The Horses That Touched My Heart



Frank Bell

Horse Whisperer

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Preface

As a young boy I was taken with horses as early as I can remember. Something grabbed me. The sheer beauty, the elegance, the grace and patience they possessed seeped deeply into my soul. I promised myself, had almost a knowingness, that one day I would be with a horse and together we would do amazing things. That horse found me in 1987, and we did those amazing things for twenty-two years. In February of 2008 he moved on, but he will live inside of me forever.

Lakota Breeze taught me so much and still does. The love I ***feel*** for Lakota is beyond words. And that word says it all. For without feel, we'll never be more than caretakers. With feel we become partners, true friends because we truly understand them.

Feel was a gift to me and is my gift to you in these vignettes about these magnificent creatures. Enjoy the journey… Enjoy the ride.

In Spirit,

Frank R. Bell



CHAPTER ONE

Moonstruck: Who is teaching whom?

"The horse is God's gift to man." – Arabian Proverb

It is interesting to look back upon one's life and realize that some of life's greatest, most powerful lessons—the kind that instantaneously transform us, or the kind that 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 had been ridden previously. 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 working the easier filly, I was feeling, well, 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.

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 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 Kents 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 polo 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 yard, 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 parade 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.

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, 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 offside. 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, right on the verge of blowing like a volcano. I'd pull her head around which prevented her from blowing, wait until she settled a bit and then walk off again, but even this had no positive, settling effect. She just wasn't improving and we were both incredibly tense. 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, hoping, praying for someone to show up. 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 had 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 a life blessing in disguise. During my weeks of healing, I had plenty of time to think about my mistakes and even my future. The first question was, "Do I really want to continue this horse thing at thirty-nine years of age?" I was admittedly a little old for this cowboy stuff. I tried to find the rationale in moving on, pursuing something else. But I couldn't leave the horses. My work wasn't finished. But I did make a very solemn promise to myself as I mended: I vowed 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, was 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. 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 concentration, focus, and 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**

In a nutshell, we're creating a relationship, becoming the respected leader, addressing problems, and finally connecting brains and feet in an elegant dance we call ballet, as safety is turned into a graceful dance, first on the ground, then in the saddle.

Learning and implementing these seven steps can create the most amazing bond one could ever imagine, 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. 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.



CHAPTER TWO

Ambella

"When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will finally know peace." – Jimi Hendrix

Connecting with others on a deep, meaningful level is a rarity in our hurried world. When it does happen, it is truly a gift that needs to be recognized and acted upon. Sometimes we aren't quite ready or even aware of such connections and the moment is gone before we realize what has been lost. In the late summer of 1988, I had such a connection with one of the most beautiful young ladies I've ever known. I long to reconnect with Ambella.

I took a job that summer at Indian Creek Ranch near the one-horse town of Cameron, Montana. The ranch was owned by some very well-to-do polo people who had homes throughout the world and hobnobbed with the most famous polo player of all, Prince Charles.

In the polo world, the thoroughbreds have a career that usually ends in their mid-teens when they lose their speed or break down physically. From there they often become brood mares as they did at Indian Creek Ranch. With two famous stallions to service the mares, a new crop of foals arrived every year to welcome the warm springtime weather and green grass. As the sun just started to light the sky on the morning of the equinox, March 21st, a very special foal was taking her first breaths on that cool beginning. She was the color of aged hay, a buckskin with a prominent dark stripe running down the middle of her back. With a black mane and tail and dark lower legs, she wasn't common like all the bays that

dominate the polo scene. She marched to the beat of her own drum, right from day one.

On my second day at the ranch I was assigned to the fence repair detail, beginning with the fences close-in, just walking distance from the main buildings. I donned a tool belt with plenty of staples, picked up a specialized tool for stretching wire, pulling staples, and pounding them back into the posts, and started working my way away from the barn.

The weanlings, born only several months before, hurried over as a group and watched curiously from a distance as I worked. They kicked up and played, especially as I pounded. It kind of became a game for all of us. They would get very quiet and creep in closer and closer as I did the quiet work. Then when I began pounding, the tempo picked up until they were dancing around like kindergartners to loud music. The second the pounding stopped, they would freeze, ears forward, intent on my work. Each time it got quiet, they inched in closer with the little buckskin leading the way. Finally, as I was bent over retrieving staples off the ground, I felt a soft nose on my arm. I very slowly turned to find the lovely buckskin extending a warm greeting to me. I sat down and allowed her to sniff me all over. Her timid friends stayed back and watched as she bravely paved the way to our new-found friendship. With my back against the fence pole and knees up, I gently stroked her face all over, then under her chin in the hollow of her jaw. She cocked her head to the side as I found her spot and itched it for a bit, then quit. I had work to do, so I asked her to leave. She fully understood my wishes and hurried off to join her friends, almost gloating at her huge accomplishment as if to say, "Look what I just did!"

It was the same the rest of the day. The gang of eight weanlings would come and go, each time becoming a little more brave with the buckskin always leading the way. She was smaller than the other horses but didn't know it. As the day progressed, I handled most of the horses, getting more aggressive with them each time, as they did with me. Little did I know at the time that I was doing a great job of gentling them, while teaching respect. It

all seemed like the right thing to do at that time, and I just loved getting my hands on the youngsters.

The following morning, I had some mechanical work to do in front of the barn on the old Massey Ferguson tractor. As I walked out the back door of main house, who should greet me but my new girlfriend. I walked right up to her and gave her a hearty hello, stroking her head and neck first, then all over her body. I finished with a big hug, wrapping my arms all around her neck and pulling her into me tight, ending with a strong squeeze, then walked off toward the barn just yards away. I slid the barn door open, walked in and started organizing the tools I would need to work on the tractor. As I was busily searching in the low light for a specialized wrench at the bottom of the toolbox, I sensed a presence nearby. I then felt the warm breath and whiskers of my favorite girl. She had walked right into the barn amid farm equipment and sharp objects. I very delicately showed her the way back out, told her how much I appreciated her help, and went back to work, this time closing the door behind me. I had diverted a potentially very dangerous situation. Had she spooked suddenly, it would have meant certain injury in all that pointed and dangerous clutter.

Tools in hand, I emerged to find her waiting patiently for me right by the tractor. It was as if she knew exactly what I had to do and really did want to help. I spent about an hour over, under, around and through that old unit with the buckskin right by my side. I believe she would have jumped into my lap and taken a drive if I'd have encouraged it. From that day on, she was my number one girl.

As a student, she was as good as it gets. She was always eager to learn and enjoyed the process thoroughly. But she also had a mind of her own and would voice her opinion readily when asked by either horses or humans. If something wasn't fair, she would stand right up to it. Upon my return to South Carolina in the fall of 1990, she let me know some bad handling had taken place while I'd been gone over the summer.

The horses had been left in the care of summer help who had used a variety of workers as the summer progressed. When I

reintroduced myself that fall, her attitude was combative and she struck me when I was deworming her. She had obviously been in a fight with a human and had developed an attitude. It didn't take long for me to sort out just what had happened. The farrier had worked her over and she didn't have a lot of use for men, even me. I was heartbroken. The bad news: horses never forget. The good news: they do forgive. She was a little mad at me for leaving for so long and for being mistreated. I then took the time to reconnect, just loving all over her. She melted like butter into my attentions and the bad behavior ended immediately. What a relief for me as this was the year to teach her to accept me on her back.

By now I had started about a half dozen horses on my own and my confidence was growing like a weed. I couldn't get enough. Working with the two-year-old crop of eight was likely the most enjoyable and meaningful period of my life. I knew these kids. They were all my friends. We had grown up together from the get-go. I taught them to lead and to enter stalls and trailers. I trimmed their feet. And we all went on the big road trip to South Carolina, moving the whole ranch of thirty-five horses to the south in three trailers. What a road trip! But the moment of truth was upon me as Ambella and I entered the roundpen on the day that would truly change her life, forever.

Being my favorite of the gang of eight, I started with her, confident that this would be an experience never to be forgotten. And it wasn 't. The dance, I had perfected. The harmony that I had strived for and the partnership that we had created, all came together with this horse I so loved. Within minutes we were gliding around that roundpen like a couple of seasoned ballroom dancers. She seemed to say to me, "I've just been waiting for this moment. Now we can have big fun." She progressed like no horse I've ever worked with. Within a couple of weeks, we were cantering forward and moving laterally simultaneously like a sharp knife cutting through soft butter. Her perfect balance and my medium-size fit like a well-used leather glove. My mental pictures became hers as we prepared her for the fast and exciting world of polo. I dreaded the day of her departure and even contemplated purchasing her myself. To this day I regret not

exercising that option, but then the story would not be nearly so interesting.

In the spring of '91 Omar Viale drove up from Sun South, Abercrombie and Kent's polo headquarters in Lake Worth, Florida. A fabulous trainer originally from Argentina, Omar had lived at the farm next to ours in South Carolina the previous year. He had taken me under his wing and shared his vast knowledge with me. Now he was here to take my lady away. It was a hard day for me. He roached her beautiful black mane as she watched the thick hair pile up on the ground below. He then got on her and experienced a lightness unlike anything he had ever dreamed of. "Very nice, Frankie. Very, very light. Very, very nice," he reiterated over and over.

The tears welled in my eyes as I said good-bye and hugged that horse fiercely. She took part of me with her that day. That once-in-a-lifetime connection drove off, heading south. I let it happen and have regretted it ever since.

I kept track of Ambella as best I could over the years. She was a star and one of the fastest horses in the game, leading Geoffrey Kent and his Abercrombie and Kent/Rolex team to several championships. But then I got busy and almost forgot the pain of missing her. She was gone. She had a great life in polo, a job, meaning she had moved on. Leave it behind, Frank. But down inside I couldn't let her go, ever.

In January of '99, I called Omar to invite him to a clinic I was doing in the Tampa area in mid-February.

"Ah, Frankie. I come up and see you. . . No, you come down here and do a demonstration for our polo friends. I set it up for you. Okay?" he asked.

"Hey, Omar, where's that buckskin filly I worked with? I'd really like to see her," I inquired.

"You mean Ambella. Oh, she's in England, Frankie. That horse is fast, one of the fastest in the game."

"I'd like to see her. I may be over there this summer. How would I find her?"

"After he got hurt and quit the game, Geoffrey gave her to Prince Charles. He gave him both her and Moonstruck."

I thought back on the horse who had taught me the most and changed my life. That was Moonstruck. I thought back on the horse I had loved the most and had the best connection. And that was Ambella.

I will do everything in my power to see her again. If there's a way to give her a home to live out the rest of her life when her polo career ends, I want that home to be the one I provide. I long to reconnect with Ambella.



CHAPTER THREE

Lakota's Lasting Adventure

"To be loved by a horse, or by any animal, should fill us with awe, for we have not deserved it." –Marion Garretty

The end of October was closing in fast in southwestern Montana. The color change had taken place weeks earlier, and the feeling of winter, short days and gray weather followed by extreme cold and snow, was in the wings. "One more trip into the park. I've just got to do it one last time," I thought to myself repeatedly as the days ticked by. Then one bright morning I just couldn't resist.

The forecast was for a magnificent fall day in the mid-sixties and light winds from the south. I hurriedly gathered my gear and loaded Lakota, my five-year-old Anglo/Arab gelding, into my open two-horse trailer. I put a heavy blanket on him as the morning was brisk, probably below freezing. I gobbled some breakfast down and with a piece of toast in my mouth, kissed my lady farewell for the day.

Into the Wilds

It was about a hundred-mile trip into my favorite haunt at the edge of the Tetons in western Wyoming. I'd made this trip dozens of times and the excitement of riding my horse into the wilds never abated. The lure of this magical place was its remoteness. It was truly untamed and hadn't changed in eons—no buildings or barbed wire, no sign of man save for the lightly traveled trails and odd fire ring. A piece of paper or a can would catch my eye from time to time and always go home with me. The grasses, especially the high-meadow timothy, were chest-high on my horse this time

of year. He'd just take the tops off without even dropping his head. He loved this place as much as I. And the fishing? There are cutthroat trout up to ten pounds and there is the odd brown, which was even bigger, but the huge browns are seldom caught—too wily. They die of old age. But they do keep the smaller cutthroat on the alert since they're cannibalistic. It was the big cagey brown trout that had my attention. They would happily rise to a well-presented dry fly just on dark.

Did I mention the bears?

Both grizzlies and black bears inhabit this part of the world. For this very reason food items like bacon are a no-no. In fact, all food must be hung up high in the trees. The experts even suggest hoisting up the very clothes you cooked in as well as anything that smells, like toothpaste, deodorant, spices, etc. I'm careful about it, but not anal. Sensible would the right word. Traveling on horseback is a great insurance policy. A horse will catch the scent or sight of a bear a long, long time before the human will. Horses just plain don't like the smell of bears.

Dropping into Idaho

All these thoughts were drifting through my mind as I drove along, and we crested Raynolds Pass into Idaho. Henry's Lake shone brilliantly in the foreground with the sharply etched Centennial Mountains rising straight up on the other side. The day was shaping up perfectly for a wonderful trip with my best friend, Lakota Breeze. As the grade began to level out toward the bottom of the pass and the odd house appeared in the distance, suddenly I felt a swinging sensation behind me. I glanced into the rear-view mirror to see the trailer whipping back and forth wildly. My heart lurched. I couldn't just jam on the brakes but had to ease down for fear of tipping the already precarious trailer. But it was too late. By the time I got the truck stopped in the middle of the highway, the trailer was on its side. The sight was horrific.

"Oh my God. Oh no," I yelled out. I jammed the gearshift into park and was digging for my knife as I leapt from the truck. With the knife open, I ran around to the back of the trailer to see my terrorized horse pulling back hard on his lead.

There was blood dripping from his knees, and the right side of his rump was hamburger from being dragged along the roadway in the open-designed trailer. I quickly sawed through the lead as he continued to pull back. I stayed right with him.

"Eaaaaaaaaasy big fella. Eaaaaaaaaaasy," I cooed over and over, as much to calm myself as for him. My heart was thumping wildly as my adrenaline shot sky-high. I was completely freaked out –I figured I'd probably killed my best friend.

Free of the rope, Lakota and I shot backwards as far as he needed to get away from that awful turned-over trailer. Eventually he stopped and allowed me to stroke him and survey the damage. A trail of bright blood led to our place of regrouping at the edge of the road. His knees weren't gushing blood but were both pretty skinned up and the blood was dripping onto the pavement. I moved to his right to take in his exposed upper leg/rump area and suddenly realized I was looking at the blanket insulation. The heavy blanket had protected him from the terrible burn of the pavement. I lifted the edge of the blanket high enough to see a dark spot about ten inches wide on his whitish hair. The impact hadn't broken his skin. What a relief!

Tears welled in my eyes as I began to settle and take all this in. I was in shock and reeling from the reality of what had taken place, and how much worse this really could have been. We began walking over to a fence about fifty yards to the south through heavy sagebrush. I tied Lakota to a post and laid my head against his neck.

"I am so sorry, big guy. You trust me so much, don't you? And here I've messed you up. I am so sorry," I repeated as tears dripped from my nose onto his neck. The knees were still bleeding but less now and in reality, he seemed pretty calm, all things considered. I heard the sound of an engine and looked up to see a truck stopping behind the overturned trailer. I waved, hugged my horse, and began walking back up to the highway. "You just relax for a few minutes, Lakota," I called back. "I'll be back and you'll never have to ride in that *&%#@! thing again. I promise."

Help at Hand

By now the driver was out of his truck and shaking his head in disbelief as he took in the scene. "Is your horse okay?" he asked.

"Skinned up his knees and bruised his hind end pretty bad," I admitted, shaking my head and looking down at the pavement in sheer shame and disbelief. The tears blurred my eyes again, but I fought them back.

"What the heck happened, mister?" he inquired.

"All of a sudden, the trailer was whipping back and forth and by the time I got it stopped, it was too late. It had gone over on its side. I guess the hitch broke or came loose or something. God, I don't know what happened. But I've got a real mess here."

We walked to the front of the trailer. The heavy safety chain had prevented an even more horrendous accident. It was tight to the underside of the trailer hitch.

The stranger took calm control of the situation. "Back up your truck a few inches. That'll take off the pressure, and we can remove the chain. I've got a good length of towrope with a hook. I'll bet we can latch onto the side of the trailer and upright it."

This angel was suddenly in charge, and I was at his beck and call. I was still in such shock that I couldn't really think clearly. I backed up my truck and removed the safety chain. In the meantime, the stranger was positioning his truck to the side so he could pull from ninety degrees. He hooked the chain to his hitch, then to the heavy metal angle iron on the side of my trailer. "Okay. Now stand back," he said.

"If something snaps or gives, we've got a lethal chain flying through the air."

From in front of my truck I watched as he very gently righted my trailer. With a loud thump and groan the trailer rocked back and forth a time or two and then settled.

With a firm handshake I introduced myself while he was recoiling his towline. My new best friend's name was Dave Schultz. I dug into my wallet for a twenty, but he wouldn't think of taking it.

"You've got enough on your hands. Think he'll get back in that thing?" Dave asked, with a doubtful look in his eye.

"I have no idea," I sighed, still reeling from the accident. "I figure I'll walk up to one of those houses and call a friend with a big stock trailer. Might need to have the vet come along as well. Man, I just don't know what I'm going to do but I can't thank you enough. You've really pulled me through a whole lot of this mess already. You and the missus have a wonderful day. Heck, it's only 7:30. You've got this whole glorious day in front of you. Thanks again, Dave," I reiterated with another strong, heartfelt handshake.

Schultz drove off in the direction I was originally headed and I contemplated my next move. There were three or four houses a half mile away. But my truck and trailer were right in the middle of the road, so I focused on cleaning up that situation. The hitch on the trailer seemed fine, as did the ball on the truck, so in a few minutes I had the rig safely on the side of the road.

Go for Help or See if Lakota will Load?

My eyes went from Lakota, standing quietly at the fence, to the houses and then back again at least a half dozen times before I decided to walk over and have a visit with my beloved horse. I was still pretty hyped up and not thinking too clearly. Lakota watched my approach with eager ears forward. The knees had stopped bleeding. Relief. I stroked his neck reassuringly and untied the short lead rope. As we walked back toward the trailer, he dropped his head to eat grass several times. I was not about to stop him.

"Very good sign," I thought to myself with a sense of wonder. Only a relaxed horse eats. He just wasn't that freaked out—in fact, hardly at all. We walked right up to the steep trailer ramp.

"Now you need to understand something very clearly, Lakota," I began. "If you don't want to enter that trailer ever again, well, that's fine with me. This is your call here." Lakota looked at me as if he completely understood what I was saying, then looked at the trailer, and put a foot on the ramp, and then looked quizzically at me again.

"Your call here, big fella. You're running the show now."

And Lakota walked right up that ramp as if to say, "Okay Dad, let's get where we're going."

With hindsight I realized that he had no idea anything was ever wrong. "Heck," he probably thought. "We travel across the whole darn country with dozens of horses and then spend our winters in South Carolina. We go into the wilds and deal with rattling cooking gear, llamas, bears and moose. We swim across rivers. And now we turn over trailers. I trust you. You're my Dad. We do it all!" Again, the tears were just streaming off my nose onto the ground. I could not believe the trust this animal had in me. That same trust only forty-five minutes earlier had almost gotten him killed.

I hoisted the ramp back into the closed position that formed the back of the trailer. Then I checked and rechecked the hitch, but I still didn't trust it. I found some wire and secured it 100% this time, knowing full well that I hadn't done this procedure right to begin with. I had not clipped those two little ears down securely and heard that telltale snap that told me it was locked. Nor did I have a lock in the hole on the hitch that would have prevented this horrible occurrence. And I will always feel guilty about that to the end of my days. I think Lakota forgave me, but I could never forgive myself.

Headin' Home

I drove downhill to the nearest house and called my lady friend.

"We've had an accident and I turned the trailer over," I panted into the phone. "Lakota's a mess with bleeding knees and a badly bruised upper leg. Call Doc Leslie and have him there. I'll be there in an hour." I hung up and left with a quick thanks.

It was a bit less than an hour when I pulled back into Indian Creek Ranch. And there was no Doc Leslie truck. Sherry came running out when she heard me honk.

"Where's the Doc?" I called out.

"He just didn't seem terribly worried if the horse would reload. Let's see Lakota," urged Sherry, who was a very cool head and whose own years of horse experience included some pretty grizzly situations.

I lowered the ramp and led my buddy down onto the flat. The knees were skinned but had already begun to scab over.

"Let's see his side. Sure, trashed the blanket, Frank. That probably saved his hide, ya know?" Sherry had taken the words right out of my mouth.

I removed the blanket and she pushed and probed into the discolored hair. He hardly flinched.

"He'll probably be pretty sore. Give him a dose of Bute and clean up those knees with some Betadine. Then put some of that Corona ointment on his knees. He'll be fine, Frank."

"You sure he doesn't need to see Doc Leslie? Come on, this is serious. I'm pretty freaked out about this."

