



# Frank Bell Horse Whisperer

## **MOONSTRUCK: WHO IS TEACHING WHOM?**

*By Frank Bell*

It is interesting to look back upon one's life and realize that some of life's greatest, most powerful lessons – the kind that can instantaneously transform us, or the kind that can even end up remarkably vaulting us down previously unplanned life paths – can often happen in just the blink of an eye. Or even...in the quick, resounding crunch of a bone.

It was the late 1980s and I was on the back of a horse who was about to teach me the most important lesson of my horse career; unbeknownst to me at the time, it was a lesson that would go on to benefit riders and trainers and instructors throughout the world for years to come. I was on my second two-year-old Argentine filly of the day and neither horse previously had been ridden. The first, a sweet chestnut, had been a breeze, and we seemed to fit each other like old friends. But the second filly was quite another story; clearly she was having a bad day, but it was a bad day that would transform my life forever.

It hadn't started out that bad. I saddled up the second, more spirited filly, and had done my groundwork, then climbed right on confidently. With my earlier success of the day working the easier filly, I was feeling downright just a little cocky. You see, this was only the second unbroken horse I *ever* had been on, and I had absolutely no idea then how quickly and violently it can turn.

Her name was Moonstruck, so-dubbed for the obvious bright white moon on her almost-black forehead. She was of the finest South American breeding, very high strung, which isn't necessarily an undesirable trait for a horse headed into the fast-paced, very demanding world of polo. Little did I know that day, but Moonstruck would later go on to become one of the fastest horses in the game of polo, and would carry one of the most infamous polo players of all time: the future King of England, Prince Charles. But today Moonstruck was still green. She had her young mind on other things, namely, sheer terror and the absolute determination to unload her rider.

Initially, the ride in the sixty-foot roundpen had proceeded perfectly. It was a beautiful spring day in Camden, South Carolina. The entire southland was bursting out of winter magnificently, as the grasses greened and buds exploded everywhere. The dogwoods, azaleas and daffodils exuberantly greeted the warmth and penetrating sunshine. The smells and sounds of the awakening had everyone feeling great, including me. With my second successful ride under my belt, my confidence level began to inflate, and I felt the urge to push the envelope a bit more. That's when I decided to ride Moonstruck out of the roundpen for the first time.



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Still feeling confident, I rode Moonstruck across the field to an area over by my house several hundred yards to the north, then we headed to the edge of the lake, where I even managed to get her to take a few steps into the cool water. Things were going well. Feeling satisfied, I headed the filly back toward the roundpen, which was situated right in the middle of the three-hundred-acre horse farm that I was managing for Geoffrey and Jorie Kent. Things were still going smoothly; no surprises here.

Our ride completed, I swung my right leg off the horse, where it barely brushed the filly's rump. But that unexpected rear-brush was all it took; before I could finish my dismount, Moonstruck jerked right out from under me, and I landed hard on the ground. The filly was clearly bothered by this surprise dismount, and suddenly she became even more agitated. She pranced around frightened. However, I knew I had to get back on her in order to leave her in a good place and end on a positive note. But I also knew instinctively that Moonstruck needed a little time to cool down. So, I turned the jittery filly loose into the roundpen and then sat up on the edge of the fence to watch as she moved around, hopefully burning off her agitation. Truth be known, I was stalling. I didn't have much in my bag of tools to offer her. I knew my limitations.

I'd worked for the Kent family for a couple of years now and was learning about horses as quickly and efficiently as I felt possible. Their travel company, Abercrombie and Kent, had a high-goal team, which was sponsored by Rolex. The Kents were also best friends with Prince Charles of England. These folks played the fastest and most prestigious polo in the world and owned the best mounts, as well, mostly from Argentina and quite pricey. Players alone commanded salaries as high as a million dollars to play for a season. These players were nearly always of Argentine descent and grew up playing the game from quite a young age. Even as small children, they would swing mallets as they raced around on the playground, playing that game as comfortably and as often as most other children might play tag. By the time they were actually riding, they could already hit the ball with phenomenal precision. The game of polo has long been imbedded in the Argentine culture, and that country unequivocally turns out some of the best horses and riders in the world. And Moonstruck was one of those horses. She just didn't know it at the time, this crisp spring day. But then, neither did I.

