

Today, horses serve as companions more than as necessary work tools. Low-stress horsemanship can enrich that relationship for both horse and rider.

Willing Cooperation

By HERMAN DETERING



Look at things from the horse's perspective, respect his needs and learn to communicate in his language. This can lead to a rewarding partnership. All photos taken by Paul Hester and provided by Herman Detering.

Why is it for the past two or three decades the hot topic in horsemanship has been a low-stress approach to training commonly referred to as “natural horsemanship?” Is there anything fundamentally new in the way we train horses?

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, Western horsemanship has been engaged in a debate over how best to train horses. There have always been those who take a gradual and gentle approach to horsemanship, but over the years these few have been far outnumbered by the many who regard horses as wild animals to be subdued and broken.

During the past half-century this lopsided balance has radically shifted toward low-stress horsemanship. Those who use this method view horses as frightened prey animals who have the potential to work in partnership with humans if we will look at things from the horse's perspective, respect his needs and learn to communicate in his language.

Basically, horsemen who use this approach strive to minimize fear in the horse and eliminate the use of force by handlers. In place of these, they seek to develop a mutual sense of “feel” that joins them with the horse and makes low-stress handling possible.

Today the many variations on this approach are generally grouped under natural horsemanship. Its roots can be found in the Vaquero traditions of American ranch life and in the work of late 19th century “horse whisperers.”

Most of us are familiar with the term horse whisperer, which has been popularized by Monte Roberts through his books and demonstrations, and by Robert Redford in his film *The Horse Whisperer*.

The TRUE UNITY and WILLING COOPERATION

between the horse and me is not something that can be handed to someone – it has to be learned. It has to come from the inside of a person and the inside of a horse.

— Tom Dorrance, *True Unity: Willing Communication Between Horse and Human*

Establishing leadership



In the initial encounter, the horse views the meeting from the prey versus predator perspective.



Detering's restrained pressure causes the horse to yield.



A few trips around the pen and Detering's leadership is established.

Creating a new herd



Detering's calm approach produces an initial rapport.



Detering asserts his leadership and redefines the herd by sending the horses in opposite directions.



A new hierarchy and sociability emerge when Detering releases the horses from his pressure.

The term has negative connotations for many clinicians because of its historical association with mystery and the supernatural. It has generally been replaced by the term natural horsemanship, which is more associated with the effort to clarify, rather than obscure, the principles of low-stress handling.

This approach to training seeks clear communication with horses through approximating the

Calm persistence



In low-stress handling, project a calm, persistent confidence around the horse.



Another instance



Detering achieves controlled movement of the horse off of his restrained pressure.



The horse has a moment of decision — flee or join Detering.



Detering begins the horse's first lesson "on-line."

body language horses use with each other in herd life.

In natural horsemanship the horse is regarded as a partner rather than as a disposable possession. Advocates of this approach put the relationship with the horse as the No. 1 priority, not to be compromised for any short-term training or competitive advantage. They strive to cultivate choice on the part of the horse, rather than obedience through avoidance of pain. The handler seeks to build a sense of trust and respect in the horse and act so the horse will look to him for leadership.

There is no standard training procedure here. Each situation is different and each handler must adapt his or her approach to fit the particular situation. The only rules are the horse must move when asked to move and may not run over you, kick or bite you. The rest is worked out through patient negotiation.

The popularity of this approach can be measured in part by a quick check on the internet. Today, you will find more than a million web sites listed under natural horsemanship. There are clinics every day around the country, along with training programs and articles on natural horsemanship every month in major horse publications.

A starting point

A dramatic starting point for

Understood and accepted



The horse understands and accepts the lesson. Detering's leadership is confirmed and the horse exhibits calm behavior.

natural horsemanship would have to be the moment in 1960 when a cowboy from Idaho, Ray Hunt, turned to California horseman Tom Dorrance for help.

Ray needed help with a horse he was unable to break with traditional forceful methods. What Ray learned from Tom he proceeded to share with the world. Through his work, he has succeeded in establishing a low-stress style of horsemanship that has become the core legacy for natural horsemanship today.

It seems the world was ready for this message for it quickly caught on in many countries. In America, its acceptance was prepared both by the cultural revolution of the 1960s and through studies of animal behavior that stretched from dolphins to dogs. Today this field of study is known as ethology.

Why low-stress horsemanship?

The basic reasons, principles and techniques for using low-stress methods with horses are similar to those that apply to low-stress cattle handling. Safety and effectiveness rank high along with a deep sense of satisfaction that many feel from bonding with members of another species.

In horsemanship, this method was originally developed for starting colts under saddle and for working with horses that needed remedial help.

It has since grown into a major industry which also focuses on developing extensive ground control of a horse and on teaching refined control in the saddle.

When we ask why low-stress horsemanship has become so popular in the last few decades, several reasons come to mind. First,

the horse today is more an elective companion than a work tool. This elevation in status has carried with it an understandable increase in concern for the well-being of the horse. Further, it is generally argued by natural horsemen that low-stress handling methods produce better results in health, well-being and ultimately in performance.