"Heck, he'll be fine," Sherry reassured me. "That's just a scratch, little road burn. It's nothing, really. You're the one who needs help, Frank. You're all white and pale. Probably in shock from this. But your horse will be fine. I promise. I've seen far worse. You know that. Go take care of him and then lie down for a while. You're the one we need to worry about."

I led my friend Lakota into the barn and tied him to a hitching rail, then buried my head into his neck and just wept long and hard—heavy sobs. "I am so sorry, my friend. I am so sorry," I repeated, hugging Lakota fiercely until I was finally okay. He was fine—had been all along. It was all about me apologizing to the friend who trusted me the most.

Trailer Safety

Oh, the lessons we all learn in this horse journey. They're endless. And about the time you kind of think you've seen it all, yet another will appear. That is my promise—curve balls forever with horses. My hard lesson was about checking and double-checking when trailering horses. I cannot stress enough how taking some time at the front-end can save a potential disaster somewhere down the road.

15 Steps to Trailering Safety

1. Is the trailer safe? Sharp objects inside or out? Check the floorboards. With years of urine, manure, and moisture, they rot. There could be a thousand pounds or more on any one

board at any time. You must remove the mat to check the board. Use a nail or ice pick to check the boards for dry rot.

2. Good tires with correct pressure? Use a gauge. These tires support the whole rig plus your horses. Incorrect or uneven tire pressure is generally responsible for most towing problems and too low tire pressure is a frequent cause of tire failure. Check wheel lug nuts and bolts which should be torqued before first road use. Check and re-torque on a new trailer after the first 10 miles, then 25 miles, and again at 50 miles. Check periodically thereafter that they are secure.
3. Lighting and brake systems. Don't wait for the day of the trip. Check these components well before the trip. Then you have time to fix the problem before you leave, not en route. Don't just wing it.
4. Understand just how the hitch itself works. There are many different configurations. Learn yours thoroughly. This is your horse's life at stake. Make sure the ball on the towing vehicle is the correct size for the trailer. This is especially important to check if you have different balls for several different trailers, or if you are using a new or borrowed trailer.
5. All trailers have a safety chain or cable. A heavy chain is best and needs to be secured well at each end. Attach it properly. It saved my horse!
6. Secure all the doors and windows. Double check. Don't allow the remote possibility for a lead getting outside the trailer or a door finding its way open while traveling or otherwise. You don't want to hear that story.
7. Is the footing inside slippery? Urine and manure on a wood floor equal slippery surface. Ridged rubber mats are the best insurance for good footing.
8. Secure the dividers. Far too often dividers come loose. Be absolutely certain the divider is locked in place.
9. When horses are loaded, make sure they are comfortably tied. The rule of thumb is that they should be able to turn their head

ninety degrees. In stock trailers, untied horses are okay, but don't overload or have incompatible horses together.

10. If you are hauling just one horse in a two-horse straight load, put the horse on the driver's side of the trailer. If you are hauling more than one horse, put the heaviest horse on the driver's side. Roads are usually raised in the middle, so by putting the heaviest part of the load on the higher side, it will help to balance the trailer better.
11. If driving a trailer is a new experience for you, practice driving the rig before you put a horse in the trailer. Know well how to park and back up before you head out on the road with a horse in tow.
12. Stop often and make sure all's well back there. Don't load your horses, hop in, and head off on your 500-mile trip. Stop early in the trip to make sure all is well. Feel the wheel bearings for undue warmth. Does the hitch look good? Safety chain? Door and windows? Are the horses traveling OK? Everyone getting along?
13. Remember when driving that you've got animals behind you. At corners and stops give them a slight brake a little ahead of the actual stop. This helps them prepare for that change in speed or direction.
14. It's a good idea to take along a cell phone with a fully charged battery (or use a car charger) or have a CB radio in case of emergency.
15. Having trouble trailer loading your horse? Check out my "Trailer Loading" video. Various horses, trailers, and weather conditions are used to demonstrate my gentle solutions approach to helping horses accept trailers as part of life and basic horse training. Learn how to help your horse to want to be in the trailer and look forward to the next adventure. Proper tying, securing the butt bar and door, backing out, driving, safety tips, and more are covered in my video, which was filmed throughout the U.S.A. Learn how to do it right and actually enjoy the process while heightening horse and trainer/handler confidence.

I won't spend too much time discussing some of the tragic stories I've heard that didn't turn out as well as mine. Rest assured, some absolutely horrible things have taken place in which horses had to be put down because of an owner's very simple trailering negligence. My goal in writing this piece is for you to avoid such an incident. These animals trust us implicitly. They literally place their lives in our hands. Really. We owe them the certainty that we have done every single thing possible to make the trip a safe and rewarding time.



CHAPTER FOUR

Predicament

"Certain comic effects can be achieved by a brand-new rider, especially a man who dresses like a fashion model and rides like a tailor." – C. J. J. Mullen

Jeanie Olen had a stallion with quite a reputation. All the horses he sired were difficult and indeed, no fun to start. I heard about Gainer long before I laid eyes on any of his get. Seems no one in the area wanted to take on any of Jeanie's horses. I rolled up my sleeves in anticipation of something fun and challenging to work with and was ready when Jeanie phoned.

"I've got seven horses I need started and heard you might be able to help me," Jeanie said.

I sucked it in and asked a few questions about them. They were all thoroughbreds of medium size and superb athletic ability, including bucking, twisting, and rearing. Besides that, they were just downright insolent.

"My stallion is fabulous," she boasted.

"Yes, so I've heard," I replied with a wry smile. We made arrangements to meet at Jeanie's farm the very next day to have a look at Gainer's progeny.

Jeanie's place, like everything in the area, was on a hillside without much flat area, save for a slippery roundpen. It was not an ideal set-up for starting horses but would have to do in a pinch. Jeanie proudly showed me her two- and three-year-olds one by one, explaining the specifics that made each of them so special, much like a proud mother introducing her children. They were as varied as could be imagined, ranging from a massive three-year old sorrel thoroughbred that appeared half quarter horse to a

small 14-2 roan. I took an immediate liking to a dark bay thoroughbred of sixteen hands named Predicament.

Jeanie informed me that he was the "case." He'd been through three trainers who were completely intimidated and a bunch of vets, who now would have nothing to do with him.

"Let's start with him," I suggested. Jeanie's face lit right up, since no one would even talk to her about this horse that had baffled everyone.

I eased into Predicament's stall and allowed him to check me out. I could tell he was extremely nervous around new people as his head went sky high and his eyes showed far too much white. He moved to the back of the stall and pawed nervously, almost aggressively. He had experienced a very bad time with too many people.

I felt for his pain and lowered my stature. "Eeeeasy big guy. Eeeeasy," I spoke quietly. "It's all right. I'll help you through all this." I kissed as softly as possible in rapid succession as I began to circle to his right.

His head moved with me, but not his body. I inched closer to his hindquarters, careful to note his attitude and his back leg that could cow kick me in a heartbeat. I reached far out and just brushed his rump lightly, then pulled back. His head lowered and he licked his lips.

I walked completely around his front end, keeping a distance of about ten feet, and again, he just watched. I stroked his rump again, less cautiously, digging my fingers in and working a circle. His head rose with his nose pointing blissfully high into the air, then, as I continued, he rotated his entire head so that his left eye was almost facing the ceiling. Ecstasy.

I started really getting into it with my fingers and used both hands as I briskly worked five-inch circles. My right hand worked back to his tail that was up as high as he could get it, inviting me to stroke its silky underside. I did that for a few seconds very, very lightly, before walking off.

Predicament stood perfectly still for about thirty seconds. Then very slowly he turned his head to face me, dropped it to where his nose was just above his knees and started working

his mouth with sheer delight and a new understanding of the human. I had neither taken nor asked anything of him. There was no bad taste in his mouth or sharp sting on his rump. He simply had been *given to,* unconditionally, for quite likely the first time in his life.

Predicament's interactions with humans had been so horrible that he could expect only the worst every single time. This played right into my hands. What a gift! While I pitied the animal, I recognized that time and consistency could possibly help him trust the human again. In an instant I had his program worked out. He would have to become my new best friend, and it couldn't happen at Jeanie's place as she had hoped. (I learned later that Jeanie was a frustrated vet who had lost her license because of malpractice.)

I led Predicament out to the slippery roundpen and had a great bonding session before I got him saddled. He came along beautifully in my ***7-Step Safety System (7-SSS)*** until it was time to put some weight in the stirrups. Suddenly he became a different horse, almost a Jekyll and Hyde personality. Someone had gotten this far and hit the brick wall.

I couldn't blame them for not knowing where to go next. The old-fashioned racehorse method of bellying horses in their stall and climbing on a time or two before heading to a small roundpen sure didn't work with this guy. Sadly that had been the end of it for his previous trainers. They simply had no more in their bag of tricks. I could only smile with the satisfaction of knowing I could help this guy not only learn to like humans, but to trust them to the point of carrying one of them around on his back. All it would take would be time and consistency before he would indeed invite me to go for a ride.

Predicament Comes to Kamchatka

We made arrangements to bring Jeanie's roundpen to my facility at

"Kamchatka" in Camden, South Carolina, the very next day. Kamchatka was a fabulous place to live and work with horses. The 8000 square foot Civil War-era mansion sat on a beautifully landscaped fifteen-acre estate along with a half dozen cottages and

a forties-style racehorse barn. I leased one of the cottages and the barn. The barn wasn't being used and had kind of gone to seed, but there were three good-sized paddocks along Dicey Ford Road. Across the road lay the hunt country that consisted of about 5000 acres.

Living in this glorious location gave me some of the fondest memories of my life. From experiencing the magnificence of springtime in the south to riding in the vast hunt country, it was a very special period.

In reality, the original Kamchatka is a peninsula off the northeast coast of the former U.S.S.R. and set far apart from everything. In years past this South Carolina estate, perhaps then a plantation, had been so named because it had been so remote. The owners had the cottages built for their well-heeled visiting friends who travelled through on their yearly sojourn to Florida from New England. The "cottages" were anything but modest. They were full blown, 1500-2500 square foot, very well constructed houses with high ceilings, wood floors, large porches, and an aura that reeked of the South.

The barn had a huge cupola in the middle with an entry underneath allowing access to the courtyard that was surrounded by mature azalea hedges. The walks under the long overhangs were genuine cobblestone, so worn that they evoked images of soldiers leading horses through these aisles. Two wars had been fought here in Camden, South Carolina: the American Revolutionary War Battle of Camden on August 16, 1780, and several Civil War battles in 1865. It was not at all uncommon to find ancient lead bullets after rainstorms, or even Indian potsherds and arrowheads. People had been living… and dying… here for a long time, by American time standards.

Predicament arrived along with the roundpen and two of the other horses the following morning. To the horses' delight there was actually grass out in my paddocks for them to nibble on. Predicament was overjoyed, as were the others, to finally have a flat area to cut loose. The horses ran and kicked and bucked all over the large paddock and under the huge oak trees on the upper edge close to my house. Over four mammoth rotting oak logs they

flew in sheer delight. The footing was sandy instead of the slippery clay they had been accustomed to. They hadn't known this freedom in a while and took full advantage.

We assembled the roundpen up in the corner of the paddock close to my house. There was heavy foliage on two sides giving it a feeling of coziness. The sand footing was perfect. It was a quiet, out-of-the-way spot that felt just right to bring these horses along. I couldn't wait to get started!

By now I'd had some time to ponder Predicament's personality. He was a complex horse that had to be brought along with utmost care. I ached for this poor guy who had experienced such a bad deal in his short life. Yes, we were off on the right footing, but I was in no hurry to push Predicament along. Instead, I figured I'd get myself well-tuned up on his two other pasture-mates before turning my attention to him.

The other two horses came along predictably well and adapted to my training without fanfare. I was riding both of them in less than an hour and built on that success each day. I was, admittedly, avoiding the one that had me a bit perplexed. I figured the longer I stalled, the more thorough my plan would be when the moment of truth finally presented itself. After a couple of days of rainy weather and several calls from Jeanie inquiring about the horse of her greatest concern, I felt the time had finally come to face the music. But I was not about to do this alone.

The Moment of Truth

I'd learned some things the hard way a couple of years earlier and had spent six weeks recovering from a broken collarbone. Had someone been there with me; to help to calm the horse, I wouldn't have taken that trip to the hospital. But then I also wouldn't have had the downtime to re-think my training approach that today is helping thousands of horses and their owners. In any case, my lady friend Chris, who had good horse-sense, was right at my side as I prepared Predicament for his first ride.

Some horses simply give off a relaxed aura and invite that first ride as if to say, "I'm ready for this. If you're cool, so am I." And some don't. Predicament just couldn't seem to get into that zone of

really letting down and I was able to read it very easily. This horse wore his emotions right on the outside. His whole demeanor was tight and nervous. His eyes showed too much white. He snorted fear for no apparent reason. As hard as I tried to prepare him to have me on his back, he continued to exude discomfort at that prospect. You see, he knew exactly what was coming, because so many others had failed there. He had managed to hoodwink, intimidate and hurt every single person who had ever gotten close to him.

Using my rope halter and 12-foot lead, I ran through the first six exercises of my ***7-SSS*** program that I use to prepare all horses to ride. I then drove Predicament around the fifty-foot pen at liberty, careful to note how he took his leads and handled the stirrups banging on his sides. He passed the exams reasonably well and seemed to say, "I'm as ready as I'll ever be." So, taking a deep breath, I slipped just my toe into the stirrup.

Immediately Predicament's head shot sky-high and he bolted forward in terror. We regrouped. This time I pulled his head sharply into me with my left hand, along with a handful of mane, which would force him to circle into me and allow me to stay close. Grabbing the cantle on the saddle with my right hand, I gave myself a hearty oomph and pulled myself half-way up.

Predicament circled nervously as I stroked his outside neck and tried to calm him with soothing words. Then I eased back to the ground and allowed our tiny success to sink into both of our psyches. He did seem to relax a tad, and we repeated the same procedure. This time I again mounted half-way but also allowed him a glance of me on the offside as I leaned far over the saddle and slowly waved my right arm for him to see. He tensed up when he saw my arm but didn't lose it completely. Again, I eased off and allowed our success to soak in.

"Wow, he's nervous," I conceded to Chris. "I'm just not too excited about getting on his back. Ya know?"

"I just don't think he's going to settle down a whole lot more than he already has," Chris observed. "He's been pretty traumatized somewhere along the line and obviously has a very real fear of feeling someone on his back."

I just wasn't ready to climb aboard. Something in my inner consciousness told me to just chill for a while longer, an instinct I've learned to listen to. "I'm kinda hungry. Let's get some lunch and let him settle out a bit. Never hurts for a horse to just carry around the saddle for a while," I said. I placed a bucket of water in the roundpen, and we went up for lunch and contemplation.

"Tell you what, Chris. Why don't you get in front of him when I get on?" I suggested as we ate. "Just stroke him and try to keep him relaxed. We'll lead him around a bit and keep his head tilted to the left so we can always circle him down. You stay on the left side. How's that sound?" I asked.

"Sounds like about the best plan we can offer him for now," Chris replied. "Sure, let's give it a whirl, Frank. And bring your helmet."

Back in the pen with Predicament, I put my helmet on securely and took a deep breath. "Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeasy now, Predicament. Eeeeeeeeeeeeasy boy," I cooed as I prepared him and myself for the real moment of truth. This time, when I put my toe in the stirrup, Predicament's head turned sharply to the left into me, half-way up. Then with Chris providing comfort on the left with stroking and reassurance, I finally swung my leg over the back of the saddle.

Predicament tensed and immediately started walking forward strongly. But he had to circle into us, and that was my security, otherwise it would have been an immediate rodeo. This was one very, very uptight horse.

But our plan was working. Allowing him to move and lavishly nurturing him were the key ingredients. Round and round that pen we walked, and the horse very slowly settled into this new deal. I stroked and cooed and Chris did the same. And it worked! Within about fifteen minutes Predicament was actually walking out in a semi-relaxed manner. His head had dropped and he was even working his mouth in understanding. Hard as I tried to appear relaxed, my heart had been in my throat for that entire time. As I settled my body deeply into the saddle and mimicked his rhythm, he became

increasingly relaxed until I was finally prepared to ask Chris to back off.

"Let's do a couple of one-rein stops with you in here close, and then I'll be ready to take him alone," I suggested. We circled Predicament down to a stop several times. It was quite a circus with the three of us working together, but it was just what both Predicament and I needed. And this worked, too. He came to a stop and found a soft release and stroking. We'd taught him we could always return to the same safe, loving place whenever things were uncertain, and he actually seemed to revel in going there.

"Okay," I instructed. "Now you back off and I'll go it alone."

Chris eased off to the edge of the roundpen. I released Predicament's head most of the way, but kept a decided bend to the left, and with my body language and a soft cluck, asked him to walk off. With constant stroking on his neck and soothing words of encouragement, off we went. He was tentative at first and walked as if stepping on eggs. Truth be known, I was probably just as nervous. But we stayed with it and after a series of revolutions around the pen he again started reaching out and relaxing. What a feeling! This was easily the most uptight horse I'd ever encountered, and we'd just crossed a huge hurdle. He was carrying me quietly and confidently and seemed proud of himself.

But there was one very sticky part of the equation that I'd avoided. I hadn't circled him to the right and I just knew somewhere deep inside that this could push him right over the edge. I'd been directing him with my lead rope, but it wasn't tied into reins. Circling him down, I dismounted and reconfigured the rope, then I remounted without fanfare, prepared to change directions and ready for whatever he could throw at me. I was nervous about this but so wanted to get over that hump that I forced myself onwards.

I began with slight leg pressure on the right to get him just thinking on that side. Then I basically passed the rein pressure and contact from one side to the next in as smooth a transition as I could. But it wasn't pretty. As his head came across to the other side, Predicament tensed and took hold of himself right on the

verge of melting down and exploding. I could feel a keg of dynamite underneath me and immediately knew I had to change his mind from extreme fear and flight mode to the regrouping and nurturing we'd practiced dozens of times on the ground.

I began an assertive bumping back with my leg on his right, thereby driving those hindquarters underneath him, disengaging his engine, and changing his mind all at the same time. I took a very firm hold of his head with the reins, and with my left hand, I stroked his neck reassuringly. Round and round we went as this uptight horse expended quantum pent-up energy. In my heart I knew this was the real litmus test. When we could circle down in each direction, back to that safe loving place I call *the safety zone*, well, then we'd have arrived.

Fortunately, I was able to pull his mind away from freaking out and get past that crisis to the right. Eventually we got stopped and were able to regroup. When I'd assured him, it was all the same on the right side, we walked off calmly and did another half dozen one-rein stops in that sticky direction. Then as we transitioned out of the right turn back to the left, Predicament was again ready to go off the edge, but not nearly as severely. We circled into a one-rein stop to the left, regrouped and settled, and then continued to turn from one side to the next until he wasn't bothered about that change.

"You know, Chris, I think it's about time for a breather and a couple of Rolaids," I sighed with a smile. I circled Predicament to the left, down to a stop, and did a little rocking in the saddle before dismounting, just to let him know my dismount was coming. With just my toe in the stirrup, I easily dismounted and immediately approached his head and praised him as lavishly as if he were the brightest thoroughbred in the whole world. And he bought it. That horse was so proud of himself. And I was proud of us all. The team effort had been the key to helping this hapless creature overcome his fears.

Owner Jeanie returned a week later to see the new Predicament cantering through the woods on a loose rein. He and I radiated a joy and exuberance that spring day which I will never forget.



CHAPTER FIVE

Bonding With Claymier Horses

"A lovely horse is always an experience… It is an emotional experience of the kind that is spoiled by words." – Beryl Markham

Fall of 1993 found me at a crossroads in my life. I was in Washington

D.C. sharing Thanksgiving with my brother Graeme and his lovely wife, Claudia. My whole life was in my old Toyota van along with all my horse gear and Montana license plates. The little town in South Carolina where I'd lived and worked horses had become a bit too small for me and a couple of the women I'd known. This pattern was sadly all too familiar. I needed to get my hands on some horses.

Middleburg, Virginia is about horses. I'd heard this for years. Jackie O, among other notables, rode in the prestigious Middleburg hunt. On the Monday following the Thanksgiving weekend I took a drive west of D.C. through the winding, hilly country of Virginia. It was a cool sunny day heralding late fall and early winter. When road construction stopped all traffic, I got out to stretch and experience the warming day. As people shyly milled around their cars, I caught the eye of one of the college girls just in front and said, "Good morning."

Montana plates are door openers most everywhere. We almost immediately got into why a Montanan would be in Virginia. Horses. Really. When we moved to the kind of training I did, her eyes lit up.

"I just read in *People* magazine about someone who relates to horses like that," she exclaimed.

I queried several names and Dorrance brought a big smile. At the very next exit, the 7-11 had an issue and sure enough, there was an article on Tom Dorrance, along with pictures. "What a blessing," I thought.

Tom Dorrance is the father of the movement, the supreme gentler, the guru, the man. I now had some ammunition to work with. With copies of that article, I figured, I couldn't be stopped.