As I stalled for time, hoping Moonstruck would settle, I prayed for someone to show up. A helper on the ground would make all the difference as Moonstruck would feel a whole lot more secure. . . as would I. Interesting how when you don't want interruptions, there is this constant litany of people, deliveries, UPS trucks, etc. Well now I needed someone, anyone to show, but that just wasn't the case. I was in this on my own. Me and Moonstruck.



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Finally I worked up the courage and faced the moment of truth. I entered the solid wooden roundpen with determination, sprinkled with a touch of resignation. I was still feeling confident, but honestly had no idea how to help Moonstruck out of her fear place, aside from just climbing up on her back again. My ground-training skills were very limited then. As I swung my leg over her back, Moonstruck immediately tensed up like a coiled spring. With the left rein, I had pulled her head around toward me as I mounted so that she could not easily leave or explode, but she was still shaking with fear as I found the stirrup on the off side. Taking a deep breath, I eased her head a bit and she walked off very slowly, gingerly, on what felt like were her tiptoes. I sat deep into the saddle and talked to her.

"Easy girl. You're just fine. Eeeeeeeeeeasy now," I cooed repeatedly. But it wasn't working. We would walk a few steps and Moonstruck would tense, remaining right on the verge of blowing like a volcano. I tried to get her head cranked around and wait until she settled a bit to try again, but even this had no positive, settling effect. She was becoming completely unglued. Worse, when I shifted in the saddle to try to dismount, Moonstruck would almost blow, and so I had no other option but to continue with the tense ride. My adrenaline beginning to pump by this point, I decided to allow her to trot off her excess energy. I chose that option out of total desperation. A few strides into the trot and the volcano finally spewed; Moonstruck catapulted me right off her back and hard into the side of the roundpen. I heard a loud SNAP, and immediately realized I couldn't move my left arm or shoulder. It felt like a dull knife was stabbed into my upper chest. My face was skinned up and bleeding. However, as injured as I was, what hurt most was...my pride. And I also knew: I'd just left the horse in a very bad place. I felt like...I'd failed. Painfully, I dragged myself up and out of the roundpen and finally to the hospital to have my face cleaned up, and also to learn that I wouldn't be riding horses for a couple of months with a badly broken collar bone.

In retrospect, this accident was actually a life blessing in disguise. During my weeks of healing, I had plenty of time to think about my mistakes and even my future. As I mended, I vowed to myself then and there, that before I would *ever* ride another horse, I would set up a system on the ground to promote my safety, as well as the safety and well-being of the horse. And that's exactly what I did.

What evolved out of that long ago, fateful spring day, is a system that I have been honing and teaching to thousands of students, trainers, teachers, and veterinarians throughout the world for years now. I call this program my **7-Step Safety System**. It is now the foundation for everything I do with horses, all horses, whether I ride them or not.

When these seven sequential exercises are implemented properly, the rider has a completely new and in-depth relationship with his horse. Furthermore, it builds a relationship based on mutual levels of confidence and trust. If the horse isn't right, perhaps it's not time to ride, or it may be time to get some outside help.



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What we're talking about here is *safety*. To my way of thinking, safety is the only thing that really matters when dealing with horses. Without safety as your primary focus, the experience for you and the horse cannot possibly be all that it can be: incredible. Best of all, anyone can learn this system. It's not hard, but does require practice.

My **7-Step Safety System** is as follows:

- **BONDING**
- **TAKE AND GIVE**
- **INTIMACY**
- **THE DANCE BEGINS**
- **DESENSITIZATION/CONFIDENCE BUILDING**
- **BALLET ON THE GROUND**
- **BALLET IN THE SADDLE**

Learning and implementing these seven steps can create the most amazing bond one could ever imagine having with a horse, and keep you, the rider, safer than you've ever been. I repeat: anyone can learn this, with practice. A child, an adult, any horse can learn this and should!

I have made it one of my life's missions to teach others what Moonstruck taught me one long-ago spring day, as have so many other horses taught me, as well, along that journey. I also have had the privilege of working with hundreds of some of the most troubled horses in the world, and have brought them around to far better, happier places, simply using my 7-step system. It is truly a life joy to turn around completely a frightened, damaged, or hurting horse successfully. I still, to this day, must thank that young filly named Moonstruck for teaching me one of my life's greatest lessons. Painfully, yes, but ultimately, magnificently and life-lasting. She changed my life.

*"The most painful lessons in life are often the ones that change us for the better."*