there's quite a lot to love in horses, which are also highly financially valued as well. Some top athletes change hands for £2 million. How does that make her feel? 'You have to try not to think about it,' she laughs.

TOP DOGS

What equine physiotherapy does for horses, Barbara Houlding does for top dog athletes. Keeping and training racing greyhounds herself, few can know the breed as well as she does – and she and her husband have the winners to prove it. She also works with other elite dogs and points out that just like human athletes, different skills and strengths are needed for different animals. 'Greyhounds are the sprinters – the 100 metre runners, if you like – while sled dogs are endurance athletes or marathon runners. And agility dogs are amazing athletes too.'

Ms Houlding describes herself as a veterinary physio who treats 'occasional bipeds' and who is in the process of setting up her own specialist centre in Suffolk. She is passionate about the need for physios working with animals to be qualified. 'My ethical worries are about people who just think they'll have a go at it – you have to understand canine treatments; you can't just extrapolate from treating humans.'

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It's a grubby job in a man's world... you need steel-capped boots, a thick skin and a sense of humour

KATE HESSE

Groups like the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy – the CSP clinical interest group in animal therapy – are helping to promote the discipline, as are postgraduate courses, for example, the masters degree at the Royal Veterinary College, where Ms Houlding lectures.

But there remains the issue that while the term 'physiotherapist' is protected in law, anyone can stick another word in front of it and call themselves an 'animal' or 'equine' or 'canine' physiotherapist.

This can lead to problems at the track or course.

'It's a very competitive market, more so now we're in a recession,' says Kate Hesse. 'The competition isn't just from other veterinary physiotherapists, but from chiropractors, osteopaths and the dreaded "back man" – which refers to lay people, who, if you're lucky, have done a couple of weekend courses or perhaps learned a few tricks off their dad. I'm regularly referred to as the "back lady" and it never ceases to make me cringe.'

Insults and randy colts aside, however, Ms Hesse doesn't regret that when she had an offer from vet school in one hand and physio school in the other, she pursued the latter. As well as career highlights that included being the physio for the Australian equine team at the Sydney Olympics, she particularly delights in remembering a trip to New York with one special horse, who is now out to stud.

'Starcraft is a real glamour galloper and is a household name in Australia, who made it over here,' she smiles. 'He was handsome, a pin-up and a bit cheeky – and a fellow Australian. He was a real star and I was so lucky to work with him.' FL

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On the gallop

When Anna O'Brien started working with what is now the jockeys' injury management team, she asked one of the riders if he was ever pressed for tips. 'He told me he advises not to wash whites with colours,' she laughs.

It's a jokey way of making the point that jockeys, like everyone in the horse racing world, could be in serious trouble if thought to be passing on information from the stable. Ms O'Brien and the other 10 physiotherapists on the JIM team must bear this in mind when treating their clients – the professional and amateur national hunt and flat jockeys at race meetings.

'We treat acute and chronic injuries at race meetings,' she says. 'It's very challenging and it's hard work – you can be doing five to 12 treatments in one afternoon. But although it's demanding, it's very rewarding. Dealing with professional athletes is always a privilege – jockeys are amazing people and they work very, very hard.'

Today's JIM team has its roots in a service set up by animal therapy pioneer Mary Bromiley some 18 years ago. 'It was obvious early on that this was essential for jockeys,' says Ms O'Brien, explaining it is now under the aegis of the Professional Jockeys Association.

The JIM team is incredibly busy: attending races at 55 of the 60 tracks in England, Scotland and Wales, and covering 100 per cent of all jump fixtures and a third of all flat meetings. Physiotherapists typically arrive an hour and a half before racing begins, in order to be available for jockeys needing treatment prior to their race, as well as post racing.

Jockeys fall on average every eight to nine rides, so they have a lot of injuries

ANNA O'BRIEN

'Jockeys fall on average every eight to nine rides, so they have a lot of injuries.' These include fractures, particularly of the femur, as well as upper body and thoracic spine problems, and treatments are mostly 'hands on', but physios also use therapies like ultrasound at the track.

Ms O'Brien admits to not being especially interested in horses or in racing – perhaps just as well as she has no time for watching when she is attending meetings. But one thing that has struck her is the regard jockeys have for each other.

'They really look out for each other,' she says. 'There are television monitors in the treatment area [showing the ongoing races]. If there weren't, we wouldn't be able to get to jockeys to come in, as they always want to know what's going on – and if someone falls, even if it doesn't look bad to me, they'll be concerned because they know what it's like. Yes, they're in competition but the camaraderie is amazing.'

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