With renewed vigor I drove into quaint Middleburg in search of a tack store. Parking in the middle of town, I was directed to three serious ones, and another that dealt in second-hand equestrian gear. The closest and fanciest was just across Main Street. I adjusted my cowboy hat and ambled in.

"Good morning," I said, disarmingly.

"Guten Morgen." The German accent was unmistakable, the woman's smile a little suspicious, hinting at "What's with the hat, cornball? This is Middleburg. No cowboys allowed."

We visited a little about the fine day, and oh yes, what a lovely store, then I cut to the chase and let it be known that I specialized in helping problem horses like the man in *People* magazine, Tom Dorrance.

"Who?" she questioned. I explained about this movement that I felt a part of. It all went right by her. She seemed preoccupied and too busy to visit, then suddenly, her eyes lit up. "There's a man out in Marshall who needs help. Broke his pelvis breaking a horse," she furnished.

"Let me get his name and number. He might be open to listening to your spiel." She smiled as she found the number. "Bingo."

I smiled to myself.

Bob Claymier was at work in D.C. when I found him, and he was very ready to listen. It was a Wednesday. He gave me directions to his ranch and encouraged me to see what kind of progress I could make with trailer-loading his two Arabians. He had one walking about half-way up the ramp of his two-horse trailer. We'd get together on the weekend and talk it all over.

I hurried back to report to Brigette in the tack store and thank her. Little did I know at the time, that she had spent some time

with Claymier's horses, though had accomplished little. She also let me know later that I had seemed quite overconfident.

Claymier's place was about a half-hour away, and through even more spectacular and very hilly horse country. As I neared Marshall, I passed the Marriot Ranch of hotel fame. I filed that for a future visit.

Bob's directions were good, and when I arrived, it was about mid-day. The barn was a couple of hundred yards below the ranch style house. The only flat place was in the shape of a D, above the house, and had new, white three board fencing and good footing. Obviously, Bob's training ring.

I couldn't wait to handle some horses. In fact, I went right on down to meet them even before I checked in with the Claymiers. I was anxious to meet Hali and Arabesque. The horses saw me coming, and as I walked down the hill with halter and lead rope in my hand, they watched me, curious and with their heads high. They were in separate stalls, and I introduced myself by allowing each to sniff my hand then I gently stroked their cheeks and necks. I immediately noted their demeanor and extreme high-headedness, then I entered the five-year-old gelding's stall.

Hali was racing bred and magnificently built, refined yet with a commanding aura of power. He was a medium dapple grey of 15 hands and high strung, a trait not uncommon to the breed. I started with my *bonding* process: *If we're going to work together, let's get to know one another*. I explored his face, rubbed his eyes and under his chin, sneaked into his nose, then up to his ears. Suddenly he lowered his head to make it easier to get to his left ear. Then lower and lower. Now he was leaning into me with delight. I'd found his spot. When he was just about ready to crumble to his knees with pleasure, I quit.

He followed me around the stall like a dog following an owner with a treat. I began again, going directly to his ears, and in seconds, had the top of his head below my chest, as he made it easy for me to work on those ears. As I stood directly in front, I gently began asking his head to each side by applying a little pressure on each side alternately, introducing *take and give* while continuing with the ears with one hand. I knew right then that I'd

taken him to a place he'd never been with a human, and that I, in a couple of minutes, had him in the palm of my hand. I drifted to one side and suggested he visit me in the girth area by applying a little pressure with my fingertips on his nose handle. He complied happily as I blew a farewell in his nose and moved to the mare.

Younger than Hali, Arabesque was a dark grey, three-year-old quarter/Arabian cross. Everything about her made her breeding obvious from her big bone and stocky build to her more relaxed nature. While she, too, was suspicious and high headed, it was nothing like the straight Egyptian next door. She enjoyed my attentions and readily complied, except for her mistrust on the right side. So, I moved to her right, and reassuringly stroked and bonded with her, letting her know life could be wonderful on her right. With my hand on her nose handle and lightly touching her girth area, she yielded and visited me for an instant. I released her immediately and stroked lavishly all over her right side, paying close attention to her sensitive flank area. Her head went up at an awkward angle with her nose tipped in my direction.

I moved up to her rump just above her tail and scratched heartily with my fingertips, then snuck my fingernails quickly under her already upraised tail and brushed the underside. Again, using her nose handle, I asked her to visit me on her right. She let me know her delight, as her nose touched her right side. She sighed deeply, releasing years of tension. We shared a level of intimacy new to her. I had now planted a seed that was certain to grow, then I deliberately left her, so it could.

Back to Hali who was overjoyed to see me. I offered the halter which he eagerly sought with his nose, signaling his enthusiasm. We proceeded into the area just in front of his stall, and adjacent to the trailer I hoped he would happily load into . . . someday. We re-bonded in seconds; he complied to my pressure and release game like a champ, with his head going anywhere with only ounces of pressure, and intimacy became a foregone conclusion as he melted into my arms as if to ask, "Why did it take you so long to find me?" He now wanted to dance with delight. We were both totally prepared for it.

He unwound from my lead rope on his offside and behind his legs and began the dance in an unsure circle. But as I gently drove him with my left hand, and directed with my right, he quickly absorbed the signals and trotted around me with glee. In a few short minutes we were working in perfect harmony as our level of trust grew, and he delighted in his new-found talent and unspoken communication. In less than a half hour we had become best buddies. Everything told me he was ready to deal with the trailer.

We walked over to the ramp and his head went sky high. From my knees, I showed him the ramp, with gentle urging downward on the lead. Trust prevailed as he took his first sniff of the ramp, then a foot up, then another, then sniffed the inside. I backed him off the ramp, and we went for a walk. Along the fence was some green grass that had escaped Bob's Angus steers. Hali went for that grass in a huge way while I cut a big handful for the next step. While he avidly cleaned up the last of the summer's growth, I dropped to my knees and stroked his legs, chest, belly, and neck. Instead of towering over him, I was on his level while we continued our bonding.

With my bribe ammunition in hand, we quietly returned to the trailer. I walked up the ramp. He followed. I showed him the grass, just out of his reach, then placed it in his manger. I eased out while keeping him on the ramp, then gently encouraged him to move forward, as we had done earlier, when we danced in front of the trailer. He looked at me to make sure it was okay. I assured him in a voice filled with love. He looked high-headedly into the manger. I tapped his rump with my hand. He walked forward as my tapping turned into gentle, reassuring stroking. He grabbed a mouthful of grass, and then quickly backed out. With tears welling in my eyes, I loved him all over.

When I finally caught up with Linda and Bob Claymier, it was a rainy Saturday morning. They were a warm couple who invited me in from the raw weather for a hot drink. They both commuted to Washington during the week and had lived all over the world with Bob's foreign service work. The house was as homey, and inviting, as they were . . . and it was filled with artifacts and

treasures from their travels. We got acquainted as I warmed up, then Bob suggested we have a look at the horses.

I had played down what I'd already accomplished, only mentioning that the horses would now go into the trailer. We donned rain gear and started down the hill to the barn as I suppressed a smile. "Bob, if you'll open the trailer doors nice and wide, I'll get the horses," I suggested.

"Don't you want their halters?" His look was doubtful.

"I've got another idea. Not to worry," I reassured him.

He was still securing the second trailer door when Hali left his stall and hurried into that first door for his breakfast which I'd left there the day before.

"Well, I'll be go to hell!" he exclaimed. Not to be outdone, or left out, Arabesque almost ran Bob over in her rush to get into the other side.

I shared a few more of my techniques with Bob before the cold and rain drove us back up to the house. By then, not only did I have a job, but also an invitation to live with them while I worked the horses.

"Kids are gone. We've got a of couple of extra rooms. Why don't you stay with us?" Bob suggested.

I insisted on giving him a couple of references, as I would be in his home filled with the priceless collection of a lifetime. He'd check me out and talk on Monday. I moved in Monday evening. By the end of the week the horses were going great, and the Claymiers had come home to a couple of hot meals à la Bell. We were so comfortable with each other that I was able to joke about not being able to get the moving trucks in and out before they got home. Linda gave a big sigh as she admitted some earlier discomfort at opening her house to a total stranger.

The first week in December I got a call from Cynthia, an old friend in

D.C. "Can you get a suit?" she pried.

"What for?"

"Press party in the White House on the 15th."

Press party?! "I'm certain I can figure something out," I assured her in excitement. When I shared this with the Claymiers,

their jaws dropped to the floor. They had lived in the area forever. Bob had been in the civil service, but never in the White House. Who WAS this Frank Bell?

Cynthia Johnson grew up in Toledo, Ohio, just as I had. A good friend of my brother Graeme and his wife, she was a photographer assigned to President Clinton every third month. We'd all known each other forever, and she knew a trip to the White House would be a treat. Every year she delighted in taking someone who was certain to be impressed. I was, one more time, in exactly the right place at the right time.

We arrived by cab, showed I.D.s, and entered the home of the Clintons. What a hoot! We were handed a slip of paper with a time to be photographed with Bill and Hil. Off we went to the Red Room banquet hall filled with about 300 other guests. The food was excellent—my consumption of smoked salmon, brie, and microbrewery beer seriously dented the federal budget. Cynthia introduced me to her friends and acquaintances in her professional world. George Stephanopoulos, Jim Miklaszewski and numerous other hitters were milling around. At the appointed time, we headed down the basement to wait our turn. While everyone patiently stood in another line, I was on the cruise. This was an area of the White House the public didn't often see. Every piece of furniture and artwork was historically significant, titled, dated, and explained. I couldn't get enough. A chair of Lincoln's French paintings given to Jefferson, a tapestry from the Civil War. I was the proverbial kid in the candy store.

As we inched our way to the big moment, the protocol became obvious. I meet Hillary as Cynthia greets the boss. Click. Then I meet Bill on the way out. Got it. Only one hitch. Cynthia is not my girlfriend, so she thinks I'd really like a picture alone and is bold enough to ask and does.

Hillary assumed she was out of the photo too, just me and Big Bill. As she walked off, I protested, "Get back in here!" She came back as I pulled her alongside with my arm over her shoulder. Click. I not only had my arm around the first lady but had proof.

"Frank!" Cynthia blurted out, embarrassed. Too late it was over. She settled down and we headed back to the party for the remainder of the event.

The Claymiers were curious and anxious to hear of my evening. I shared it all and promised a picture. By this time, we had indeed become very comfortable friends. They had helped me through a difficult time and been incredibly supportive and patient with my life transition that had an open-ended future. The horses and Claymiers were helping me through the tough times, while I shared my training system with both Bob and Linda.

Just prior to Christmas, before I left, Linda, a complete novice, was riding Arabesque, the horse that had broken Bob's pelvis. How about that for a happy ending!



CHAPTER SIX

Rowdy's Last Buck

"A canter is the cure for every evil." – Benjamin Disraeli

The last part of '93 found me in the great state of Virginia straightening out a couple Arabians for a man and his wife who later became good friends of mine. The horses had been a pleasure, but once I had these two lovely creatures going down the trail confidently, I started taking on new challenges and found one that brings back very fond memories of riding through the steep hills of Virginia.

The Marriott family of hotel fame owned a vast cattle ranch near Marshall, Virginia. In the western U.S. "vast" is measured in thousands of acres; in Virginia it's typically in hundreds. The Marriotts had about four thousand, so this was a serious expanse of land. I'd driven by the entrance numerous times and one day I had a couple of hours and it just felt right. It was later in the afternoon with the sun setting low and the day cooling briskly. I donned my cowboy hat and, with Montana plates on my car, I looked the part. I sauntered—that's right, sauntered—into the office and announced that Mister Fixit had arrived.

"My name's Frank Bell and I specialize in fixing problem horses," I announced as I gave the tall manager a firm handshake.

"It is odd you'd show up just now because I do happen to have a horse that we're getting ready to sell," shot back Mister Manager.

"What seems to be the problem?" I inquired.

"Bucking everyone off who tries to ride him. Broke my head wrangler's arm and bruised up a couple others who've tried to ride him. Yep, he's headed to the auction first of the year."

"Well, this is exactly what I do," I informed this man confidently.

My self-assurance caught his interest. He introduced himself as Larry Mowery and asked about the financial details. Agreement reached, we went out to see "Rowdy," as they'd appropriately named him. Into the paddock was led a seven-year-old dull chestnut quarter horse type of about fifteen hands. He had a mane and tail full of burrs and a worried, suspicious look in his eye.

"Just take off the halter and let him go," I instructed the ranch hand who had led him in. I started walking toward Rowdy with my rope halter/lead in hand, and he immediately trotted away from me to the other end of the 25' x 50' square pen. I moved right in behind him and pushed him onward and around the pen three or four times pretty aggressively, all the while making a hissing sound.

I wanted to take charge immediately and I did. Just as he was making that fourth turn in the corner, I pulled back, stopped making the noise, and drew his inside eye to me. He stopped immediately and watched me intensely for about twenty seconds, then dropped his head, let out a big sigh, and licked his lips. I dropped to one knee and lowered my eyes and just allowed the whole experience to soak into him for a bit.

A crowd had gathered as the end of the day approached and the crisp air of early winter was descending into the little paddock. There were looks of curiosity and doubt alike on the faces in the impromptu audience. Word had already spread about a cowboy from Montana who was going to take on Rowdy, whose reputation had aptly spread around the ranch.

I slowly stood up. Rowdy watched me with very close attention as his head rose higher in the cool air. "Eeeeeeeeasy now, boy," I cooed.

"Gonna get ya fixed up here now. Eeeeeeeeeeasy now," I softly whispered over and over while easing into him with my posture sideways and non-threatening.

My first touch was on his neck just below his wildly matted mane. His neck was rock-solid, tense. I kept my stature soft and inviting and worked his neck and withers progressively with more and more gusto, all the while cooing away in soothing tones. My fingers found the V under his jaw and there I encountered a plethora of bumps and lumps. Bug bites. Oh, yes! My fingernails worked aggressively on those bites and his head rose up in the air at an awkward angle in sheer pleasure.

"Got him. Now he's mine," I announced and abruptly walked off over to the fence where the crowd was watching me. "Watch this now," I predicted.

Rowdy was wide-eyed and focused on me, and he hadn't moved an inch. Without taking his eyes off me, he began a slow and almost indiscernible licking that very gradually became great big licks of gusto as if to say, *"Wow. That was something. Think we could do that again?"* Then he lowered his head and, while still watching me very closely, took his first step in my direction. A few seconds later he had made himself quite accessible. I immediately found "the spot" and indulged him again. He responded with absolute delight.

"If I can melt him right in the beginning the rest is easy," I informed my now very attentive crowd. I slipped my 12' rope halter/lead combo over his head and began the sequence of exercises that today is helping thousands of horses throughout the world. I taught him to drop his head with the slightest pressure on the lead, then lightly guided his head to each side with my fingers on his nose-handle, and finally, I blew in his nose. As I held his head to the side with one hand, my other drifted to the dock of his tail. I dug deep into the hair and scratched aggressively. His tail slowly began to rise, allowing me to lightly feather the underside with my fingernails. He raised it higher in appreciation.

"That's a good place to leave it. He's come a long way and is telling me he really trusts me. I call that last fore and aft deal *intimacy*." I turned to the lanky manager. "Do I have a job?"

"What time can you start tomorrow?" Mowery sealed the deal with a strong handshake and a genuine smile.

"Pretty cold in the morning, frost on the ground and all. I'll be over around ten. Got anything to do with this guy? Any jobs for a horse?" I asked.

"We do need to move some cattle from the north section into the one just south. I'll make you a map. It's about thirty steers. But you sure you'll be able to ride him? You know it's in that first couple of minutes that he's been dumping everybody?"

"I won't get on unless I have things going my way pretty well on the ground. Never do. Don't worry. I'm pretty particular about my safety. Also, what have you been feeding old Rowdy?" I inquired curiously.

"He gets a coffee can of grain morning and evening, and we feed a grass alfalfa mix." The head wrangler spoke up—a big young man named Brent.

"How big is the can?" I asked.

"Here, I'll show you." Brent produced a huge coffee can that said "3 lbs." on the side.

"Well, that's over. If he's doing nothing, he sure doesn't need that kind of protein. Some horses just can't take grain at all. It's better to feed a horse up when needed than to have an over-hyped horse at the beginning. So, until I give the word, no grain for Rowdy. Ok?" It may have sounded like a suggestion, but it was really an instruction.

"Believe me, there's a whole bunch of people that are going to want to see this tomorrow, Frank. You'd better take your time and be careful. Oh yeah, I've got to have you sign a release for the Marriotts before you ride. You understand, I'm sure."

I left feeling great, but with that kind of gnawing feeling deep in my gut: What was I going to encounter tomorrow?

Back at Camp Claymier I informed Bob and Linda about my new employer.

"Don't waste much time, do ya, Frank?" asked Bob.

"Well, your horses are doing well and I just love fixing them, so what the heck? Truth is I can't get enough of this stuff. Kind of addicted to it. And you know I'm still proving this 'system' to myself. I just keep succeeding time after time with this sequence. I can't even believe it," I said, shaking my head.

"That's a pretty good client for around here, and they do pay their bills. So have at it, but don't get hurt," Bob quipped.

Bob Claymier was an interesting case. He'd been into horses for some time and had a gentle demeanor, but he had also gotten into a bit of trouble with his quarter/Arab mare. In fact she'd bucked so hard he'd broken his pelvis and was just now recovering. I'd heard about Bob's plight at a tack store in Middleburg and called him. He seemed eager to listen to this new method of training and turned out to be a real sponge for learning. I'd straightened the horses out, and now I had him and his wife Linda *riding in confidence*, as I call it. Mutual levels of trust led to an invitation to stay with them for a few weeks and, well, that was that. Today, ten years later, Bob is one of my head accredited instructors, teaching the same exercises that at that time I was perfecting, using his and the Marriotts' horses.

It was a classic fall morning, breaking clear and brisk. I fed the Claymier's horses and played with their lively Gordon setter, Gilly, who helped me with feeding every morning. Then I organized my gear for the new challenge. I was excited about working with Rowdy and arrived a bit early, which in this profession never makes a bad impression.

Manager Mowery was busy on the phone. He looked at his watch, gave me a thumbs up, and pointed to the barn. I quickly found Brent who was busy cleaning up old Rowdy in the barn alley. Some of the tangles had been combed out, but most cut off. Worked for me just fine. "That's good, Brent. I'm not much of a groomer myself. Just knock off the big stuff in the saddle and girth area. I'll go get my gear. You don't have a roundpen by any chance?" I asked.

"Just that same area you worked him in last night, Mr. Bell."

I looked over my shoulder to see if my father was behind me. "Mr. Bell's my dad. Call me Frank," I smiled, putting Brent at ease.

By the time I got back with my gear, Rowdy and Brent were waiting in the paddock. Brent was interested in learning, and he was the one I needed to get through to, so when I left, my methods wouldn't leave with me. I wasted no time with Rowdy, and within

seconds he melted right into my hands. But would the saddle present a different scenario?

"I got hurt a couple years ago, Brent, and decided I didn't want any more of that. So, I developed a bunch of exercises that improves my safety. Kinda takes the risk, or at least most of the risk, out of the ride. So, I'm going to work through these exercises with Rowdy and if I find anything really glaring, then I'll have to either fix it or not ride. I don't take any more chances than necessary." Brent was all ears. "Feel free to ask any questions," I said. "No such thing as a dumb question."

Brent, a man of few words, nodded, then he did indeed watch very closely as I worked through my program. I taught Rowdy to drive in a circle, and then wind down to a stop, which would later translate into a one-rein-stop. I produced an aerial with a plastic bag on the end. Rowdy's eyes widened, but with a little nurturing he quickly handled the bag touching all over his body, first standing still, then moving *rationally*.

Then I taught him my *Ballet on the Ground* exercise. This athlete quickly figured out the game and was doing perfect turns on the forehand, followed by rocking back onto his haunches, and pushing off in the opposite direction.

"Will ya look at him move? Man, oh man, he's a jock. That's why it's so easy for him to unload you guys. The horse is perfectly balanced, Brent. You see how he's using himself so well? Heck, he's just about doing rollbacks!" This specimen of horseflesh was playing my game like a champ. "You see what's happening here is I'm connecting the dots. I'm forcing him to use his brain and feet."

With a look of very strong concentration Brent nodded. I knew most of this was going right by him. "Don't worry," I said. "If I survive this ride and get Rowdy straightened out, I'll slow down and really teach you this stuff. Okay?"

"That would be great… Frank. It's kinda confusing to see just what's going on. I really don't have much experience with horses, ya know. I just like 'em a lot and wanna learn. We could all use some help. Maybe you can do a little teaching to all of us," Brent suggested.

"There's six of us wranglers here. Why don't you kinda suggest that to Mr. Mowery, and then he can approach me about it. Make it his idea."

I smiled, thinking of how I was using horse psychology to help the human make the right decision. Ray Hunt would have been so proud of me.

