

Lola Michelin

Director of Education and Founder of
Northwest School of Animal Massage

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The Northwest School of Animal Massage was founded in 2001 to meet a growing demand for approved training programs in canine and equine massage in the State of Washington. Headquartered on Vashon Island, just across the sound from Seattle, the NWSAM has now expanded to 15 satellite campuses across North America and attracts students from as faraway as Japan and Australia.

Horse Connection sat down with founder Lola Michelin to learn about the school, about her, and to find out what is the most difficult animal to massage.

What motivated you to start NWSAM?

I started out as a vet tech and studied animal science at Michigan State. During that training I learned about animal massage – specifically equine massage and then later in life when I moved to the Pacific Northwest I studied human massage. So my experience in both human and animal massage led me to start the school.

Do you specialize in equine massage?

We have two programs – a small animal and a large animal program.

Our student body is probably

around 60% enrolled in the small animal program, focusing on cats and dogs, and the remainder 40% on large animals, primarily horses. We also have many students that complete both programs.

Wasn't equine massage established first, and then expanded to include dog and cat massage?

Absolutely, equine massage has been around for decades and probably centuries. It became really popular in the 70's here in the US and has since grown in popularity. Small animal massage gained a foothold in the last decade and continues to be a large growth market for the industry.

Do the students that graduate from NWSAM go on to start their own business?

I do believe that the majority of our students go into private practice, but many also enter employment positions in vet clinics, animal daycare centers

or grooming salons, especially the small animal massage practitioners. The equine massage practitioners find work at racetracks, which are a very popular venue for a massage practitioner. Probably a third of our students are vet technicians who are supplementing their work with massage as well.

Is there a big difference between human and animal massage?

Yes – if you have an understanding of human massage, some of that information translates over into animal massage as well. However, there are significant differences in the area of anatomy and the biomechanics of the animal. The behavior of an animal is also a factor in how it receives massage because they could be a prey animal or a predator, a pack or herd animal, so the response would vary depending on these factors. Although the benefits are often the same, how we approach them and how we apply the massage differs from animals to humans.

So the massage helps animals in much the same way it helps us?

Yes, at our school we focus on three different areas – maintenance of health that includes benefits such as relaxation and relief from anxiety and stress, relief from muscle tension, and improvement of the circulatory and respiratory system. The second area is that of performance, and we specialize in techniques for athletic animals and working animals such as service or search and rescue dogs, show horses, racehorses and police horses. The third is rehabilitation therapy to help the animal recover from illness, injury and post surgical care that involves issues of confinement when recovering.

When students complete the program at NWSAM, are they then certified the way human massage practitioners are?

Yes, they get a certification for each level of training completed. Some states have different criteria for certification. Here in Washington State, we have a licensing program for animal massage practitioner that is completely independent from the human massage or vet industry, so graduates of our program have to meet certain criteria here, whereas most states have no requirements for certification. However, more states are coming around to establishing guidelines for this growing industry.



The school offers programs in equine massage and small animal massage, primarily dogs.



How long does it take a student to become certified through NWSAM?

The average student takes between four and six months to complete their first level of training. Most students usually do two levels of training and many go through all three levels that will take between a year and a year and a half.

Not trying to be funny here, but how easy can it be to massage a cat?

Ha ha, that's a great question. A lot of cats love massage. The one thing we tell our students is that the market for cat massage is different from dogs or horses because cats break up their day sleeping, grooming themselves and each other, and playing, so they've managed to figure out a low stress lifestyle that would reduce their need for massage as opposed to other animals. That said, cats do get injured and can need rehabilitative treatment.

What's the most unusual animal you have ever massaged?

I've massaged giraffes, a rhino, and large cats such as a panther so I've had a large range of clients to work on.

I imagine a neck massage on a giraffe must take a really long time.

Yes, (laughing) we actually did a surgery on a giraffe that was at one of the zoos where I was working. We had a whole team of massage therapists working on him during the surgery – one on each leg and two working on the head and neck.

One of the most unusual animals Lola gave a massage to was a giraffe.

Apart from the massage school, what is your involvement or connection with horses?

I've had horses most of my life. My goal when I was young and in college was to be a veterinarian for racetrack work and my early practice was with racehorses. I primarily ride in the hunters and equitation currently, and I have a retirement facility that I run. I have ten horses at my place in various stages of retirement or rehabilitation. The group includes a retired dressage horse, my own hunter, several jumpers, a couple of miniature horses and a miniature donkey.

What is the most fulfilling part of your business?

If you asked me ten years ago I would have said seeing the animals that I have worked on recover. Right now it would be hearing the stories from our graduates about their businesses and their successes.

What is the least fulfilling?

The administration aspect of the business. The school has grown beyond my wildest expectations and with that comes a lot of administrative work. I don't like to be inside at a desk.

What have horses taught you that translate into your business model?

I think more than anything, they have taught me to be patient and present. To stay in the moment and work with what's in front of you.

What do you consider your toughest challenge?

Helping an animal where there might be factors that can't be changed. Also, explaining to people the validity of animal massage.

What is your favorite charity?

The work we've been doing with Best Friends Animal Sanctuary has been life changing.

Favorite book?

The Power of One.

Favorite shoes?

My muck boots or my riding boots.

Favorite saddle?

Passier jumping saddle.

What is your guilty pleasure?

Chocolate and red wine.

Were you a wild or mild child growing up?

I would say mild but everyone who knew me would probably say wild.

Where do you live in your dreams?

New Zealand, although Vashon Island is a pretty close second.

Your partner must love horses. What else must they love besides you?

Dogs and animals in general. And adventure.

Greatest regret?

Not being able to go back and complete vet school. But I only regret that about five days out of the year.

Greatest fear?

Being a burden to others – and spiders!

What is number one on your bucket list?

To make it into a mini-prix. It used to be a grand prix, but now, a mini-prix would do.

What is your motto?

The school motto is – “The future is in your hands.” My motto is – “Be the best you can, as long as you can, as safely as you can.”

HC: What's on the horizon for Lola?

I'm excited about some new programs that we're developing for the school in the next five years at our new campus!

For more information on the Northwest School of Animal Massage visit <http://www.nwsam.com/>

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as long as you can,
as safely as you can.”*