

A Softness Came Over His Eye

By Herman Detering

The crowd of over one hundred people seemed small in the vast stadium that surrounded the horse pen. That afternoon I was scheduled to work with several wild horses as part of two demonstrations I was putting on for the Colombian Zebu Association, formally known as the Asociacion Colombiana de Criadores de Ganado Cebu.

This was in Monteria City, the capital of Cordoba in Northwestern Colombia. The



temperature there is hot year-round. The seasons are only those of rain and drought. I was invited here to give a talk and put on live demonstrations of low stress handling with horses and cattle.

As I stood in the arena waiting for the horses to arrive, a large truck came to a stop at a nearby loading dock. There were loud shuffling and scrambling noises coming from inside the truck as the horses bumped each other and scrambled around. Quickly, one of the four vaqueros opened the rear door, and they all began shoving and yelling at the horses to get them down a steep, slippery ramp.

Somehow, without falling, the horses managed to get down safely into the pens. Within a few minutes the stallions began fighting. Front hooves lashed out and flashing teeth sought each others' necks.

Immediately, the crowd joined in. Cheers and whistling filled the arena as the horses fought, to the satisfaction of the observers.

I had asked for wild horses, and these were the ones chosen for me to tame. I was to pit one hour of low stress gentling against a lifetime of neglect and rough handling. Well, I had asked for it, and they took me at my word!

I swallowed hard and thought ... I have worked with mustangs off the Nevada desert but never horses as wild, scarred up and desperate as these.

In the holding pen, the struggle continued among the horses and the crowd kept urging them on. All I could do to stop this was to choose the horse I wanted to work with as quickly as possible.

I chose a large sorrel stallion. It took the vaqueros several minutes to separate him from the others, and get him into the round pen where I was going to work.

At this point, I entered the pen; the horse and I exchanged a quick glance. As I stepped forward to move him, he bolted, with a determination not to be anywhere near me. It was clear that in his mind, all humans were to be avoided, at any cost.

I continued to move him around the pen. I expected it would take about fifteen minutes of pushing and turning before I could start trying to draw him to me. Often horses can be drawn to you by relaxing and stepping back from them. If this doesn't work, over a longer period

of time, you can usually make contact by using a low energy, indirect approach, known as "advance and retreat." Here, I tried both approaches and he didn't respond to either one. He would only move away and change directions. I tried again and again but was unsuccessful in getting him to tolerate me anywhere near him.

Fear completely dominated any curiosity he might have about me. He had no doubt that I was a predator and he was the prey. In the wild, the choices in this situation have been clear to prey animals for millions of years: escape or die. So here, as with all wild horses, the fear associated with humans as predators is initially so strong that it shuts out any possibility of voluntary contact.

Unfortunately, I was so focused on what I was doing that I initially failed to recall my first experience gentling a mustang. I worked and worked with this horse without making any progress. Finally I decided to put a rope on him. Once the rope was on him, I used it to create some resistance to his flight impulses. This gave me a better chance to get near him and encourage him to stay with me.

This day in Monteria, in front of a curious and skeptical crowd, I failed to remember the earlier experience and continued with my usual approach of working "at liberty." This is a technique that allows a horse to run free, and accept human contact only when he chooses to do so. In this case, a "liberty" approach would have taken much too long.

I proceeded as best I could. Finally, when I asked for a change of directions, I got him to turn in, toward me, rather than away, and we began a dance that took us many times back and forth across one end of the pen. I thought I was well on my way to making contact, but he would go no further. Because of the number of horses to be worked, I decided to stop at this point, and be satisfied with the limited progress I had made.

During the time I was working with the horse, I was talking to the audience, through a translator, about what I was trying to accomplish. I now explained to them that it would take more time than we had today for me to make contact and halter this horse.

I was disappointed I couldn't show them a wild horse accepting a human and a halter

within an hour. I had, however, another chance, and it was waiting just outside the pen.