"Time for the saddle." Rowdy handled the saddle like a champ but was a little goosey when I slapped it with the lead as he impulsively circled me. "He looks like a teenager on his first drive. See how hurky-jerky he is? When he can go around me quietly and confidently and smoothly AS I SLAP THE SADDLE, then he'll have it, and I'll feel a whole lot safer about riding." I eased off on the slapping, wound the horse down to a stop and loved him up.

"It's okay, big boy. You'll make it," I reassured him, all the while stroking his neck and kneading his withers. I rubbed his eyes and slipped my finger into the corner of his mouth and feathered his tongue to soften him up. He let out a big sigh, licked his lips, and lowered his head as if to say, "Heck, this is all new stuff. Give a guy a break, would ya?" I then started the slapping of the lead again, but this time much more softly. I stayed in much closer to him, actually pushing my upper arm and shoulder into his side while sensing his need to be nurtured. "He needs my support to get through this. A little touching goes a long way. This is the kind of thing you need to read in a horse if you're ever going to make it as a trainer, Brent. It's called empathy. That and patience are the key ingredients of all great trainers."

Reassuring Rowdy paid huge dividends as he came out the other side and, within a few minutes, was walking around me quietly as I slapped the saddle hard, really hard. "This is the litmus test, my friend. When a horse can handle this, they're in a pretty good place," I said as I looked toward my tack bag for my helmet.

I checked the girth for the last time and confidently mounted Mr. Rowdy while maintaining contact with the left rein. "Mane and rein always, when I mount. That way I can circle him if I need to."

Rowdy and I spent about another ten minutes in that paddock doing one-rein stops in each direction. With each circle appeared a new spectator. Before long there were a dozen people watching and waiting for the expected rodeo. Mowery and his secretary, all the wranglers, and several others stood there on that cool morning, hugging themselves to stay warm. I pushed Rowdy over to the gate and leaned down and unlatched the hasp, then eased Rowdy back and pulled the gate toward us.

"We coulda done that for ya, Frank," offered Mowery.

"No, this is good for him. Thanks just the same. Got that map?"

Mowery handed me a drawing of the area I needed to work and explained a few of the particulars. Then he handed me a small walkie-talkie that I slipped into my coat pocket. "Just in case," he said with a smile.

So, off we went down a long gentle hill toward a steep one in the distance. We did a half dozen one-rein-stops at the walk and trot before hitting the bottom. As we started the long grade uphill I pushed Rowdy into a trot, then drifted into the canter. I was 100% ready when his head lowered abruptly for the anticipated bucking match. I allowed that head to get down just the right distance then gave it a hard upward jerk with my right rein and made a loud *shhhhhhhhhhh* noise. And that was it. Rowdy had hit the brick wall and found this bucking business could be a bit uncomfortable. He didn't even think about it again.

We went on to have one of the most memorable rides of my life through both the gentle and not so gentle hills of that part of Virginia. I was on a horse that was crying out for work, a job, focus. And on that day, I gave it to him with absolute glee. My pictures became his and I never pushed him one iota. We almost literally flew through the country at a medium lope, just devouring those hills. Rowdy was so perfectly balanced, it was like riding a rocking chair. We'd spot a gathering of the Angus steers in the distance and just eat up the ground getting there regardless of the pitch of the country. We flew through the beautifully treed, lush land hour after hour, on that cool, early December day in the year that had become a turning point in my budding horse career.

By early afternoon the cattle were moved and secured. A couple of the wranglers had found us and we'd made quick work of what would have normally taken a lot longer. I had some cattle experience and was mounted on a horse that was overjoyed to be back on the payroll. Three of us rode back into the ranch headquarters, splitting up at the end as they reported to the manager and I untacked Rowdy. I was giving him a thorough rubdown when Mowery walked in.

"Glad it all worked out so well, Frank. Guess the boys were pretty impressed with your riding and handling of Rowdy. So he didn't try to buck you again?" he inquired.

"Just that once at the beginning of the hill. He kind of hit the brick wall, so to speak. I made it uncomfortable for him, and he decided he'd rather get along with me."

"And he did." Mowery grinned.

I was still high from it. "What… a… ride that was. Wow. He is awesome. Still for sale?"

"What would you think about teaching my guys some of this stuff? Do you do that?" Mowery asked.

"Oh, yes. Sure. Let's organize a mini clinic. I'll need a half-day, three or four hours. You get it figured out and I'll be here. Yes, I think we can have your guys riding a whole lot more confidently and safely."

Two days later I spent a full morning and part of the afternoon teaching this eager gang how to communicate better with their horses. They learned the necessary ground skills that lead to the safety net of the one-rein-stop. In the afternoon they learned how to perform this emergency regrouping exercise until it became a gliding symmetry of horse and rider. And who was the Number One star of the show? None other than Rowdy. The same horse that was headed to auction because he'd hurt one too many wranglers was now teaching them the basics of what would eventually become formalized as ***Frank Bell's 7-Step Safety System.***



CHAPTER SEVEN

Misdirected Youth

"Thou must learn the thoughts of the noble horse whom thou wouldst ride. Be not indiscreet in thy demands, nor require him to perform indiscreetly."– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

In the late 80s and early 90s I spent my winters working with horses in Camden, South Carolina. It was a wonderful place to winter. In this climate we always had a true winter, but nothing like Montana. The sandy footing was excellent, and there were few days on which I could not train. Toward the end of my stint in South Carolina, I rented a house, barn, and pasture right on the edge of more than five thousand acres of hunt country. It was an incredible set-up. My reputation for helping difficult horses had expanded to where the phone was ringing and my barn was full.

One evening in mid-winter, a middle-aged man dropped in just as the sun was setting. Bill McGraw extended a firm handshake and began his story. "I've got this little filly that I just can't control. She throws her head like she's crazy. I don't know what to do with her," he said.

"When can you bring her over to me?" I asked.

"I get off a little earlier tomorrow and could bring her by about 3:00. Would that work for you?" he asked.

"I sure have the time, but no space. My barn is full right now. But I'm just guessing we'll be able to get her headed in the right direction pretty fast, so, yes, let's give it a go. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

Bill showed up right on time with an old rickety two-horse trailer. Unnoticed by him, I shook my head in exasperation. Camden had the highest level of horsemanship, and the lowest.

The education ranged so dramatically I never knew what to expect; this looked to me like a lack of education. Sure enough, as he unloaded the little sorrel filly, I could see exactly what was going on. He held the horse tightly right under her chin, at the snap. The poor horse had no freedom, or release… ever, and was really pissed off about it. We moved her up to my working area a couple of hundred yards away, and it was a struggle the whole way. I took over up at the barn.

One Angry Horse

Bill handed me the lead, with the wild thing at the end acting up and prancing and swinging her head back and forth. I just backed off from her and let her work it out a bit. She was bursting with energy and frustration. I figured if I could get her moving, at least she'd be expending some of that energy and I could be directing her movement. So, I positioned myself to ask her to *move* and set it up for her to do so. With a little body language from me, she took off to my left, counterclockwise. We went around like that for a half dozen rounds, and then I asked her to change direction. You would have thought her world was coming to an end. The moment she felt pressure on her face; she went into meltdown. She threw her head violently back and forth in a frenzy. She reared and struck out with her front legs. I mean, she really had an attitude about pressure. Something must have gone terribly wrong in her training for her to react like this.

"Man, I've never seen anything like this before," I confessed. "Is it like this whenever you take hold of her?" I questioned Bill.

"Well, yes. She just doesn't seem to have any ability to mellow. I try to hold her still, but she just wigs right out and she's getting too big to handle. Do you think you can help her?" he asked me sheepishly.

"Just you watch how I make this stop. And watch closely as you may have to do the same."

Resistance Meets Resistance

I'd been brainstorming on this whole head shaking issue from the moment she left the trailer and I had finally formulated a plan. By

now she'd settled a bit, and I was able to send her off in the other direction. She seemed to like this game and moved around me at a controlled trot. She moved with a fluidity that was simply beautiful. I allowed her to go around me for a while and get very comfortable with the whole concept of basic lunging. She neither pulled on me nor crowded me. She maintained a perfect distance and just seemed to be proud of herself, showing off. She moved with a sense of *brio* as the Paso crowd calls it. It was something to behold.

But the time came to make a change and the moment she felt the lead begin to control her face, the meltdown started. She'd been getting away with this for some time, and I had to turn the tables. The second she started, so did I. I moved into her and took the web halter and shook harder than she did. Now suddenly I was in control, and she wasn't having much fun. All the while I was making a *shhhhhhhhhh* noise as loud as I could. I stayed with it for maybe fifteen seconds, until she stopped fighting back, then suddenly I quit and backed off.

Her big eyes looked at me in sheer astonishment. Then, after at least twenty seconds, she licked her lips and her habitually high head dropped a couple of inches. In an attempt to help her get that head lower, I applied a bit of downward pressure. Over the edge she went again; she recommenced shaking her head and now became uncomfortably light on her front feet. Again, she met my overwhelming response and suddenly her world was being rocked back and forth all over again, and there was an obnoxious *shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh* sound taking place right in her face.

This time it only took about ten seconds for her to stop fighting me. I backed off and again we saw the wide eyes followed by the licking of lips and the head dropped at least another six inches.

"We're gaining here, Bill. You see what I'm doing?" I asked.

He opened up, replying, "Yes, I see what you're doing, but I really don't understand. Help me here."

"Well," I said, "from what I can gather you never let her go, that is, once she's haltered. You expect her to be perfect, and you hang onto her way too tight. So, she's just resentful. She needs a job, a focus, so to speak. When she's circling, she's really happy. She's

engaging herself and feeling important and useful. But the moment she feels constraint; it's meltdown time because there's never been a release. It's all about the release. That is how the horse learns, Bill, from the release, not the pressure. I have to make her reaction uncomfortable, so she doesn't want to do it." This was a lot for him to take in at once, I could tell. "I take over instead of her. Turn the tables on her. Pretty quick here she'll get it figured out and stop fighting me and decide it's a whole lot easier to just get along. I've made the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult. A little old fella from Oregon figured all this out some time ago. I'm just borrowing the concept from Tom Dorrance."

By now, Cayenne (that's what I'd named her) was settled and ready for the next installment of her education. From the end of my 12 ft lead, I took up the slack and urged her forward, though I was pulling somewhat off to the side. The white grew larger and larger in her eyes as she resisted the pressure. "Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," I sounded lightly and suddenly she froze completely. I held the lead and clucked a couple times. She impulsively gave her head to me about an inch. I released her completely and walked into her with praise and soothing words. The licking and head drop were quick and definite. "I think she just made the big breakthrough, Bill. Watch very closely."

I eased out to the end of the lead and slowly began to take up the slack. Before I reached the end, she'd taken a step forward. My release was crisp, my reward hearty. Within a few minutes she was following me around like a long-lost puppy. After a few minutes of this we stopped and I asked her to drop her head, simply drop. Her resistance was immediate as was my progressively louder *shhhhhhhhhhhhh*, but my pressure didn't stop. Suddenly she dropped her head fractionally. I'd expected this, so the release was again accurate. The next bit of downward pressure produced a huge yield.

The worst was over.

Ask, Anticipate, Get Compliance, Release, Reward

"Let me explain a couple of things to you, Bill," I said. "The basis for all training and meaningful communication with horses is

pressure and release. I call it *take and give* and it's the second step in my sequence of exercises. But the thing you have to get is this: the horse learns from the release of pressure, not the application of it. So, it's absolutely critical that you have good timing. Memorize this sequence in your mind. No. Better yet I'll give you one of my laminated pocket cards that has a condensed version of my **7-Step Safety System** on it. For now, here's the order of communicating *take and give,* ask, anticipate, get compliance, release, and reward."

"The 'release' is the reward, but if you just happen to like your horse, a stroke on the neck goes a long way. That's not a slap," I clarified.

"But a loving stroke. You see, the moment the foal hits the ground the mother licks the horse all over. Cleans the baby up. So our affection needs to emulate that big warm tongue. As horses get older, they learn to give that same attention and affection to each other." Bill was smiling as I continued. "You ever notice two horses kind of kneading each other's withers? That's the settling spot. So when you want to reward a horse either on the ground or in the saddle, just knead the withers. It's pretty handy since it's right in your front yard when you're riding. Heck, you can take a nervous horse, and just by working those withers, settle the horse right down."

The 3-Ts

"I've developed something I call the '3-Ts': Theory, Technique, and Timing. You must understand why you do what you do, hence the theory. Then you learn some techniques to communicate the theory. But initially the techniques are a bit rough and need refinement. That's where the timing comes in. As you work with this, Bill, your timing will improve until it all becomes second nature and really flows. You stop thinking about what you're doing, and it all becomes rote. Is all of this making sense to you? I've really thrown a lot at you here."

"I just can't believe how little I actually understood about dealing with horses. I thought it was all so easy but I have really been doing it all wrong," said Bill, looking down and slowly shaking his head.

"Hey man, relax. You came for help. Pat yourself on the back. Most people, men especially, just keep doing it all wrong and getting into fights with horses and it turns into a real mess. Now you get it. You understand the concepts. You've got a good mind, so now it's a matter of really concentrating on what you are communicating. We've jolted the resistance pattern in her, so you're right on your way to success."

Bill was listening intently.

"Also, those exercises you watched me doing earlier, driving the horse around and getting the head to drop and give to the side—it's all explained in my foundation video, 'Discover the Horse You Never Knew.' You need that to refer to for at least the first few sessions. Now, I want you to take over from me." Bill reached for the rope and I held up my hand. "But don't start until you know exactly what you want. That wouldn't be fair. In fact, first take the end of the lead rope and we'll pretend I'm the horse. The moment I yield, you do the same with a big release."

And so Bill McGraw and I practiced improving his timing until he was ready to offer the horse a good deal. With a little coaching he began by giving the horse a thorough stroking all over her neck, withers, and face. The little lady melted into this man's attentions as if to say, "That's all I ever wanted from you, but you just couldn't understand." Her big glassy eyes softened at about the same rate as his. Before it was over, his lips were quivering and a tear or two fell from the tip of his nose as he finally connected with the horse he'd lost almost from day one. Horses never forget… but they do forgive.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Maggie Learns to Trust Again

"There is a touch of divinity even in brutes, and a special halo about a horse that should forever exempt it from indignities. As for those majestic, magisterial truck-horses of the docks, I would as soon think of striking a judge on the bench, as to lay violent hands upon their holy hides." – Herman Melville in Redburn

How One Man's Senseless Act Sets Up a Horse Not to Trust Anyone on Two Legs

I was working with some clients in South Florida when I heard Fred Brook's desperate plea for help. On my voice mail, he sounded both desperate and regretful. "Frank. I need some help with a young filly. We got into a little tussle a while back and I just can't get anywhere with her. Give me a call as soon as you can," he pleaded.

I'd met Fred Brooks about three years earlier. He was managing a very attractive ranch for some high-end hunter/jumper people outside Monument, Colorado. He was in his late fifties and by no means an imposing figure. He seemed to have a good rapport with animals. His dogs always greeted me with such enthusiasm that their tails seemed to be wagging their bodies.

Fred had watched me deal with some very difficult horses. One huge chestnut thoroughbred gelding had left a woman in a wheelchair and needed to be laid down to work through his explosive fits. The horse had come through beautifully, and by the end of the session I was riding while swinging a noisy plastic bag over the horse's head. Fred had been impressed enough to buy a couple of my videos for his son in Pennsylvania who was also getting into horses. But I sensed an edge in Fred, a short fuse that

could turn violent in an instant. That turned out to be exactly the case.

The Cold Hard Truth

I left a message saying I would be back in Colorado in a couple of weeks and would give him a call. I reached him after I'd settled in for a couple of days. "So, tell me what happened."

He began with a tone of guilt in his voice. "I've got this yearling filly that I can't get near. She's out of quarter horse racing stock, so pretty high strung. Well, I did something really dumb. I was working with her six months ago and she kicked me in the leg, bad. I just reacted. I had a rake in my hand and whacked her with it hard. Broke the rake in half! I've tried everything since then, but I can't get anywhere with her, and she's gotten violent and aggressive. I just can't afford to get hurt."

"Hey, I can't either," I acknowledged. My heart thumped fast and hard as I listened to his story. So I was going to try to help this horse that probably wanted to attack me. Real fun stuff.

I felt a sense of resignation as I reflected on how this whole thing had evolved. I had attained this reputation that put me time after time in dangerous situations. And I succeed time after time in bringing these horses back. How interesting this journey had become.

I drove down to the boarding stable early Saturday morning. The place was located east of Colorado Springs just where the plains started. Those same plains ran apparently endlessly and became progressively flatter right into Kansas. The facility was a low-budget, run-down, rag-tag operation with dark, cramped stalls and runs with dangerous, sagging fencing on all sides. A winter's worth of manure was on top of every surface. The place was destined for the bulldozer and development; hence no-one made much effort to maintain aesthetics.

Fred greeted me, though I didn't recognize him, so he had to introduce himself. He'd aged ten years in three. He reached out with a firm handshake and sincere smile. "Thanks for coming down. I hope you can help me. I'm at my wit's end with this horse." He told me the story in full detail as we walked through

the barn to Maggie's stall that connected to a decent sized run. We stopped at the stall door and looked to the outside where a teen-aged girl was with the horse.

"She trusts Heather more than anyone," Fred told me. "She can touch her just a little. But try to put a halter on and she goes ballistic. She's really dangerous. I hope you can get somewhere with her. Please be careful."

I observed an attractive bay yearling that I would have taken for a thoroughbred. Everything was long on the horse: long legs, long body, and long head. She seemed to have an intelligent eye, not mean, but hesitant and very watchful.

"She doesn't trust men one bit," Fred added.

"Wonder why?" I thought to myself while I suppressed my smile.

"Where can I work with her? Do you have a roundpen or a small area?" I was anxious to begin. We looked around for a reasonable place to work with her, but there just wasn't anything even close to what I'd hoped for. Finally, we settled on a stall across the center alley that ran down the length of the barn. I went to get my gear as Fred and Heather pushed Maggie across the alley into the 12' x 12' stall.

The stall was not ideal. It was dark and dusty with a low ceiling and way too much loose, dried manure. The dark wood walls ran up to the sloping ceiling that was quite low at the back. The wall on the alley side was about five feet high, and the stall-door was rickety and had a bad latch. I didn't like the arrangement at all but really had no choice if I was going to help this lovely, troubled lady. I ached at the distrust and anguish I could read on her face.

I entered the stall slowly, keeping my eyes down and off of her. She shot into the corner and sulked with her rump to me. She took a quick look with her left eye only, then violently bolted into the next corner, moving to my right. The wood structure groaned loudly as she collided into the wall. I moved into the opposite corner and squatted down quietly while I waited for her to take a look or face me. Nothing. So I started making a soft kissing noise

and then began to tap lightly on the wall behind me. The kissing and tapping became gradually louder until she finally took a look.

I stopped immediately and moved my eyes to the floor. She took a five-second look at me, before she turned her head away, then abruptly looked back at me, and finally looked away again. "What in the world is this guy doing?" she seemed to say. I started tapping and kissing again, making it progressively louder and more obvious until she turned her head to me. I stopped immediately. She looked at me, then lowered her head and worked her mouth.

"That's a good sign," I whispered.

Fred and Heather were spellbound, frozen on the side but watching intently.

"Wow. She is a case," I observed. "Hand me the bamboo pole very slowly," I instructed.

As Fred began extending the pole to me in the corner, Maggie noticed. She whirled completely around and charged into the far corner with a loud thump as the whole structure trembled. I moved to the stall door as she turned and charged me. "Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," I hissed loudly and raised my arms aggressively as I faced her and made my 5'-10" stature as large and imposing as possible.

She froze and so did I. Mexican standoff.

I waited about five seconds, staring at her intensely, then began to wave my arms again aggressively and firmly commanded, "Back. Back. Back."

With each "Back," she took steps away from me as I bore down on her.

"Open the gate please," I ordered. Fred unfastened the latch and I slowly backed out, breathing very hard. This was one very freaked-out horse that would have attacked me if I hadn't turned the tables on her and become the aggressor.

Time for a Breather—Dusty in Here

"I'll have to say, this is unlike any horse I've ever encountered. She's terrified, but also aggressive and intimidating. Interesting," I commented as I walked outside for a breath of fresh air. The stall

was thick with a winter's accumulation of that very fine nasty dust. I gulped the cool air heartily as I gazed at the Rockies to the west and the mountain that made Colorado famous a century and a half ago, Pike's Peak. It was indeed a magnificent spring day on the Front Range, with all forms of life coming out to greet the warmth and intense high-altitude sunlight. I guess Maggie was feeling the springtime energy as well. A few minutes to allow the dust and the horse to settle is never a bad idea.

I walked back to the stall door and found Maggie standing in the corner looking at the three of us. Her expression was alert, but a bit more relaxed than when we'd parted.

"Guess it's show time," I said to Fred and Heather.

"She gonna make it?" Fred searched my face.

