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Unsung Heroes



Moonstruck and Mr Bell

The story of Mr Frank Bell and the horse who grew up to carry a future King.

As the sun begins to set over the dusty plains and paddocks of tall grass, off in the distance a whinny is heard. Gazing off, you see a lone figure playing gently with two frolicking horses. The words, "That man looks like he's dancing with those horses", come to mind. And he truly does; he dances with horses.

A romantic vision, but one not far from the truth. That is the life of Mr Frank Bell, horse trainer and imparter of knowledge of all things equine. For the last 15 years, Frank's name has been synonymous with a new style of training horses that does not involve conduct reminiscent of the treatment of slaves in ancient Egypt. Or for that matter, the treatment of horses in ancient Egypt. Not that I can prove any of this. You'll just have to go with me.

In 1989, while most of us were probably lamenting the break up of the Culture Club, Frank was putting his skills to use on a horse farm in Camden, South Carolina. Here, an unbroken horse - no, not one that was just out of the box, one that hadn't been ridden - by the name of Moonstruck waited in a pen.

Moonstruck was of the finest South American breeding, but very highly strung...just like my ex-girlfriend. Little did Frank or Moonstruck know, that the horse would later become one of the fastest in the game of polo and go on to carry the most famous polo player of our time and future King of England, Prince Charles...just like my ex-girlfriend.

After a little walking about the pen, Frank rode Moonstruck out into the fields of the farm, then back again. While dismounting, his foot gently brushed the horse's rump, spooking her and she jumped out leaving him to land heavily on the ground. Unperturbed by her behaviour, he settled down the horse before jumping back in the saddle. It seemed that Moonstruck was no longer interested in being ridden that day as she soon catapulted Frank straight into the side of the pen, breaking his collar bone and landing him in a cast for a couple of months...just like my ex-girlfriend.

The result of that fateful day is now a unique training system, developed by Frank with the occasional nod of thanks to others in the field, by which horses are reared. He calls it the Seven-Step Safety System. Others tried to call it Mr Bell and his Amazing Training Machine, but that never really stuck. And what are the steps, you ask? None other than, bonding, take and give, intimacy, the dance begins, desensitising, ballet on the ground and ballet in the saddle.

Moonstruck, of course, went on to be H.R.H. Prince Charles' favourite steed, carrying him to victory upon victory in match after match on the polo field. That is if you believe Royalty ever do have a fair game, what with all the opponents who 'accidentally' miss a ball or injure themselves at the most inopportune moments. "That was a spanking shot you played there, Charles. Went straight past me!" Yeah, right.

The horse, meanwhile, had a propensity to attract fame and gathered a crowd of followers wherever she carried a rider. Pretty soon, Moonstruck, under the weight of so many medals and honours, inevitably fell in with the wrong crowd. She started going out all night, dancing and partying, with not a care for the fact that she had a match on the next day.

Not long after, Moonstruck, was found on the side of highway US-1, wandering, neighing incoherently and throwing what she said were "rats" from her saddle. The South Carolina Highway Patrol returned Moonstruck to her pen and continued on their way, but not before alerting her friend's to the problem.

Moonstruck then received an invitation to a special "celebrity match" which, upon her arrival, actually turned out to be an intervention organised by her nearest and dearest. They confronted her with her wicked ways and the damage she was doing to her friends and family, and Moonstruck finally saw the light. She returned to her prize winning form soon after and the Royal family could not have been happier.

Anyway, back to the Seven Steps. Frank's technique, the foundation for everything he does with horses, works on the simple principle of building trust between horse and rider. This is established through a series of exercises that begin the moment one first meets a new horse. Think of it like when you're in a bar and approach someone across the room.

"You only get one chance to make a first impression on all living creatures", Bell states at the beginning of his demonstrations. With his horses, this involves 'search touching' or trying to find what makes the horse feel good; a rub on the eyes, scratch under the jaw, maybe working his finger inside the horse's nose, things we all find enjoyable. Add some soothing words and all this reduces the horse to putty in his hands. Kind of like the start of every Barry White song.

The exercises then move through touching and pressure methods to relax and gently coerce the horse into simple manoeuvres.

Then begins the 'dancing' component of the method. The trainer moves the horse through movements, all expanding on the previous trust and relaxation exercises and sometimes compared to Tai Chi.

This all culminates in a 'ballet' of movements, almost like dressage, performed by horse and rider, demonstrating the new found trust and safety they have developed with each other. And so the Seven Steps are complete. Much easier than those other "Twelve steps" my ex-girlfriend tried to get me into.

This is by no means a detailed explanation of Frank's technique, merely a scrape on the iceberg that has brought happiness and love into the lives of so many Royals. And if you're lucky enough to be in presence of a noble steed who calmly trots around and shows more affection than an itty, bitty baby kitten, chances are this lucky horse has spent part of it's life with the "horse whisperer".