The next horse was a skinned-up stallion about as beat up and afraid as I have ever handled. When he was let in, we began the usual drill: I would push him away and turn him, to show that I could control his movement. Then I would reduce my pressure and invite him to come toward me. To my disappointment, like the last horse, he persistently refused my offers and would not let me get closer than about twelve feet.

Now I was really beginning to panic! I felt I was losing my audience but couldn't think of what else to do. Then it hit me: It's a rope; you need to get a rope on him! But, if that didn't work in calming and drawing him to me, how was I going to get the rope off of him? I wasn't sure but had to take the chance.

My roping skills are practically nonexistent, so I needed to find some one there who could rope well. But before I could call for a vaquero who was skilled with a rope, a friend who had some experience with low stress handling, wanted to try his hand at approaching him. Out of frustration I agreed to let him try.

Immediately, he drove the horse away in effort to take control of his feet. Unfortunately, this only irritated the horse and he began to kick. Clearly, things were going from bad to worse. I knew now that I had only one chance, and that was to get a rope on this horse, and soon.

The translator called over the public address system for someone who was skillful at roping. Soon, a short bronze looking man with a big smile appeared and used an underhand toss of the rope to get the loop around the horse's neck. This is a technique I have never seen before, but was later told it is a common practice in Colombia.

So, with the rope securely on the horse, I stepped back into the pen, thanked the vaquero, and went back to work.

The horse stood still as I picked up the rope. I quickly moved to his side and pressured him to shift his hindquarters away from me. This caused his head to come towards me and made it impossible for him to kick me. I did this on both sides and let him know I wanted him to face me and keep at least eight feet away, unless I asked him to come closer.

After a few minutes of this work, I felt I could approach him without causing him to pull away. As I started moving slowly down the rope, he continued to face me and accept my presence. Soon I was reaching out and touching him lightly about half way down his face.

To my surprise he accepted my touch without shock or resistance. As I continued to rub him, he stretched his neck forward and let his head come to rest on my arm. Underneath all his fears, I saw a softness in his eyes that wasn't there before. It was as if he had suddenly been granted a reprieve from the fear and stress that had become a regular part of his life.

I proceeded to move my hand down his neck to his withers. After a moment's pause, I turned and started to lead him off. He followed willingly. I was thrilled that the audience had been able to see this, but I wanted more. I wanted them to see this frightened, wild horse, decide on his own, to follow me, without a rope or any constraint.

I felt rushed for time, but decided to go ahead and remove the rope. I was sure we had made an emotional connection, but I really didn't know what to expect.

As I raised the loop over his head, he stood

there, very alert. Clearly, he was still afraid, but not enough to resist what I was doing. When the rope was completely off, he just stood there, as if nothing had changed. Slowly, I dropped both of my arms to my side, and walked off. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him start to follow me, calmly, with his neck relaxed and his head down.

The audience began to applaud. I felt I had given them an idea of what could be achieved with a wild horse, when approached with empathy and proper techniques.

I have gentled horses for nearly a decade, and it is always an emotional experience for me when a horse's fear gives way to trust. Some of these occasions I remember vividly, others have passed from memory. But this time, I cannot seem to forget the soft look in that horse's eyes, as he experienced gentleness and compassion from a human, probably for the first time in his life.



SOUTHWIND FARMS
EQUESTRIAN CENTER

BREHAM AREA
COLT STARTING
BOARDING
RIDING LESSONS
200 ACRES
FOR RIDING

Herman Detering with Sabra
at the end of a training session,
when horse and trainer have
established trust and communication.

Southwind Farms Equestrian Center
3300 FM 390E | Brenham, TX 77833
713.870.2848
www.SouthwindFarmsTx.com



HOOF 'N' PAW
The OK Portable Corral

- Easy set up and take down
- Unlimited configurations
- Attaches to trailer or can be a stand-alone corral
- Stores in a small space
- Lightweight
- Aluminum construction – no rust, no fuss!

For more info, go to
www.hoofnpaw.net
or call 713-817-2662