"Oh, sure. We'll get there. I just don't know the perfect route right now. So we'll feel our way into it. This bamboo pole treatment is pretty effective with real touchy horses. Use it a lot on mustangs every year at a workshop I'm part of." I glanced at Fred. "Watch closely. You may need this someday." I wanted Fred to make it with this horse. But she was a tough one, real tough, and had learned to take nothing from anybody if she didn't want to. This one was a truly dangerous horse.

I walked in with purpose, but in an inviting manner as if to say, "Let's talk things over." I lowered my stature as she did the same. Very deliberately I inched the 10' bamboo pole hand over hand from Fred into the stall.

I wanted her in the corner I'd just come from. It was brighter, more inviting, and just felt right—sixth-sense stuff. Keeping the pole low I eased to my right, crowding her. She lurched into the opposite corner just where I wanted her and again we both settled in. She'd sneak a look here and there but was very nervous. She was also just a little bit curious. This was all so unknown to her, and she still didn't understand the new game one little bit. New material.

Very, very slowly I eased the pole into the air and waved it well in front of her so she could see it. I offered it to her for her to sniff. Very suspiciously she inched her nose out and touched it, then abruptly pulled her head back in. She snorted and tried to

strike the pole with her right foot. I waved the pole slowly up and down and then eased it over and above her whole body to her rear. She watched intently as her whole body shook in fear. Beads of sweat were showing on her chest and neck. I brought the pole back to her front and offered it to her again. She sniffed it again but was more certain this time and didn't bolt her head away when it touched her nose.

I figured she was ready and prepared myself to be able to move fast if she exploded. Very deliberately I moved the pole over her head and neck and down onto her withers, making firm, steady contact. The moment she felt it she charged forward violently into the stall door corner. Fred and Heather fled across the aisle as she crashed into the door. Fortunately, the latch held. I moved into the diagonal corner from her and kept the pole firmly on her withers. I kept my stature low, bent over, and my eyes averted. She could only stay settled for a few seconds before needing to move around the stall, but I was able to maintain contact from the middle of the stall, and eventually she stopped in the corner where she felt safe.

I was relieved when she stopped as the air was again thick with dust, and I really wanted some clean air. But I waited for a few minutes with a hanky over my face to allow the horse and the air to settle. Then I began sawing back and forth while pushing down with a bit of pressure, "fiddling," as my friend John Sharp called it. Right then and there I knew we were going to make it.

"We're over the hard part. She's going to be alright, Fred." She licked her lips and lowered her head, and acquiesced to the touch that was my doing, if not directly by my hand.

"This is great, Frank," Fred sighed with a sense of relief.

Gentling Horses with a Bamboo Pole

John Sharp had taught me this bamboo pole technique three years earlier when we gentled wild mustangs together at the Wild Horse Workshop in Antioch, California. He had been using this process for almost sixty years and was finally getting credit for this fascinating and effective approach to gentling the wild ones. John, now in his mid-eighties, was passing his valuable knowledge on. I

felt honored not only to be working with this master, but more important, to be learning his secrets from a lifetime of working with horses of every shape and color.

Today John Sharp and I are the dynamic duo at the annual Wild Horse Workshop of which we are both charter members. We gentle horses side by side and help each other when it's needed. We play cribbage after lunch and take toddy at the end of the day. John is one of my best friends.

Back in the dark stall, Maggie was accepting the "fiddling" on her back and inviting me to explore the rest of her body, which is exactly how the technique works. From her withers I "fiddled" slowly back to her rump, then over her dock and quickly down the back of her legs, whisking the pole away as fast as possible. She kicked out violently but didn't connect with the pole. Back to her withers, I pressed down firmly until she settled; then started again. I was very gradually inching closer and closer while keeping my stature low and non-threatening. Before long she was accepting the pole well and seemed comfortable with me just off her shoulder. I eased the pole to the ground and extended my hand. She sniffed my hand thoroughly, then let out a long deep sigh as if to say, "Okay, I'm ready to trust you . . . just a little bit." I then made first contact with the back of my hand on her neck just below her withers. My left hand then very slowly but deliberately worked up directly onto her withers. I started kneading both areas just as John Sharp had taught me.

The Magic of the Withers

The withers represent a truly magical area on almost all horses. We've all observed two horses nuzzling each other's withers in the pasture. It seems to generate a sense of security, pleasure and well-being. It is also conveniently located right in our front yard when riding a horse. How handy. Ever since my fortuitous meeting with John Sharp, I've used the withers to help calm and reassure horses both in the saddle and on the ground.

With Maggie accepting my touch, I repositioned myself to face forward. I eased my right hand under her jaw and found the V underneath. My fingernails scratched deeply into the matted hair

as she delighted in my attentions. Again, she sighed deeply and dropped her head to seek my touch. I tipped her head toward me with my right hand and found her face with my left. Very gently I searched her face to find her pleasure spots as she really began to trust and melt. I call this "search touching." Within a few minutes I was rubbing her eyes vigorously with the palm of my hand. My fingers found the corner of her mouth, then the inside, as I feathered her tongue with my index finger, then my whole hand. Up her face and onto her forehead I scratched vigorously in her swirl area, noting a pronounced double swirl that sent a clear signal to me.

The Science of Swirls

Extensive studies have been done on the placement of swirls on horses' foreheads. All horses have a swirl on their forehead. It may be located right between their eyes or high up in the middle of their head above the eyes, and anywhere in between. It may be off to the right or left. And it may be very subtle or quite pronounced. And then there may be two swirls. They are usually right together, even touching. This usually signals a complex horse, sometimes dangerous, sometimes gifted, almost always high-strung.

I specialize in working with difficult horses and get my fair share of double swirls—percentage-wise a lot more than nature's average. I believe these horses are like our human geniuses. Some of these gifted humans fit into society quite well and have made huge contributions; some haven't been able to function at all, ending up in institutions. I believe it's the same with horses. The double swirls I've encountered were almost all a bit complex and usually full of energy. I take special note and care when I encounter these animals. I've coached them back to the racetrack to become winners. I've also informed some owners that they were in way over their heads to be dealing with these exceptional creatures.

Noting the obvious double swirl on Maggie's forehead helped me understand her nature a bit better. I progressed at a decidedly slower pace than normal, knowing full well that once she came

through, she would be fine. I also understood that Fred could be as much of a challenge as his horse.

7 Steps to a Safe Ride

I've developed a pattern in my work with horses, all horses. I use a proven set of exercises to establish a relationship, build trust, and establish myself as the respected director. Horses like having a leader. It makes decision-making easy, and I gently and lovingly show them the way. After we've developed that trust, we move to problem solving. I would rather discover, address, and fix the horse's issues on the ground than encounter surprises in the saddle. That accomplished, we then progress to a dressage maneuver on the ground, and then do the same in the saddle. This set of exercises takes 80-90% of the risk out of the ride. I like those odds a lot!

The first step in my 7 Step System is *bonding*, which is exactly what Maggie and I were doing. And now it was time to progress to the most basic premise of all training, *take and give,* the second step. All communication requires the use of pressure, which is sometimes exceedingly subtle, and sometimes at the opposite end of the scale and very intense.

I first teach a horse to drop his head, which accomplishes two distinct goals:

- Yield to pressure
- Get relaxed. A horse cannot have his head down and not be relaxed.

I apply downward pressure from the halter or my hand. The moment the horse drops his head one iota, the pressure ends. To my way of thinking this communication needs to be firmly entrenched to teach most anything.

So with that in mind, I eased my right hand up Maggie's neck to just behind her ears and massaged her poll area. I then pushed down with the flat of my hand asking her to drop her head. She resisted and pushed up against the pressure. The flat hand slowly became a slight pinch on the skin of her upper neck just behind her ears. She searched for that discomfort to end, raising her head

and shaking it from one side to the other, then she dropped it an inch and was completely released.

She licked her lips as I allowed this bit of information to sink in. Again, I began with a pushing down motion on her upper neck. Again, she resisted. The slight pinch urged her to drop her head. This time the drop was 6". Within a few minutes, hand pressure on her poll meant "drop your head" to her. I helped her find a wonderful place with her head down close to the ground with me kneeling next to her, as she stood relaxed, confident, and understanding the most basic premise of all training - pressure and release, take and give.

Using her nose-handle, the piece of bone just above her nostril that conveniently accepts three or four fingers, I guided her head to each side into her girth area and breathed into her nose. As I did so, I eased my other hand over her belly and up to the dock of her tail where I scratched deeply. I felt her tail rise in delight as I feathered the silky underside with the back of my fingernails. This third step of my program I call *intimacy*. This signifies big league trust and a high level of confidence.

Bring on the Halter

At this point Maggie was begging for more. She was really enjoying the process of trusting a human again and genuinely loving the work. School was fun. But the haltering could trip a panic switch, and we could lose everything. Fred handed my soft rope halter/lead combo to me from the door.

"This is fabulous. You are making incredible headway. I guess this will really be the test, won't it?" he asked, reading my mind.

"Watch this process. You'll be doing the same when I leave, so pay very close attention. The idea is to halter her without fanfare. I really want her to hardly know it's happened."

I eased over to her with the halter and 12' lead all balled up, not hanging down. I held it out for her to sniff thoroughly. She took her sweet time. Time, we had in abundance. Then I turned and faced toward her rear and eased my left hand under her neck to contain her. With my right I gently rubbed the rope all over her neck/wither area. She handled this well, so I turned around and

arranged the halter to fit with the nose-opening in my left hand. Again, I gently rubbed the halter on the side of her face as I contained her head with my right hand. I gave her the same attention I'd given her earlier as we bonded, only this time I just happened to have a rope doing some of the work. I rubbed her eyes first, and she immediately started to melt as I eased the opening down over her face and found her nose. She hardly noticed that her nose was now deeply in the halter. I deftly reached over her neck, retrieved the end, and tied the knot that secured the halter. Presto. Success.

Knowing full well that Fred would not be quite as handy as I with the halter, I led Maggie around the stall in each direction, asked her to drop her head, and then took the halter off. She licked her lips heartily and followed me right over to the stall door as if to say, "That's not it, is it?"

"Well no. It isn't," I mentally answered as I turned to Fred. "Okay, I'm going to halter her a couple more times, then I want you to do the same. Okay?"

"Man, I'm nervous. She's so afraid of me. Let's let Heather give it a try first. What da ya think?" Fred asked.

"I think that's a great idea." I smiled at Heather, then turned around to find Maggie patiently waiting for more schooling. This time I uncoiled the halter/lead right in front of her as she watched curiously. I eased into her left side and offered the nose-opening and waited… She wasn't getting it, so I made the slightest suggestion with my right hand on her poll. She remembered that lesson well and dropped her head right into the opening. I snugged it up onto her nose, loved on her, and took it off. Again, I offered the opening, only this time after a short pause I gave a soft cluck. She immediately found the opening with gusto. Again, I loved her up heartily. One more try and she couldn't get her nose in there fast enough.

"Okay, Heather. Let's give it a whirl," I suggested, handing her the halter.

Heather entered the stall and gave Maggie a big hug, then offered the halter. Maggie found that nose opening even faster than she had with me—smart horse.

After Heather has repeated the lesson three times, it was finally Fred's turn. He came in with more than a bit of trepidation. I made sure he loved on her and worked her withers and rubbed her eyes. A little bonding goes a long way in a short time. I instructed him to keep his eyes soft and averted. When he understood all that and set himself up properly, then and only then did he offer the halter. She dropped her head right into it even before he was ready. After Fred had haltered her three times successfully, he slipped it off, wrapped his arms around her neck and buried his face in her mane. His whole body shook as he enveloped her. When he turned back to us his lips were trembling and his face was wet with tears. She was back and so was he.

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The bamboo pole is a handy device for communicating with horses. You can enjoy reading more about its effectiveness in Chapter 23, "Fishing for Mustangs." "Pole Gentling the Wild Horse," and our Video. Learn more at www.HorseWhisperer.com.



CHAPTER NINE

Soaring Fast and Breezy

"They say princes learn no art truly, but the art of horsemanship. The reason is, the brave beast is no flatterer. He will throw a prince as soon as his groom." – Ben Johnson

In the spring of '94 I got wind of one of the troubled horses that might be headed my way. The odd part of the equation was the age of this horse. Soaring Fast and Breezy was a two-year-old, full-blooded Arabian of racing lineage. Typically, Arabs were started under saddle in the spring of their third year. As the story unfolded, apparently Breezy had learned to whirl, leave the rider suspended in air, and then streak back to the barn. Several experienced and quite nimble riders had hit the ground hard, followed by the long walk home.

Breezy arrived in the middle of the afternoon in early spring. It was still quite cold in the front range of the Rocky Mountains with morning and evening temperatures well below freezing. None of the horses lacked for energy in this cool weather.

The first thing I heard about the twenty-mile trip over to my place was the loading fiasco. It had taken several hours to load the horse. I could tell from the attitude of the man delivering Breezy that there was no love lost between them. This left a huge opening for me, since I place utmost importance on developing a relationship.

Breezy emerged from the trailer wide-eyed. This was her first trip away from the ranch at which she'd grown up. More importantly, she was away from the security of her gang of horses. She was a lanky dark gray of about fifteen hands with a black mane and tail. She had a friendly and intelligent look about her.

We moved her into an outside paddock and sent her handler home. I wasted no time in getting to know her and she immediately melted into my version of a positive first impression. With hindsight I'm sure this was the first time a human had really loved on her. She wicked it up like a sponge and we quickly became fast friends with the mutual goal of sending her to the track that summer as a confident and reliable horse.

Lemons to Lemonade

That night I did a lot of thinking about this situation. I sure wasn't in any big hurry to climb on her but had to somehow build her confidence. The answer came to me about 3:30 a.m.; I woke with a very clear starting place, namely trailer loading. Here was something she absolutely hated and was probably quite fearful of.

First thing in the morning I called down to the ranch-hand and asked him not to feed the new gray horse. I would feed her a little later, ideally in the biggest trailer I could find. After the day had warmed a bit, I walked down to see my new challenge. She was happy to see me and was an eager and bright student. We did some ground exercises to help her understand the fourth step of my program; *The Dance Begins.* This driving procedure is integral to sending a horse into a trailer, stall, or paddock. Within a matter of ten minutes, she was driving like a champ through an assortment of gates and openings.

Time for the Trailer

I had the use of a good-sized, three-horse slant trailer with a gentle ramp grade. In spite of the snow on the ground, the footing was good and the ramp was dry and had excellent traction. The Merhow trailer was reasonably well lit and, with the partitions secured against the wall, had ample space. This was a good starting place to do some serious confidence building.

But Breezy didn't seem to think so. The moment we walked up to the ramp, I saw a different and very stubborn side to this gangly Arabian. Her eyes filled with white and she started to back-pedal immediately. I was prepared for this and helped her move backwards much faster and more aggressively than even she

wanted to. Back we went a good twenty-five paces as I made her attitude and refusal uncomfortable for her, all the while making a loud *shhhhhhhhhhhhhh* noise. Then I stopped and let it sink in for a long minute. She looked at me with those big dark eyes, and then finally licked her lips and dropped her head as if to say, "Gee nobody's ever done that to me before." I loved her up and reassured her that I was still her new best friend, and then we started anew.

This time at the trailer she at least stood at the edge of the ramp and stood calmly. But the moment I asked for forward movement, she exploded again. She met the same not-so-nice result, only this time we only went back a few steps as I made the loud and annoying *shhhhhhhhhhh* noise. This went on a couple more times before she decided it might be easier to work with me by placing her right foot gingerly onto the ramp. You would have thought she'd won a million-dollar stakes race. I praised her up and down and she believed me. And that one foot led to two, then three and then suddenly she was in the front of the trailer eating her breakfast. I allowed her to take a few bites and relax before asking her to back out, which she did reluctantly. The next time I asked her to go in she did not hesitate one iota. Hey, breakfast was there and she was good and hungry.

For the next week Breezy had her morning meal inside a whole variety of trailers including a very small and tight one-horse model that no horse would choose to ride in. But she trusted me implicitly and it really became kind of a game for both of us: Hmmmm, which trailer today?

Time to Mount Up

Three days into our morning ritual I sensed it was time to get some saddle-work done. After religiously working through the first six steps of my ***7-Step Safety System,*** I mounted Breezy and performed the final step, *Ballet in the Saddle*. When I had her performing one-rein stops well, we progressed to the beginning stages of rollbacks. Within minutes she was doing ballet beautifully, first pivoting on the forehand, then rocking back onto her hind end and pushing off with glee in this exercise that

essentially connected her mind and her feet. And now the moment of truth was upon me, the first ride out.

Given Breezy's history I knew it was just a matter of time before she would try her whirling stunt on me. I felt I was totally prepared. Exactly when and where this might happen was the big mystery, so we eased into it and did some confidence building before facing the bigger challenges. We began by riding around the barn and paddock area with which she was familiar. We rode up and down the alleys between the paddocks visiting dozens of the other horses of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Then we rode into one end of the small twelve-stall barn and out the other side. There were big garbage cans filled with grain and supplements. The rakes, shovels, and assorted tools, as well as horses coming and going, gave many horses fits in this barn. Breezy took notice and did tense up several times, but with a bit of support she really did handle this challenge commendably. Now it was time to leave the barn area and explore the ranch.

We walked down the road through the dip of a creek bed that challenged most horses as it was congested with brush and trees on each side. As with most horses, Breezy was concerned in this narrow corridor, but she didn't have a real meltdown and came out the other side intact and reasonably poised. The ranch opened at this point, with fields extending in all directions. At this time of year, they were barren, apart from clumps of scrub oak that were poking up everywhere. We circled several of these clusters then proceeded up the road in the direction of some interesting red sandstone formations.

A large horse-eating boulder sat at the edge of the road. Now this boulder had probably spooked more horses than just about anything on the ranch and she tensed noticeably. "Eeeeeeeeeeeeeasy, girl. Just an old rock. Nothing to be afraid of now. Eeeeeeeeeeeasy, Breezy," I cooed over and over while stroking her neck and pushing her through this sticky area with my legs and seat. Though she was on pins and needles, she maintained control of herself, and we walked on up the road.

We must have been a good seventy-five yards past the boulder when she just couldn't maintain anymore and suddenly whirled to

the right, hard. Real hard. I was sitting deep and had a hold on the reins, with the right one a bit shorter so it wouldn't take much to get that head around. I was ready and even expectant the whole time in anticipation of this exact scenario, so I put my plan right into action.

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," I hissed aggressively and cracked her right shoulder with my stirrup three times, then circled her down to a one-rein stop and regrouped to help her settle down. No grudge here. She had just happened to hit the brick wall when she whirled right into it. She thought it was all her idea, and it was a bad one. She was absolutely right. It was a bad idea and quite uncomfortable. Better her discomfort than mine.

The Black and White Zones

At this point in my career specializing with difficult cases, I had some very distinct philosophies about how to help horses through their issues. The belief my mentor Tom Dorrance had espoused years earlier stayed with me: "Find a way to make the right thing easy and comfortable for the horse and the wrong thing difficult or uncomfortable." After hitting the ground more times than I'd like to admit, I began smartening up and actually formulating a plan before the bomb exploded. That way it was not a surprise for me but was for the horse. Time after time, I was able to help the horse conquer his fears and irrational behaviors by setting the horse up to "hit the brick wall" the moment the behavior raised its ugly head. Time after time I began "fixing" problems almost instantly.

The key here is timing and anticipation. Instead of being surprised by the event, I became pro-active and made very certain that the event was negatively rewarded. Of course, conversely, all positive behavior was rewarded heartily. Most important there must be no gray area. If we aren't clear about our communication, how will the horse learn?

A situation like this one with Breezy was unfortunately human induced. The horse would reach a certain distance from the barn, away from her buddies and suddenly go into overload. Herd-bound is a good description. My best guess is that a trainer in her

earlier education hadn't taken the time to baby-step her into longer and longer rides. She'd reacted and succeeded by leaving that person in the dust and then run home with glee as if to say, "Look what I just did!" A very dangerous pattern had developed that had to be broken. I'm so glad she found me to help her through it.

We continued our ride, but I deliberately didn't explore the outer edges of her ability. Instead, I made it a pleasurable discovery ride. Her confidence grew by leaps and bounds, and we rode back to the barn, both winners.

Challenge Yourself to Challenge the Horse

By design, every day the challenges became increasingly more varied and interesting. The immature two-year-old filly blossomed like the spring flowers bursting out all around us. What fun we had on that ranch filled with obstacles of every description.

One specific area did wonders for Breezy's confidence. There was an area of the ranch that was simply terrifying for almost all horses. Gas tanks on stilts, garbage dumpsters, rolls of wire fencing, boards and scraps of metal were strewn throughout this scary area. This was my favorite place to work horses on ground and in the saddle. And Breezy, just like most horses, was not happy about spending time here. So…. we did. In fact, we spent a whole lot of time in this exact location.

