



Horsemanship

Will Paull

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“A man who tries to please all men by weakening his position or compromising his beliefs, in the end has neither position nor beliefs”- Pierre Elliot Trudeau

There are two ways of approaching horses. You can try to make the horse do what you want, or you can teach the horse to choose to do what you want. The difference between the two is called horsemanship. It's the difference between getting a horse on a trailer by hook or by crook, or teaching the horse to willingly walk on. It's the difference between rigging some contraption on the horse that holds his head in place, or teaching the horse to position his head where you ask him. Between having to catch your horse, or having your horse come to you. Between pulling your horse along with a rope, or having him follow you without the rope. Do you set things up for the horse to fail, then punish him for it? Or set things up for him to succeed, then reward him for it?

Being a horseman may not win you any ribbons, but it may save your life.

Most horse people by now have at least dabbled in some sort of horse whispering or natural horsemanship, and probably quickly given up. We have all seen the infamous Parelli rope wigglers and may have wondered what they were trying to accomplish. The trouble is, they often don't really know why they are wiggling the rope either. It is pointless to try to copy someone else's method without fully understanding the principle behind it. On the other hand if you do understand the principle, then you can just make up your own method. Two ways I always see people get themselves in trouble: They avoid doing just what they should be doing the most: “My horse is afraid of garbage cans, so I never go near garbage cans.” And, they give up just before something works: “I've been trying for over ten minutes.”

Once you have figured out some methods that work for you, AND understand the principle behind them, horsemanship becomes a never ending process of improving your “feel”. How often have you heard someone say, “He just blew up with no warning.” There was a warning, they just missed it, that's what feel is about. If you have to chase your horse around shaking a bucket of oats to catch him, that's a warning. He could be saying something like, “I don't like you very much, I'm not very safe for you to ride.”

I'm always perplexed by the way people will squat down like a Sumo wrestler and heave on horses legs for decades, rather than learn to ask the horse to lift his foot with some feel. Another warning. Maybe the horse is saying, “I know I'm stronger and smarter than you are. I don't respect you.” If asking the horse to lift his foot takes more effort than popping the lid off a can of Pringles, you're doing it wrong. I'm not telling you you're doing it wrong, the horse is.

When deworming a horse, people will swing from the halter like Tarzan, sometimes even bring Jane along to help, for the horses entire lifespan, rather than learn to ask the horse to lower his head with more feel. I know he wasn't THAT bad the very first time in his life he was given dewormer. If he has gotten worse, it's because someone with no feel, inadvertently trained him to get worse. When the horse is good about oral meds you



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need to be gentle with him to preserve that. Don't just stab some awful tasting stuff into his mouth like you've got better things to do, and expect him to always be cooperative.

Everyone has different aptitudes for feel. A racecar driver can feel things in a brake, clutch, and steering wheel, that most of us are oblivious to. What are you best at? Maybe your fingers deftly dance across a computer keyboard, or you can skip rope with your eyes closed. It may even be the feel you have on the reins. I know of superb riders, better than I'll ever be, who don't do so well back at the barn. Try to find your very best feel in everything you do with a horse. You may never fully succeed, but always being conscious of trying to find a feel can help a lot.

Even something as seemingly inconsequential as petting a horse can be done with feel. When someone puts their hand on your shoulder, you know instantly if it's the warm touch of an old friend (or a new friend), or if it's the awkward groping of someone who wants something from you. Well the horse knows too. It's pretty rare that I will just walk up to a horse and do: pat, pat, pat, "nice horsey." When I pet a horse, I'm reaching out to him, trying to feel his life, and give him mine. I'm not petting his fur, I'm petting his heart.

"Bear but a touch of my hand and you will be upheld in more than this." - Charles Dickens

"Got the feel for the wheel, keep the movin' parts clean" David Lee Roth, "Panama"
Thanks for riding. Will