Achieving low-stress results

Low-stress horsemanship, in the tradition of Tom Dorrance and Ray Hunt relies on two basic principles of horse psychology. First, horses are strongly focused on the pecking order of the herd. Horses will struggle for the highest rank in this order they can obtain. Second, horses are sociable to the herd. Along with the ability to flee danger, the strength and experience of the herd is a major asset for the individual horse in his effort to survive.

The practitioner of low-stress handling must attend to his “herd position” in his relationship with a horse. Once this is settled in his favor, he must establish a strong bond with the horse. Specifically, he must gain the respect of the horse, and then develop the horse’s sense of trust in the horseman’s leadership. This is how horses operate with each other.

For example, to gain initial control and respect, you must achieve a yielding of the horse’s feet. Natural horsemen usually gain this through ground work in a 50- to 60-foot round pen, with the handler applying pressure to the horse from the center of the pen. This calls for approaching a horse with a determined and controlled energy which the handler relaxes the moment the horse starts to move. This technique is known as “pressure and release,” and is used at all levels of training.

The experience of being controlled without pain becomes the basis of a radically new relation-

ship between the horse and man. The options of this prey-predator confrontation are no longer just death, escape or capture, but communication, cooperation and partnership.

When humans cease to act like predators, horses can stop acting like prey. When handlers forgo pain-inducing force, the horse learns that he only has to move, rather than escape, to get relief from pressure. The same pressure and release is used from the saddle by the rider squeezing and relaxing his legs. This opens a new world of choice and response for the horse, and he begins to think and consider rather than just react and run.

It is important to remember this: Low-stress horsemanship is not about just getting a horse to *do* what you want him to; that can be done more quickly with pain avoidance techniques.

This method is about getting the horse *to want to do* what you want. It is about letting him make choices within a structured situation and accepting the positive and negative consequences of these choices.

General principles

There are some general principles that you need to apply to be effective at this style of horsemanship. As important as these principles are, remember that effectiveness in low-stress handling ultimately lies in the art of application and this requires practice and experience.

- Make the choice you want easy for the horse and the choices you don’t want difficult, but not impossible. Allow a horse to make a mistake, but work him a little harder when he does. Keep him searching for the answer you want, then reward him when he finds it.
- Understand that control over a horse’s movement is essential to control over his mind. Movement

is his primary means of defense. Control this and you control him.

- Bond with, support and provide structured leadership for the horse. You are teaching him, not forcing your ideas on him.
- Discipline, set limits, but never punish. Punishment will drive a horse away physically or mentally and confirms his suspicions that we are just another predator to be avoided.
- Break training goals down into as many “baby steps” as is necessary.
- Reward the slightest effort to comply with your requests. Keep a “soft focus” on your final goal and work on the specific problem at hand. For example, trailer loading needs to be broken down into a series of small steps, like getting the horse to move forward on cue, then to move to smaller and more confined spaces.
- Take responsibility for the choices your horse makes.
- Act so that your body language is responsible for the choices he makes.
- The pressure you apply should be just enough to overcome the other pressures that are acting on him.

In low-stress handling, you need to project a calm, persistent confidence through your presence. Never express anger or fear. Project warm support for correct choices and remain emotionally neutral when applying corrections.

Try to recognize undesirable behavior as early as possible and then redirect the horse’s attention to doing something he knows well.

We humans are, after all, predators. Horses know this deep in their genes. However, our hold on their trust and respect turns not on what we are, but on how we act toward them.

Natural horsemanship today

There are literally hundreds

of clinicians today who work with these low-stress principles and methods.

Ray Hunt is still traveling and teaching all who are interested in learning. A few of those who follow closely in this tradition are Buck Brannaman, Bryan Neubert and Pat Parelli. Other major nationally recognized clinicians include Clynton Anderson, John and Josh Lyons, Peter Campbell, Chris Cox and Craig Cameron.

Some clinicians stress extensive groundwork while others move quickly to work under saddle. Techniques have been developed to serve both the novice and the experienced horseman. Some are professional cowboys in a hurry to get back to work. Others may not even want to ride, but want to develop refined skills on the ground.

The horse's choice

What I see that distinguishes natural horsemanship from other methods of training is the emphasis on allowing the horse choice in his responses. It puts the relationship with the horse above all other training goals and communicates with him in his language of pressure and release. This gets the horse to want to do something, rather than just manipulating his behavior.

The art of low-stress handling is not mysterious, or the province of a few highly gifted individuals. It is rooted in an understanding of the psychology of prey animals. It requires careful study, practice, and an empathetic feel for animals.

Perhaps the most appropriate image of the willing partnership that is the goal of natural horsemanship is the classical centaur, a creature half-man and half-horse. For, to paraphrase Ray Hunt, it is only when you can act so that your idea becomes his idea and his feet become your feet that you have attained the goal of harmony with your horse.■