The first day we entered this area I kept her very busy with my ground exercises. She had very little time to focus on what was surrounding her because I kept her mind totally engaged performing *ballet on the ground*. When I finally eased off, she let out a big sigh and was just relieved to take a breather. The next day after the ground exercises I mounted her and we went exploring all the interesting junk. At one point she reached overload and again whirled to the right, her favorite direction to unload riders. It wasn't quite as lightning-quick as the first whirl on the road, but it was fast. In any case, she met the same end: a stirrup in the shoulder and it was over, for good. To the best of my knowledge that was the last whirl of her career. Within a few more days she

was eagerly looking into dumpsters and sniffing gas tanks. And now she was ready for some speed work.

Off to the Races

The remainder of her time with me was simply marvelous. We took long rides into the Rocky Mountains and foothills surrounding the ranch. We worked at slow speeds through the gently sloping hills and then increased the pace faster and faster as she became more fit. And finally, we had a memorable ride which neither of us would ever forget as we just flew through the gentle hills adjacent to the Rockies, mile after mile with no bottom to this young horse. We full-out galloped with glee and a sense of freedom and expression that I'd never before experienced. She was now ready to race.

It was indeed a sad day when we said our good-byes. I hugged her fiercely before she loaded like a seasoned champ right back into the trailer she'd arrived in several months earlier. By the end of the racing season, she was the leading money winner of her class and went on to have an illustrious racing career.

Warm, Wet Whiskers

The years flew by and I lost track of this wonderful Arabian filly. I heard bits and pieces of her notable successes, and I always smiled with pride at our accomplishments. Then, one spring, I was at the racetrack tending to another of my students, a horse named Magnifico. Leaning against a stall door I watched this stunning character of a horse parade around on the hot walker just being his prankish self. As I stood there, I felt the warm breath of another horse, then the whiskers on my neck. I reached back and stroked this friendly intruder and asked the groom, "Say, Betty, who is this horse tickling my neck?"

"That's Soaring Fast 'n' Breezy."

I turned around and we melted into our long-lost friendship as if time hadn't passed one minute. She remembered, and so did I, the wonderful journey we'd shared years earlier, and we both reveled in it.



CHAPTER TEN

Fred Ballets into the Ribbons

"Wear a helmet because your skull isn't as thick as your parents think it is." – Unknown

Fred was just not a happy camper when he arrived at the ranch several winters ago. He seemed to be at war with everyone who rode him, and he usually came out the winner. He had hurt and intimidated the best riders in the area and in the process had established quite a reputation. It had gotten to the point where no one wanted to work with him. His owner, Meg, had shared her frustration with her farrier who had referred her to me, thank you very much. She and I had spoken on the phone several times and I was admittedly a little nervous about working with Fred. She had done everything but talk me out of taking him on.

It was midafternoon on a harsh winter day when I first laid eyes on this seven-year-old, light bay thoroughbred of about 16-3 hands on a substantial frame. He exuded power and the certain ability to make quick work of an unprepared rider. I had immediate respect for his obvious athletic prowess. But he did not possess a mean eye, which was a hopeful sign. "Be careful. He's hurt everyone. I don't want you to get hurt," Meg had warned me. She had also given me the phone number of Fred's previous victim, Rochelle Winder, and encouraged me to call her to hear her story.

"He's a nut case. Don't get on that horse. I can ride anything with hair on it, but he's got a screw loose," she had told me face to face. By the time I left Rochelle's place I wasn't so sure I wanted to continue with this project. She seemed like an experienced horse

trainer, but a tough one who would tolerate very little from her equine students. I did have one distinct glimmer of hope. Had anyone gotten inside Fred's head to find out just what was bothering him? Had anyone ever given Fred a real chance?

I couldn't have had worse conditions to begin work with Fred; ice and snow filled half my roundpen, making the footing very dangerous. Nevertheless, we started with a great bonding session with him literally melting into my arms within fifteen or twenty minutes. He seemed to tell me he was a big, confused kid who just couldn't stay out of trouble. I could empathize. I'd been the same way at his age. He did very well as we progressed through my program, one step after another until we got to step number five: *desensitizing*. The ropes over his head were very trying to him, but with patience and time, were finally accepted without hesitation. But the plastic bags were just too much. He really became all unglued and showed his nasty side. His eyes turned mostly white and his ears lay flat back against his head as he tried to strike and kick front and back. I smiled to myself and thanked him for letting me know.

Problems—my ally

I always view problems as an ally, that is, assuming I can help the horse get through to the other side. When I can take the issue that most bothers a horse and turn it into a non-issue, what have I accomplished? I have boosted the horse's confidence in himself and in me dramatically. That is precisely my goal with all horses. Discover what does bother the horse, fix it, and then allow and encourage the horse to reach his full potential.

Finding the specific issue isn't always a simple process. More often it requires an intense searching that few trainers are willing to explore, even if they are capable of it. Knowing Fred had made quick work of one rider after another, I committed to finding his specific phobia or phobias before mounting him. I am never in a hurry to mount any horse, let alone one with a reputation like Fred's. My safety is my number one concern, always.

We worked through the plastic bag issue to a small degree on the ground, then moved onto the sixth step in my program, *ballet*

on the ground, in which he excelled. His dressage breeding allowed him to perform this maneuver like a champ. With his weight forward he would pivot and face up to me with an eager look in his eye. Then with a bit of encouragement and the right signals, he would rock his weight back and perform a perfect turn on the haunches as he headed off in the opposite direction. This exercise helped boost his confidence before we did some more bag therapy. He dealt with the plastic in a more respectable manner this time, which indicated clear progress and, most important, signaled a mind that could work through things in a rational manner.

With me up on his back, Fred took to *ballet in the saddle* as if he had been doing it forever. I knew that if I could get his mind right, he could be a high-end performer for Meg. We practiced ballet until it was Fred's second nature. He gracefully executed turns on the forehand and haunches with sheer enthusiasm, almost showing off.

Once this was firmly in place I then upped the ante a notch by reintroducing the plastic bag attached to the end of my extendable wand. I rode over to the edge of the roundpen, reached out and grasped my wand. Instantly, Fred exploded, slipping on the ice, shaking, and madly circling around and around as he tried to rid himself of the plastic that continued to torment him. I stayed in the middle and somehow didn't lose my balance. At my first chance I unloaded the wand off to the side, which sent him even higher. With constant stroking and a soothing voice, I circled and calmed him down enough to dismount.

I was more than a bit unnerved at this blow-up. My heart was racing wildly. I took hold of my knees and bent over to get blood back into my head and collect myself with some deep breathing. Shaking my head back and forth, I said to myself, "That was a very close call. Careful, Frank. Very careful." I'd really found his nemesis, but wasn't sure he could overcome it, nor whether I wanted to risk my well-being in the process.

Back to Basics

Either he had sandbagged me a bit on the ground or I hadn't read the signals correctly with the plastic. In the saddle it had become

an altogether different story. This was a very serious meltdown. Back to the drawing board and *ballet on the ground*. I needed to regress a bit and rebuild that confidence before moving back to riding with the plastic which I knew he would have to conquer to get on the right track. So instead of fighting that quantum thoroughbred energy, I harnessed it and used it constructively to his benefit and mine.

One time after another, we continued to perform this masterful ground exercise which connects the feet to the brain and forces the horse to focus. Gradually and very predictably he became more and more sensible until he was ready to face the plastic. I eased him over to the fence and took hold of my wand. I immediately hid it from his sight and circled him into the security of the dance he'd come to understand so well, all the while stroking and talking in a reassuring manner. Once he was settled, again I let him just barely see the bag. He tensed up. White filled his eyes and he snorted loudly. But with my stroking and soothing words to calm him, he found his way back. Another glimpse of the bag, though, and again his head shot up sky-high. This time he came down quicker, began working his mouth in understanding and dropped his head. I patiently and lovingly stayed with this process until he accepted the wand and bag completely on the ground.

I controlled him with one hand stroking him and maintaining reassuring contact with the lead while I operated the wand with the other. Round and around we circled together as I raised the stakes higher and higher, waving the flag with purpose. Ultimately, with time and patience, he was able to move smoothly and confidently as the bag flew all around him and even onto his body *while we moved*. He was able to stay rational.

Finally, the moment of truth could be avoided no longer and I mounted him. Reinforcing the seventh and final step in my system, we again performed *ballet in the saddle* until it was second nature to Fred, then I reintroduced the flag. I rode him to the side of the roundpen, reached out and took hold of the wand, but stayed prepared to unload it if necessary. I hid it behind my back as we circled to the right. I had a constant feel and control with my

inside rein and the wand in my left hand. I allowed Fred a quick glance at it while I kneaded his withers. He tensed up, but I supported him through it with leg, touch, and voice. Again, I allowed him a look as I eased the flag into his view, but longer this time. He tensed less. Gradually, with continued support and patience, he accepted the flag more and more confidently until I was able to ride him with a slack rein while waving the flag quite aggressively. With a decided sigh he lowered his head, licked his lips, and accepted the fact that the flag was nothing to fear and I was on his back to help him. He would still tense up from time to time but come right back down as we returned to that safe, loving place he'd come to understand as his warm blanket of security, that place known as *ballet in the saddle*.

Within a few days Fred and I were best buddies. His self-confidence blossomed beyond belief. We toured construction sites, stepping over lumber and plastic tarps. We moved at a lively trot up and down the paddock alleys as I banged loudly on the adjacent metal sheds. We rode in the arena among loose horses, his mind with me the entire time. My apprentice, Jim Olson, rode him out in a halter and lead rope one day when I was busy. Upon returning, he could only shake his head in disbelief at the change in Fred. He was a different horse.

But could Meg continue helping Fred on his journey to becoming a fully realized being?

Fortunately, Meg had great powers of concentration and a strong desire to understand my system. She paid close attention to my every word. She grasped the philosophy and applied it, and now she competes with Fred. Together they perform to music, he fully groomed and she dressed to the nines. The ballet he took to so well with me is now serving him in the world of high-end dressage.

Conclusion

Fred had lost confidence in himself and everyone who rode him. He had nowhere to turn. He needed a consistent handler he could trust. The first three steps in my program, *bonding*, *take and give* and *intimacy* are about establishing a relationship with the horse first

and foremost. If he didn't trust me, how could we move forward? Once he melted into my attentions, we could address his issues. With Fred it was a matter of taking baby-steps and watching very closely for his phobias. In his case the most identifiable phobia was of the wand with the plastic bag. It was far too much for him to handle on his own, but with almost constant contact and support from me, he was able to work through it. My stroking his neck and withers, while maintaining slight rein contact, pulled his attention away from the phobia and worked miracles. In situations when he did become overwhelmed, it was simply a matter of circling him down and regrouping. He welcomed this "cocoon of warmth" when necessary. The one-rein stop had indeed saved both of us from disaster. Repeated exposure to these and a variety of challenges built his confidence until he was ready to conquer the world. As Tom Dorrance instilled in my psyche long ago, "The long way is the short way."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Education of Raphael

Such horses are the jewels of the horseman's hands and thighs; they go by the word and hardly need the rein. – Stephen Vincent Benét, "Army of Northern Virginia"

In the early winter of 1995 Jerry Leiser called me about his horse, Raphael. "He's kinda spooky," he said. It was an understatement. While I expected to find a horse on the spooky side, this four-year-old Paso Fino was off the charts.

I met with Jerry and his wife Shelly several days later. Jerry explained Raphael's past. He'd been raised in a good home but was just plain nervous. Jerry had sent him to a person he understood to be a good trainer, and left him there for almost three months before reality had set in. The trainer had done nothing more than lunge the horse, and eventually informed Jerry that he would never be able to ride the horse. Being the persistent type, that Jerry is, he would not accept quitting on his horse and set about finding another trainer.

Thankfully for all parties, he found me. We are now great friends, and he and Raphael have taken ribbons in stiff competition. Most important, Jerry has learned a new approach to working with horses and has shared his new-found skills with other horse owners. Several of the things we developed to help Raphael are worth sharing, mostly from the creative aspect of the process of desensitizing.

Very early on, while bonding with Raphael, I recognized that his back legs were overly sensitive. Jerry had mentioned problems trimming the back feet and his farrier's justified nervousness. While I was bonding at the front end and trying to find something

pleasurable for the horse, the wind blew his tail into his back legs. Raphael's head went sky high and he lurched forward with terror in his eyes. Suddenly the severity of his problem became quite apparent. This was clearly not a two-hour job.

Plotting a Course

Jerry, Shelly, and I had a somber discussion of what lay ahead. This was going to be a long process for all of us if Raphael was to become a safe riding horse, and there were no guarantees. I could put many hours into this horse and still have a dangerous animal. With Jerry in his sixties, I had my concerns for his safety. Plus, there were financial concerns. This was going to take a long time, a month minimum. But Jerry was undaunted. He seemed to trust that I could do the job and most important, he wanted to be part of the process and learn with Raphael. So, I committed to taking on this project for a variety of reasons. First, I relished the challenge. Next, I knew that if I could help Raphael with his nervousness, I would be light-years ahead in my ability to help all nervous, skittish horses I met in the future. And finally, this was also an opportunity to get to know someone new, who in this community had a degree of stature and was well respected. It never hurts a horse trainer to have such people in their court.

The project lasted about a month. Jerry was there every step of the way and was as integral in helping his horse as I was. While we worked through all the normal desensitizing procedures in my bag of tricks, Raphael required a degree of creativity far beyond my earlier challenges. One of these involved a typical horse blanket, which of course Raphael had never dealt with.

While blanketing most horses is elementary, with the nervous types, it's a confidence building opportunity. The trick is not to ask too much too fast. The place to start is to fold the blanket over itself until it is one long strip 8-10" wide. Gently easing the long rectangle across the horse's back while stroking the neck usually gives the horse enough reassurance to accept it. Once confident, I'll drive the horse in circles as the blanket hangs down over his sides. We'll do some wind-downs with the horse's nose ultimately sniffing the blanket with his head around to the girth area. Patting

the blanket or even gently slapping it with the lead can speed up the acceptance process. The next steps are simply unfolding the blanket one section at a time, driving the horse, and winding down to the safety zone for another inspection of this new phenomenon.

Finally, the blanket will be completely draped over the horse but not attached. Plenty of gentle slapping of the blanket with the hand and lead prepare the horse for attaching the blanket fore to aft. Again, driving the horse to get him used to the straps and the confinement is important to the confidence building process. This all took a good two hours with Raphael. Interestingly, he never exploded but was much challenged the whole time. By the end of the session his head was down, and he was working his mouth in a manner of acceptance.

I suggested to Jerry that Raphael wear the blanket indefinitely. I would come up with more for him to handle as his confidence blossomed. I also was adamant about keeping a close eye while Jerry worked with Raphael. I didn't want it to fall apart because the blanket caught on something or became askew. With the blanket hanging down touching his back legs and the straps secured, he had come light-years in several hours. This process had to continue.

Getting Creative with Raphael

Monday, Raphael seemed like just an old blanket-wearing horse living his life, but I knew better.

"Get me some baling twine, Jerry," I instructed. I tied short pieces of twine onto the grommets at the rear of the blanket. The twine hung down almost to the ground. Raphael jumped forward when he first felt it, again with terror in his eyes. Jerry and I smiled at each other in acknowledgement of this difficult case. Again, the process—driving in circles to the wind-down into the safety-zone—sped up the mental process of acceptance.

"Do you have some old socks in the house, Jerry?" I asked. He looked at me curiously when he returned with the socks.

"Trust me," I said. "This could help him and really speed up this whole thing." I filled the socks with a dirt-gravel mix to create

ballast in the knotted socks. I then tied one sock to the twine on the left side, leaving it to hang about three inches off the ground, and drove him off. It came as no surprise when he saw fire, as the socks attacked his left leg. I kept a hand on his neck and spoke in a quiet manner and helped him through this trying moment, then tied the other sock to the other side, which I knew would be even more difficult for him to accept.

For this horse, or any horse for that matter, dealing with this was a very big deal. It was interesting for Jerry and me to observe Raphael as the socks touched his legs and made his mind dart from one side to the other. It took a while and lots of stroking, but he finally made it and let down and relaxed. Again, he lived with the blanket, the twine, and the socks for several days. And when we finally removed that blanket, Raphael was a different horse.

Several weeks later Jerry and I were working in his arena with Raphael on a Monday morning. Jerry mentioned he had helped Raphael through yet another difficult time. Standing in front of Raphael, Jerry had shaken the gate for about a half hour until Raphael finally settled down and accepted it. I knewthen I had a quick reminder for Jerry. I took Raphael over to the gate and shook it violently. His head shot up and he pulled back. Then I placed my hand firmly on his neck and stroked as I shook the gate. He handled it with style and pride. The difference had been my reassuring hand on his neck. It was a black and white difference.

The education of Raphael was also the education of Frank and Jerry. The three of us learned and performed as a team. Raphael told me what he needed. I put on my creative and sensitivity hats and helped Raphael where he needed it, then left Jerry with homework he did well. Everyone performed their jobs and a horse and rider emerged. The lessons learned in helping Raphael have been invaluable to me ever since.

Now when Jerry calls me to share his weekend successes at shows with Raphael, I can only thank him for his confidence in me and his persistence in helping the horse many others would have so easily given up on. Thank you, Jerry, Shelly, and especially Raphael. Your challenges—and how we met them—have now helped thousands.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Magnifico's Return to Paradise

"A horse gallops with his lungs, perseveres with his heart and wins with his character." - Tesio

Magnifico's story is as interesting as any. A complex Arabian who ran for his life at the track and won, he had lost his way with humans. What had taken place will never be known or admitted. I ache for what he must have endured, because when he came to me in the late winter of '96, he had no use for me or anyone else, for that matter.

After winning several flat track races the summer of '95, he was purchased and sent to Turf Paradise in Arizona for the winter racing. In his first race, he broke the track record by a serious margin and decidedly won the next race as well. But that was the end of it. In the third and fourth races, by the time he'd entered the gate he'd already run his race—he was completely drenched in sweat and stressed out. He had nothing left. In the racing world it's called "washing out."

This was a horse that fit his name perfectly. I've not laid eyes on a better-proportioned animal in my life. He was a dark bay of 15-1 hands with strong bone and the muscle to cover it. His thick jet-black mane and tail glistened against his muscle structure, that was on a par with a well-toned stallion.

Magnifico was a no-nonsense horse. He was all business when working, yet something of a character when not. He had a busy mind that needed to be constantly challenged with a high degree of creativity. His gaits were to be envied; his speed, awesome. But none of that mattered when he arrived via transport late one warm

spring afternoon. I happened to be returning from a hike off the mountain adjacent to where I was living when I was informed that "the man" had arrived. I'd been expecting him. His owner, Emmett Ross and I had discussed his situation at length. I couldn't wait to get my hands on him. Something inside me needed to help him.

Still dressed in shorts and hiking boots, I eased into his run as the sun was setting. He took one look at me and turned his rear in a sign of disgust for humanity. I agitated my hand and then tapped my leg louder and louder until he turned to face me, then backed off, allowing him to digest my deliberate intrusion. He looked at me with obvious contempt, as if to say, "Just feed me and leave me alone. I don't want to have anything to do with you."

But I persisted by moving toward him. His ears shot back and he charged me. I held my ground, yelled at him, and raised my arms while making a threatening, ugly guttural sound.

"Heeeeeeeeeeee," I growled deeply.

He stopped, head high, ears pricked forward, clearly surprised. This intimidation skit had proved successful for him in the past but this time and with my response, he hit the brick wall. As his expression softened into curiosity and defeat, I backed off. His head lowered and he licked his lips. I circled to his left slowly, maintaining my distance. He watched suspiciously and then took a step toward me into my circle, then another. I stopped and allowed him to sniff me. I slowly reached back and made contact, scratching his chest lightly. He took a step closer as my hand continued working on him. My hands drifted up to his head, all the while continuing my attentions with the sincere desire to make an incredible first impression. My fingers found his mouth and tongue, then inside his nose, then his eyes. He leaned into my palm as I rubbed one eye then the other. With one hand on his nose-handle, my other found his flanks which I stroked gently. When he was ready, I stroked his rump above his dock, then briefly stroked the underside of his tail which he lifted with pleasure. With a big sigh, all at once he let down and melted into an intimacy, he'd probably never known. With his head in one of my hands and his tail in the other, he delighted in this oneness as

he found his way back to being okay with the human. Almost like going back to the womb, it is a place I call *intimacy*.

Over the next few months, I brought Magnifico back to his full potential. I started slowly with him, knowing he'd need time to trust again and want to work *with* the human, not against. I wanted him to enjoy our time together and did an extra special job on this horse that I came to understand, admire, and love.

Discovering Magnifico's Phobias—and Confidence Building

Magnifico had plenty of phobias that had never been addressed. Simple things like walking over a concrete pad or into the wash-rack really bothered him. Ear handling and clippers were both very big challenges. He even flinched when being saddled. It all added up to yet another racehorse with no foundation.

Every day we would have a serious bonding session first. He started to expect it and look forward to it. He began to meet me eagerly at the gate. I'd aggressively massage his face and twist his ears as he leaned into me with delight. Rubbing his eyes would almost drop him to his knees. Typical of many Arabs, he'd just melt under the affection. Then we would go looking for the very things that he did not like and begin the process of confidence building. Before long he was walking proudly in, over, around, and through everything on the ranch. He hated being left alone, away from the action. It didn't matter whether it involved human or horse, he wanted to be part of it. He would get extremely anxious when tied, out away from the action, and would paw and dig and whinny continuously. So that is exactly what he got to do, be away from the action a little longer each day until it was just part of life. And he got to lie down a lot and in an interesting variety of locations and situations.

I began by laying him down in a very safe place and as gently as possible. As horses go, he was about in the middle in his acceptance of this process. But after the first time, he seemed to begin actually *liking* it. It was full-blown spring and the grasses were pushing up into the warm Colorado sunshine. He'd drop to his knees, take a few bites of grass, and then go all the way down

and really start enjoying himself. He would clean up all the grass within easy reach, then begin extending his neck and working the perimeter. Then he would roll over or scoot on his knees a few yards and start again.

One time I took him up into the foothills at the base of the Rockies, to a remote plateau covered with rich grasses and flowers. Down he went and off I went a little way apart. I hid about a hundred yards away and watched as he munched away, then moved a little and started over. He had passed a very difficult hurdle in my mind. Here was a horse virtually in the wild unable to get up and escape a predator and he was totally relaxed about it. I left him to his grazing for a half-hour as I dozed in the warm sun, then returned and lay on my stomach on top of him. I talked soothingly and massaged his neck and face, gums and nostrils. Then observing that he was totally relaxed, I got him up, rode him bareback back down the mountain and fed him a hearty meal.

Our Ride of a Lifetime

The day finally came when it was time to pass him onto the next trainer who would work on the conditioning. We had one last ride and he seemed to sense it. The day was fresh and cool. We had our usual warm-up first on the ground, then in the saddle. We were both feeling good and we performed the *ballet in the saddle* like two seasoned ballroom dancers. His turns on the haunches were powerful and precise, and supercharged with life and happiness. We rode out into the enchanting red rock formations that inspired our riding. I eased him into a trot as we worked along an uphill track. His eagerness pulled him forward with glee and the trot extended into a smooth gliding gait that covered ground as fast as most horses would canter.

At the top we settled to a walk and wound through a series of fascinating red-rock formations. The one I called "Sphinx" looked like the head of a pharaoh. The monolith faced the Rockies to the west and glowed a deep red in the setting sun. Just around the corner was a little valley littered with age-worn red rocks, scrub oak, and luscious grass. I dismounted and untied my lead/reins from under his chin. He eagerly devoured the grasses for a few

minutes, then turned to me as if to say, "Come on. Let's have some fun."

I remounted and continued at a trot up to the mesa top, following a narrow trail that intersected the winding dirt road back to the ranch entrance. I asked for the canter, and he broke into a very slow lope. We worked up and around to the west, past massive fir trees and bright lime-green scrub oak of springtime. We came down to the walk and worked our way back towards the entrance to the drive that opened onto the very first grade of the Rocky Mountains.

Magnifico knew this routine very well. He'd done it many times in the past but usually had his riders as terrified as he was. That was not the case today. Each of us—human and horse—exuded confidence and unbridled exuberance at the daunting mountain that loomed in our path. As we turned into the drive, I encouraged a trot. He eagerly complied and within several hundred yards we were into a ground-eating extended trot, then up to a light, gliding, easy canter as we neared the mountain. After a bit of encouragement, I gave him his head, carte-blanche, and he knew it. He very deliberately picked up speed until we were just flying up between the fenced paddocks. The other horses looked up and started running with us on each side. But Magnifico was determined and totally focused as he carried me on our last ride at the ranch. He stayed on task, completely immersed in his mission to give me one of the most memorable rides of my life.

My eyes were watering as we pelted toward the beginning of the gentle grade that preceded the more pronounced steepness. His gallop was as smooth as glass. As we neared the turn up the mountain, we eased back down to his slow canter. His powerful haunches drove us up the grade to the plateau he'd lain on only weeks before. I felt no bottom in this horse today. We continued up the mountain, first conquering the steep, narrow segment. Then the trail flattened out for a quarter mile before again angling sharply uphill. He paced himself perfectly, backing off on the easier grades and just attacking the steep. I stayed well forward, listening and feeling his desires.

Up and up, we went at a very deliberate pace. The ground flew by as this creature ran like the wind. Finally, we had conquered the first face, a mountain trail we called Turners. Magnifico backed off to a walk and cooled down as we weaved through the fragrant Douglas fir and brilliant Aspen trees. Patches of snow hidden in the shade bordered our path through the crisp dry air of springtime. Within several minutes his breathing was normal.

I'd ridden hundreds of fit horses up this mountain but never had a ride like that day. It had been a special ride for both of us, one never to be forgotten.

Magnifico's Final Test

In patient workday after day, trainer James Olson continued Magnifico's conditioning, until the horse was ready for his final test before returning to the track. Knowing full well that the starting gate could still be a stumbling block, I made arrangements to "borrow" the use of an old rickety one.

Jim and I arrived mid-morning at Soaring Eagle Ranch with Magnifico in tow. The ranch had a full-sized workout track with this ancient, portable, two-stall starting gate down at the south end. It was an ideal set-up for preparing Magnifico totally for his return to the track. I saddled him with my English saddle, and as always, did a little groundwork, then rode him over to the old contraption. I rode around the outside, then with the gates wide open, rode inside, stopped for a moment, and then rode back out, stroking and supporting him the whole way. But he was clearly bothered and even with repeated trips in and out of the starting gate, he still seemed nervous. I'd brought along my gear for laying him down and decided to do so right next to the gate-monster that had become his nemesis.

With ease he found his way down onto the soft sand that surrounded the gate and, sighing, completely stretched out. I kneeled next to his head and reassured him as Jim moved to the starting gate. At my cue he began shaking the gate, first softly, then louder and louder. As the noise increased, so did the white in Magnifico's eyes. Keeping a close eye on his tail and legs, I signaled Jim to stop before Magnifico attempted to get up. Again, I

reassured him with stroking and a soothing voice before the racket started again. This time Jim rattled harder, louder, and longer before Magnifico's concern showed in his eyes and body language. But again, we timed it to quit just this side of trouble and then we allowed him to relax. The white quickly subsided out of his eyes and his whole demeanor softened as I watched closely. The final rattling found us both working hard on that gate as Magnifico lay quietly next to it, and only mildly concerned. Sensing a good time to stop, I allowed him a few minutes of complete quiet and then asked him to get up and again face the issue that had driven him from the track.

I saddled him up again and climbed right on. We immediately went back to work, first on the outside of the gate, then the inside. His whole demeanor had changed as if to say, "Hey, Pal, if I can take it on the ground, this is a snap." From inside I shook the sides as hard as I could and he didn't flinch. In and out, slow and fast, forward and backward. I tried every combination to make him flinch, even got on and off from inside, but found nothing that remotely bothered him. The final trip through the gate found us headed right onto the track and I just couldn't resist perfect footing, beautiful day, and a horse that needed a just reward and to unwind a bit. It all added up to a memorable trip around the track. We started slow and gradually built into a gallop by the far end. Once around the curve I encouraged a bit more speed and he immediately burst into a full gallop with unbridled glee. The power of this horse under me was uncharted territory. I'd never flown like this. My eyes watered from the speed, along with the deep satisfaction of our incredible journey. At that moment we tacitly conspired for him to return to the track as the New Magnifico.

Return to the Racetrack

Several months later Olson had Magnifico ready. The timing seemed perfect, as the season had just started at Arapahoe Downs. In a field of nine horses Magnifico placed a respectable fourth in his first race. He entered the gate confidently and ran a strong race against very tough competition. Most important, he was Mr. Cool

about the previous challenges. As I heard it, he hardly took notice of the starting gate.

Two weeks later he ran again. This time I was present. I wouldn't have missed it for anything and drove through the night to be in his court. I had about two minutes with him in the saddling paddock before the race. We walked off to the side, and I kneeled as hundreds watched. His head dropped next to mine.

"Why don't you show what you've got?" I asked him.

He lifted his head and looked around at the other hyper horses prancing their energy away. Then he lowered his head again and nuzzled his wet nose against the security of my head and neck and held it there for a long moment. We both reveled in our togetherness.

"Do your very best. That's all I want. Do it for you," I whispered into his ear with a strong pull of his head into me. We rose up together and I handed the lead to his handler.

With moist eyes I confidently headed toward the viewing area. I placed my bet, noting his odds at 9-1, and then watched him enter the gate for his second out as Magnifico the Confident. In a seven-furlong competition in a field of eight horses, he held his own throughout the race, keeping a close eye on the lead horse. At the final bend he was running third. Jim Olson and I were jumping up and down like kids as the horses broke onto the straightaway. Coming to the finish with two seasoned horses in front of him he came from behind and moved to the outside. With what appeared to be only the slightest encouragement, he turned on the afterburners and burst into the lead to win the race by a half-length. But it wasn't over for Magnifico. While the other horses backed off, spent, Magnifico delighted in his win and carried his jockey well into the bend before easing off. Magnifico was back!

As Jim Olson and I rushed from the stands into the winner's circle, I flashed back on that spring afternoon months before when we had rekindled his belief and trust in the human. We had worked together for months dealing with his issues. I'd taught him to lie down in the most stressful of situations including next to that old rickety starting gate. We had developed a bond and level of trust few horses or humans reach in a lifetime.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'94 Changing of the Guard

"Experienced riders are not prone to brag. And usually newcomers, if they start out being boastful, end up modest." –

C.J.J. Mullen

In the winter of '94 I was working and living at a wonderful boarding facility in Larkspur, Colorado. Larkspur is about forty miles south of downtown Denver, where the first major equine event of the year is the National Western Stock Show. Now this is a very big deal for that part of the world, with cowboys and Indians and English riders and everyone horsy coming for the various events ranging from rodeo to stadium jumping and absolutely everything in between. I'd been to that show in college but hadn't been back in a couple of decades. Now that I was a horse guy, I had a lot of ground to cover in the immense complex.

I shared a booth with the lady who owned the boarding facility in Larkspur, but I had plenty of time to just browse and found my way to the BLM booth. BLM stands for Bureau of Land Management, the government agency that oversees millions of acres of public lands and the herds of wild horses as well. I knew that prisoners actually worked with the wild horses and, for some odd reason, I just had to get involved in the program. I took a brochure home with me and wrote the director of the program, volunteering to demonstrate my humane horse handling system to the inmates. And by golly Fran Ackley took me up on it. He invited me down to the prison to exhibit my "gentle approach" in early May.

It was a pretty good pull down to Cañon City from Denver, and by the time I actually got to the point of handling horses in front of the inmates, it was mid-afternoon and hot, really hot. I worked one horse on the ground that had experienced only a couple of previous rides and then mounted up. The prisoners had done a good job. The horse was relaxed and confident and we worked together well.

"What else do you have, Fran?" I queried.

"We've got a pretty hot stallion that we haven't been able to get much done with. Want him?"

"Sure. I could use a little shade and some water first though," I admitted. I took a little break as they arranged to push the stallion down to my roundpen, and I talked with several of the inmates as we waited.

"So how'd you end up in here?" I asked one of the guys I'd been talking about training with.

"Killed a guy. Got into a brawl in a bar after a few drinks and lost it. Snapped his neck like a pencil," he admitted, shaking his head with obvious regret.

I was speechless.

Then the stallion came roaring into the fifty-foot roundpen. He was snorting fire.

"What's the story on this guy?" I asked.

"He was a herd boss in the wild, the big bad dog of the bunch. So, he's not real happy about this new situation. We haven't been able to get much done with him," Fran said. "Careful, he's come after a few of our guys quite aggressively."

He was a very well conformed horse of about 14.3 hands and had striking pinto markings of a deep chestnut against bright white hair. His mane and tail were steel grey. The horse was truly magnificent, and he seemed to know it very well, as he snorted loudly and ripped around the pen with an obvious aura of authority and self-assurance. I stepped in to change his direction, and he almost ran over me before I bolted out of the way. He was not interested in dealing with me on his right side and avoided it like the plague.

I knew immediately that unless I could accomplish this task, I couldn't help him much. I took my aerial with a plastic bag on the end, made myself a whole lot larger and again confronted him. This time I did turn him just at the last moment. He bee-lined it to the other side of the pen, where he stopped abruptly in a cloud of dust and turned to face me. I backed off to acknowledge this truce and lowered my stature slowly.

"Easy now, you wild thing," I cooed steadily to Mr. Bigshot. "Easy now, big fella. Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeasy now," I repeated over and over. But he wasn't buying it. Not much. So, I began easing into him with a sideways non-threatening posture and extended my hand in an attempt to make peace. You see, aside from a forced haltering in a chute, he'd really never been handled. Closer and closer I edged until my hand was within perhaps a foot of his face. He very slowly extended his head out and took a very wary sniff. Great. I lowered my hand and inched in another half step, then again extended my hand in greeting. With an open hand I offered friendship.

Suddenly he nailed me, swift as a rattlesnake, and bit my lower arm hard, getting a hank of skin about six inches above my wrist on the inside. It burned immediately and turned an angry purple in just seconds.

"Yow," I cried out and backed away quickly. But I didn't get after him physically. His warning signals had been clear and I'd invaded his space. I did make a loud hissing noise and sent him off to let him know this was unacceptable. We went around and around a few times and I did get to be on his right side with reasonable acceptance before having to quit for the day. The heat was unbearable and I just couldn't work effectively any longer.

Several days later Fran Ackley sent me a note of thanks along with a BLM hat and an invitation to demonstrate my techniques at an upcoming auction in Greeley two weeks later. I guess I'd made some points with the inmates as Fran mentioned he'd watched them using my techniques the very next day.

Changes in the Wind

Now at the time I didn't realize there were some awkward politics taking place at the prison horse program. The old trainer named Tex was from the old school of spurs and ropes and submission. But the times were changing and Fran and several of the others embraced the revolution that leaned toward partnership and a gentle approach. At the auction in Greeley, I was the guinea pig who would be right in the middle of this quiet battle.

I arrived on Friday night and took a walk around the pens with several of the BLM trainers to pick out a couple of subjects for the following morning.

"We've located a couple that you should be able to make good headway with Frank," explained Ted, a Native American with the long ponytail. "See this little gray here, Frank? He's actually sniffed my hand a time or two. Why don't you work him first?"

"That looks like a promising start, but let's also have a back-up horse in case this one comes along pretty fast," I added, maybe getting ahead of myself a bit.

We walked the alleys between the horse pens. Some of the horses cowered in the corners while others bolted right into the seven-foot panels in sheer terror as a painful, crashing sound jarred the quiet of the waning evening. Finally, we came upon a filled-out, black, drafty looking horse with a kind eye that didn't show too much white. He wasn't exactly friendly or curious, but he wasn't terrified either. He at least would look at us.

"He'll be my second horse if the first works out well. Okay, Ted?"

"I'll have him all ready for you just as soon as you've ridden the little gray. We'll just push him down the alley into your pen when you give the signal. Good luck and be careful, really careful." Ted added quite seriously, "I've seen more broken bones at the prison than you want to know about. Believe me. These wild horses are the real deal, but then I guess you do know that." I nodded with a strong sense of self-preservation quickly permeating my being.

Show Time

The facility was set up with rows of pens holding the wild horses with alleys in between. There were two roundpens for the demonstrators to work in, with plenty of room for spectators to observe, mill around and ask questions. The roundpens were at opposite ends of the facility, and one was a much better arrangement, with good footing, access for the horses, and ample room for the observers. The other pen had some puddles in it and was crammed into a corner with a building on the back side that kind of loomed menacingly overhead, way too close for comfort for horse or human.

The day began as a typical spring Colorado morning, bright, cool and clear but promising to warm right up and be downright hot by mid-afternoon. The little gray was in the spacious 60ft pen and at 9:00 a.m. sharp I was to begin. The loudspeakers blared the beginning of the event and announced the demonstrations. Tex was down in the less desirable pen working on horseback.

I walked in with my implements of training: my 12 ft rope halter/lead combo and a lariat. Leaving the halter beside the fence I cautiously approached the gray with a non-threatening posture and soothing tone.

"Good morning, little guy," I greeted this oddly calm little horse. He had a curious eye and a glob of snot hanging from his nose. As I got closer, he eased back a bit, but when I offered my hand, he did take a sniff. I immediately lowered my posture to reward that sniff. He lowered his head and watched me closely.

"Atta boy. I'm here to help you now. Eeeeeeeeeeasy now," I repeated over and over in a very soothing manner. And he just seemed to innately trust me for some reason. A stroke on the neck led to scratching his chest which he delighted in.

By now there were a couple of dozen people watching from outside the roundpen. "Now, I know you're all thinking I snuck in here last night and got this little guy all gentled down. But I have not had a hand on him until just now. I saw him last night and he seemed calm enough to get something done. So I'll just go ahead and move right along with him now," I explained, while kind of defending myself since at this point it all looked a little too easy.

And it was. This little horse just accepted every single thing I offered and within forty-five minutes I was riding him without incident. I couldn't believe it, nor could anyone else.

"Come on now. That horse was the exception wasn't he, Mr. Bell?" one middle-aged cowboy quipped, shaking his head as a non-believer.

I replied, "Truth is I think he's a little sick. See that runny nose? He just doesn't feel good and doesn't have it in him to offer much of a fight. Plus, I do think he's low man in the herd so I'm a pretty good deal compared to the rest of his gang. Hey, I'm ready for another one. Hey, Ted," I yelled toward the mounted cowboy, "I'm ready for the black drafty one now."

But now it all got a little complicated because it was Tex's turn to use this roundpen and I had to regroup back down in the less desirable corner pen with the puddles. And the clock was ticking away with the auction beginning at 12:00. By the time I finished with the gray, got him unsaddled, and answered a bunch of questions, I only had about an hour at best. As Ted opened and closed gates, creating alleyways to push the black into the far pen, Tex moved right into my pen, riding a substantial white mustang. His partner, Brian, came in, too, on a sorrel. A big, flashy, multi-colored mustang with a whole lot of chrome was then pushed into the pen and within seconds a rope landed around his neck and the struggle began.

Tex's approach was the absolute antithesis of mine. It was all about force as Brian roped the mustang's back legs and used Tex's rope to catch the front around his neck. Well, the poor terrorized horse with white panic-filled eyes was almost choked down within the first couple of minutes. I closely observed the audience's reaction and saw almost universal disdain in their eyes and hearts. They'd just witnessed a completely non-violent approach and now were subjected to the opposite end of the spectrum of methods.

No Time to Spare

Thankfully Ted finally had my second horse moving down the alley. I grabbed my tools and hurried in behind the black, using

this opportunity to immediately begin my own direction with this horse. At this point I had about fifty minutes to work with the drafty black that I drove from behind, immediately establishing a level of communication as he walked right into the less desirable pen.

With no time to waste I opened my lariat, created a big loop, and proceeded toward the black gelding, again and always with a non-threatening posture. His head rose high in the air as I approached and he backed into the edge of the pen, against the building that bordered the backside. I slowly waved the big loop up and down, back and forth, and then with a lucky flick it was over his head. The horse rushed forward past me along the side of the roundpen as I played out line and just let him carry the rope.

I glanced up into the stands to catch Fran's eye. He nodded with a smile. You see. Fran was on my team. He really wanted to promote the gentle approach and was silently rooting for me. I could read it in his face and body language.

As the horse circled, I glanced way down to the other pen to see someone approaching the big multi-colored, tied-down mustang with a saddle. The crowd had dwindled and seemed to be drifting my way. Tightening down on the lariat I finally made firm contact, and with a soft eye, pulling at about forty-five degrees from the front of the horse, I applied probably ten to fifteen pounds pressure and waited. Lo and behold, after probably a full minute, old Blackie gave a tiny lean in my direction. With an instantaneous release I then dropped to one knee and lowered my eyes to the ground. After another long minute I picked up on the rope and very gradually applied more pressure, still from one knee. At about seven pounds Blackie took a step in my direction. With another quick release I caught the final words of a spectator just outside the pen.

"Looks like another easy one," he'd said.

"Let me assure you sir," I began, "this horse has never been touched by the human hand except for getting that freeze brand. I had him on back-up in case the gray was too easy. He wasn't one of the terrified ones by a long shot, but he did look like a

reasonable challenge. However, you can see how fast he's catching on, huh?"

"Either you're really good or real lucky," a lady said.

At that comment I gave another slight pull and Blackie took a couple steps toward me, ears forward with an eager, ready-to-learn look in his eye. "You know, ma'am, sometimes I think I'm just downright blessed," I said as I walked off with the black horse following hesitantly behind me. I shook my head in disbelief at this seemingly miraculous progress.

We stopped in the middle of the roundpen, and I reached back and allowed Blackie to take a long sniff of my hand. I offered it to him in such a way that he had to reach for it. His big head slowly extended farther and farther until he could get a good sniff of this human who so wanted to be his friend and show him the easy way to get there. My hand drifted very slowly downward as Blackie's head dropped to follow it. Then I made firm contact on his neck just below his withers. He leaned into my touch as my fingers began to dig into his skin. I moved my hand around in front to his chest that was all covered with lumps and bug bites and dug in deeply with my fingernails. His head arched up into the sky at an awkward angle as he delighted in my touch. Now I figured I pretty much owned this horse. I'd found his pleasure spot, and he trusted me and it all just blossomed from that moment forward. Within a few minutes I was all over his face, rubbing his eyes and ears and in the corner of his mouth, breaking his big tongue loose as he licked away with gusto, signifying big-league trust.

Glancing at my watch as we walked over to my saddle at the edge of the roundpen, I noted 11:40. Slipping my soft rope halter over his head, I figured I had exactly twenty minutes before the auction would begin. Could I ride this horse in that allotted time? I wanted to, but at the same time had to be smart about it. After all this was still a wild animal and I needed to set an example of prudence. Nor did I have much interest in having my body rearranged. I liked it just the way it was.

My Navajo blanket had been on perhaps a hundred horses at this point; Blackie delighted in the smell of it and accepted it

rubbed first on his shoulder, then rubbed and tossed all over his body. I followed that with my aged red pad that he also accepted without fanfare. The saddle was another story. That was a different smell and look and he just wasn't too sure. But in time and with supporting hands stroking his muscled neck, he accepted the saddle, too, as I placed it delicately on his wide back. Then we took a walk around the pen. I just wanted him to be comfortable carrying the saddle before cinching it up.

By now I had the whole crowd. Poor Tex and Brian were all alone down there in the desirable pen with their now saddled—and terrified—horse. Again, I caught Fran's eye and gave him a quick wink and nod. He was pleased as punch and tapped his watch.

"The auction will begin in ten minutes. The auction will begin in ten minutes," the loudspeaker blared out.

"You gonna get on this one, Frank?" one of the spectators queried.

"I'm hoping so, but it'll be Blackie's choice. I don't want to push him any faster than he's ready for."

With that I reached under and began stroking his girth area in preparation for cinching him up, all the while keeping a close eye on his hind leg. I'd seen this send some horses into a panic and was ready for the worst case. But old Blackie trusted me beyond belief and within a few minutes I had him cinched up snugly and then took off the lead and sent him off. The horse had to move off and work through his gaits before this wannabe cowboy was going to even consider mounting up.

Blackie moved off in an unsure, jerky manner which was completely normal and expected. But I kept him moving and he loosened right up into a smooth walk after a couple of go-rounds. So now it was time for the trot, and he drifted, almost floated right into an exceedingly smooth trot that brought me to the point of wanting to take this wonderful horse home. Time for the canter and the expected bucking sessions and sure enough he did buck . . . or half-heartedly crow-hop a couple times, then lined out and cantered slowly around the pen, with truly a rocking-chair canter. What a horse! Sending Blackie off in the other direction, he drifted right through his gaits and didn't so much as even think of

bucking as he circled counterclockwise to the left. I stepped back and relieved the pressure, and he turned right into me as if to say, "Okay what now, boss?"

"The auction will begin in five minutes," the announcer called several times. "Please proceed to the auction ring with your bidding cards."

Not a soul moved. By now there were probably seventy-five people watching the Frank and Blackie show. I fished through my tack bag for my safety helmet and secured it tightly on my head, then took some very deep breaths and positioned Blackie right in the middle of the roundpen. Slapping the saddle with my lead as he walked around me, first a bit unsure, then with growing confidence and trust, I circled this wonderful horse down to a stop and loved him up with sheer gusto. With the moment of truth upon me, I slipped a toe in the stirrup and gave myself an oomph upward to place some weight in the stirrup. Blackie took a step to the side to balance himself. Then I pulled myself up with a hank of mane and stroked his neck deeply right at the withers.

"Everything okay, big boy? You gonna be alright now?" I asked with a tinge of predictable uncertainty in my voice. Everything about this horse said loud and clear, "Come on now. It's almost noon. Let's get going." While I slipped my right foot in the off-side stirrup, I maintained a feel on the inside rein and reached down and reassured Blackie first on the left, then the right as his big head swung to each side in complete compliance. And then with a little agitation in the saddle and a slight nudge with my leg, the horse walked off.

"The auction is now beginning. We need everyone to proceed immediately to the auction arena. The demonstrations are finished."

I rode Blackie around the roundpen several times in each direction and wound him down to several one-rein stops, then dismounted and wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him hard, really hard.

"You have no idea what we just accomplished, big boy," I explained to him. Then we gave a nod as the crowd acknowledged

our timely accomplishment. Catching Fran's eye, he gave me a strong thumbs up as he hurried over to the auction arena.

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Today, a dozen years later, the Wild Horse Inmate Program at Cañon City, Colorado, is the leading wild horse/prisoner program in the country. With approximately ten of these horse/inmate programs presently operating and others coming online each year (as well as numerous at-risk teen programs), horse and humans are truly benefiting each other as gentle solutions are employed. I am proud to have been part of that wonderful transformation.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Paramount Learns to Give It Up… Again

"Many people have sighed for the 'good old days' and regretted the 'passing of the horse,' but today, when only those who like horses own them, it is a far better time for horses." – C.W. Anderson

My neighbor Paula Kane called last May with a definite strain in her voice. "You know my big grey thoroughbred Paramount?" she asked me.

"Couldn't miss him, Paula. Big as a house. Sure, I know the horse," I replied.

"The last three or four shoeings have been a nightmare. And it's getting worse even with tranquilizers. It's to the point of sweating and swearing. I'm afraid I'll lose my farrier or he'll hurt the horse. Do you think you can help me, Frank?" she pleaded.

"Well, I've done a lot of work with foot handling problems. I'll swing by tomorrow and take a look. 9:30 okay?" I asked.

"That would be great. I might as well mention that the shoer kind of has an attitude about horse whispering. He doesn't believe in it," she added.

"No problem. Maybe he will if I can turn this situation around. But either way, his opinion doesn't matter to me. My goal is to help your horse. And you'll have to learn how to help him as well. I'll give you some homework and exercises to do with Paramount. See you tomorrow."

Paramount was a massive, twenty-year-old, light grey—almost white—raw-boned thoroughbred. I'd met him a couple of years earlier when I'd first met Paula and her husband Jeff. Paramount

had raced as a youngster, then jumped big jumps for some years and was now relaxing in the twilight of his life. He'd seemed pretty checked out to me, not a real people horse. I was a little concerned about this foot handling issue, because I wasn't confident, I could get through to him on my level, which places great importance on bonding first, then on specific problem-solving.

The Kanes lived at a swanky ranch just down the road. Their huge house sat on top of a hill overlooking magnificent views of the Front Range across the plains and foothills leading up to the Rocky Mountains. They had a small pasture in front bordering the road in which Paramount often grazed and a couple of sizeable paddocks in the back to the north. They did some fox hunting; their daughter Mariah showed on a serious level and did very well. But they were not touchy-feely people with their horses, and the horses showed it. The horses were not used to gentle touch or attention of that kind. Those kinds of situations can either work for me in a big way or against me to the same degree. I had my doubts about helping old Paramount but went into it with plenty of optimism.

I gathered the tools of my trade, the 12' halter/lead combo and a soft cotton 1" diameter rope of about fifteen feet, and then I walked over to the Kanes. Paula had the horse ready and looked a bit nervous.

"Thanks for getting right on this, Frank. I sure hope you can help us. He's been such a great horse, and we've never had a problem with the shoeing until recently. I just can't believe it's happening," she said.

"And I don't want to lose this guy. He's a really good farrier."

"I'll see what I can do, Paula." That was all I could promise.

Trust First

As with all horses, I needed to gain Paramount's trust first, so I started with just giving to him and searching for his secret spots. I call it *bonding*. I first let him sniff me well, and then I stroked his neck and under his chin. The V under his jaw was bumpy and bitten up. I worked my fingernails into that groove and scratched.

He turned his head to the side, bobbed it a bit and rolled back his eyes with pleasure. I quit while it was working. He lowered his head and worked his mouth. I'd already made some big points so moved right to his eyes and rubbed vigorously with the palm of my hand. He leaned so hard into my hand I lost my balance and had to stop. Again, the head dropped and his big tongue worked his lips as he relaxed.

From there I "search touched" his head and neck and found he absolutely loved touch, but either he wasn't familiar with it, or it had been a very long time. My confidence skyrocketed as I explored his body and found what he liked. This was a very neat horse that hadn't been loved on in a while. My specialty!

I proceeded with the next two steps of my 7-Step-Safety-System, *take and give* and *intimacy*. He gave his head to the side willingly, then raised his tail with pleasure as I stroked his dock first, then the silky underside. With absolute delight he was wrapped around me like a pretzel— "fore and aft," I smiled to myself. He delighted in our *intimacy.*

The *intimacy* step takes the horse back to the womb. It's my belief that all warm-blooded creatures crave the place we all started. Dogs, cats, humans all curl into the fetal position when cold, insecure, or depressed. Couples do "spoons" to connect and stay warm—it feels safe and secure. When the horse allows his head to be guided to the girth area while enjoying the stroking on the underside of the tail, and finds that "cocoon of warmth," we've arrived. In my mind this is big league trust. And trust is the place to start.

The Discovery Process

On to the problem. Paula had informed me that the hind legs were the issue, especially the right, which is typical. I asked for each front foot and gave Paramount a great foot massage to make the experience pleasurable. Again, he melted into my attentions. I then stroked his back and sides, working my way to the dock of his tail, which again he lifted happily to receive my attentions. A horse that readily lifts his tail will usually give his back feet as well. From there I gently worked down his left leg, stroking the whole

way. By the time I got to his pastern he'd unweighted his leg and lifted it just off the ground for me. I guided his leg back and cradled it into my lap and stroked his pastern and lower leg. He gave his leg hesitantly. I then tapped his hoof with the palm of my hand. He began to tense up and then sharply pulled his leg away. I'd found the sticky point. His issue was the pounding of the nails. *Voilà!*

I now had a clear focus. Being an older horse that had been worked hard, he no doubt had some tightness and arthritis. My experience told me the farrier had been lifting the foot too high when he began his nailing. So, the horse associated the pounding with pain. My goal had now evolved to helping him learn to tolerate the pounding again.

I'd also need to convince the shoer to hold Paramount's back legs a bit lower to help him through this.

I walked over to my bag and removed my cotton rope.

"Now watch closely, Paula," I said. "This is something you'll be doing for the next month or so. Your homework." I gently threaded the rope inside the left leg and began sawing back and forth, up and down the leg. Once Paramount was comfortable with the rope I moved behind and a bit off to the outside, and applied obvious pressure, asking the horse to yield his left leg to the rear. He didn't understand, so I began a sawing motion to make my desire more obvious. Almost immediately he unweighted his foot. I released and praised him. I started again and this time he gave with a slight bit of pressure. Again, an immediate release. With this understanding fully embedded, it was now time to turn up the heat a bit and deal with the tapping.

My goal now was to gently help Paramount tolerate very light tapping, then progress to something that would simulate nailing. With the help of the cotton rope I lifted his leg back and up. He gave willingly and once he relaxed, I lightly tapped his hoof with my open hand. After a few taps I quit and stroked his lower leg and praised him, then started again, only more pronounced this time. I tapped progressively harder and louder until he tensed a bit, then I quit and praised him again. I then put his foot down and moved up to his head

and loved him up, scratching that V under his jaw and rubbing his eyes vigorously while praising him as if he was the smartest and most important horse in the world. He completely melted; it seemed he believed every single word I said. Then I stopped while it was working and watched him lower his head, lick his lips, and sigh heavily. He seemed to say to me, "I trust you completely. Where have you been? And what took you so long to get here?"

Again, I worked my way back to his hind on-side leg, stroking his massive body the whole way. By the time I got there he had unweighted his leg and was ready to proceed. I lifted his foot and cradled it into my lap. I began tapping again with my hand until it hurt me a bit, then took my Leatherman out of its belt clip and started tapping lightly with that handy tool, making it sound about the same as the farrier's hammer. As I tapped harder and louder, Paramount tensed. I quit just this side of trouble and praised him once more. He relaxed and we started again. This time I was able to really bang the Leatherman hard, over and over again, and he did not react. Success.

Now it was Paula's turn. I coached her on using the cotton rope and we found an old rasp in her tack room for simulating the pounding of nails. I left her with direct instructions to do this every day with each foot until the shoer returned. She assured me she would follow through. Her sincere desire to help Paramount overcome this hurdle left me satisfied that she would do just that.

Return of the Farrier

Paula called me about a month later. "Buddy is coming Thursday morning at 10:00 and I'd like you to be there. Can you make it?"

I rearranged my schedule to accommodate her. I wouldn't have missed this for the world. "No problem, Paula. And let's feed him his grain only after the shoes are on. Okay?"

She agreed, and then added, "Please be tactful with this guy. I'm really worried he may just pack his tools up and leave because you are here."

"Don't you worry about a thing. I'll be Mr. Tact through and through," I assured her. "Also, Paula, do the foot exercises with

Paramount before Buddy gets there, and really reassure him. Lots of praise," I added.

I showed up a few minutes before 10:00 and went through the program with Paramount. Paula had indeed done her work. He didn't even flinch as I banged hard with that old rasp on each hoof. He just hung his head contentedly and stayed completely relaxed. About fifteen minutes after the hour a very fancy truck with a shiny rear compartment appeared. I was introduced to Buddy Hawman, a short, agreeable looking blonde man in his mid-forties. We conversed a bit before getting to the subject as I tried to put him at ease. I got a few smiles, and he seemed to loosen up as I helped him move his tools to the concrete slab adjacent to the tack room. I suggested starting with Paramount's back legs. He looked at me askance.

"Let's deal with the hard part first. The front feet will then be a piece of cake. Also, given his age and probable arthritis, try to not lift his hind legs any higher than necessary. I'm just glad you're not 6'-2" like the last shoer I worked with."

Buddy's smirk moved into a smile, as his size became an asset instead of an attitude.

With Paula up front holding and comforting Paramount, I stood off to the side and watched. The first shoe went on without a hitch. The horse was better than perfect. Sensing a prime opportunity to make my exit, I shook Buddy's hand, left him some of my business cards, and headed to my next appointment.

Paula came over that evening with an exquisite bottle of Pinot Noir and a thank-you card. She was beaming. "The horse was perfect. I just can't believe it, Frank."

I sipped a bit of the red wine with satisfaction. "You know, Paula, that's why I do what I do. I don't know anything more satisfying. So, what did old Buddy have to say about horsewhispering?"

"Oh, you didn't have anything to do with it. In Buddy's mind, somehow the horse just miraculously transformed." Paula shook her head.

I laughed. "That's the way it goes. The ego sure can get in a person's way. As I said before, I'm here for the horse and for you

and we all came out big winners. Too bad Buddy wasn't man enough to recognize what went on. His loss."

Paramount has been an absolute gentleman for Buddy ever since. He's never given me any credit or referrals. But I didn't expect that. I understand the male ego far too well.

Conclusion -- Baby Steps

Horses can go for years performing perfectly. Then one day, all that changes, and what used to be easy is now very difficult. There are abundant reasons for such a change and sometimes it can be traced back to an incident. If horses could talk, it would be easy to understand what happened. But they can't tell us. And really, it doesn't matter what did transpire. What does matter is getting the horse back on track. Just as Paramount had accepted shoeing for years, then suddenly didn't, there are numerous similar situations with horses of all ages, shapes, and sizes. The remedy involves close observation and patience. Once the issue is broken down to its finest degree, then it's a matter of building that confidence back. Starting with something simple that the horse can tolerate is the answer. From there, it's about praise, stroking, and building to increasingly more difficult tasks in pursuit of conquering the phobia. The tendency is to push too hard, too fast. The challenge is to move at a pace that never threatens the horse but instead helps the horse overcome his fear and build his confidence to become all he can be.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

William Conquers His Demons

"If one induces the horse to assume the carriage which it would adopt of its own accord when displaying its beauty, then one directs the horse to appear joyous and magnificent, proud and remarkable for having been ridden." – Xenophon

In the fascinating world of dressage, horses are asked to perform extremely complex maneuvers that require many hours of practice and extreme concentration. Adding to this equation are the physical demands. One weak link can lead to failure and frustration. On the plains of war, where dressage originated, this could lead to injury or death. In our world today dressage horses must maintain a high degree of competency, or they will not progress to the next level. One such horse came my way some years ago. His name was William the Conqueror, but the only thing he was conquering at the time was his owner's confidence.

Late winter in Colorado can produce all kinds of weather. As the saying goes, "If you don't like the weather, wait a minute." One minute it's sunny, warm, and comfortable. The next minute brings wind and cold and snow flurries or much worse.

I received a call one sunny morning from one extremely frustrated woman named Kay Streeter. She'd purchased a very high-end Dutch Warmblood only a month earlier in Holland. The horse had been flown to the States and then shipped to Colorado. He'd been at High Plains boarding facility in Castlerock for a couple of weeks and just hadn't settled down. In fact, he was a completely different horse from the one she'd ridden and subsequently bought so recently.

"He's just jumping right out from under me at the slightest provocation. I injured my back last year and cannot afford to get hurt.

My trainer who helped me pick out this guy just doesn't have time to settle him." Kay added, "He's better for her, but still a case."

That told me a lot. If the horse was better for the trainer, then the part of the equation that had changed, the owner, sure needed help. We talked about his stabling and feeding program. I was very certain to address both these issues as sometimes a change of diet and more time outside expending energy can make a huge difference. He had a stall and run at the rear of the facility where it was very quiet. I suggested moving him to the front where he would be exposed to more activity—cars, tractors, and horses coming and going. That might keep his mind more active as he digested the plethora of changing scenes at this busy facility. We set an appointment for later in the week. Unfortunately, by then the weather had turned nasty.

Face to Face with William the Conqueror

Kay Streeter was perfectly built for the activity she so wanted to excel in. She was medium height, about 5'-6" and didn't carry an ounce of excess weight. I guessed she sat the horse well and that it was a good fit. Enter William, a good-sized and perfectly proportioned draft cross. The other side of the cross is quite often the thoroughbred. This lends energy and athleticism to the mix. Sometimes one side is a bit lopsided and the cross just doesn't work as well as intended. William was about 16-1hands and dull black, almost charcoal. He was a big boned, well filled out, perfectly proportioned horse who reeked of athleticism. He had a striking blaze on his face and two white socks in front. His intelligent and eager look carried with it a glint of mischievousness that exhibited itself immediately as very bad manners—he walked all over Kay as if she didn't exist.

"You see what a butt he is, Frank?" she pleaded as he dragged her down the alley away from me. She was holding the lead just

under his chin and had no way to correct him. I could tell right from the get-go that she needed a lot of help with William.

I hurried down the alley and took over. "Now watch closely what I do," I instructed.

The horse was still walking away with Kay, so I took hold of the lead about three feet from the snap and jerked back hard several times while making a progressively louder *shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh* noise. William's head shot into the air and he stopped abruptly. The noise stopped and he stood wide-eyed and then licked his lips.

"You can't lead a horse under the chin. You have no way to control him. Look where I'm holding the lead; back a few feet. Slack is my friend. This way if he acts up, I have some leverage. Here, hold the end of the lead."

Kay took it.

"Now hold it tight, real tight. Okay?"

She nodded and I began with a light jerking motion then increased gradually until her whole body was bouncing around. Then I stopped abruptly. "You see how this works? Got your attention, didn't I? You've got a thirteen-hundred-pound horse here that will only listen to one thing, pressure… and release. And when you're hanging on under the chin, you simply cannot apply more than a few pounds."

She nodded, as wide-eyed as William. As for me, I was wondering what her "trainer" taught her and how her "trainer" led the horse.

I then led William up and down the alley a couple times, stopping abruptly here and there. Before long he was paying very close attention to my shoulder and only moved when I moved and stopped very decidedly when I did. "Okay, now you try it, Kay."

This quite timid woman took William as I instructed and started down the alley. He immediately took over and began leading the dance.

"Now jerk him back."

She did try, but wasn't forceful enough, so I took her hand and operated the lead with her. Of course, when I entered the picture again, William saluted me and was a perfect gentleman. But after a

couple of laps I backed off and she began to get the picture, as did William.

"You're going to really have to work at this," I said. "And believe me your assertiveness on the ground will carry right into the saddle. Okay?"

"This is a whole new deal for me. I paid a lot of money for William and expected a well-behaved horse," she whined.

"Kay, all horses take advantage of all people. Period. You learn this with him, and you'll have it with all horses in the future. Do your other horses take over?" I asked her.

She hesitated. "Not like him," she replied.

"Now you know how to do it right. I am a bit amazed Nancy doesn't spend a little time teaching proper leading. This is foundation stuff. Well, let's get on with it and get him saddled up."

Kay put William into the crossties, brushed and saddled him, then slipped a snaffle into his mouth. She led him (properly) out into the indoor arena and up to the mounting block and got right on. Her reins were slack as she mounted and he walked right off with her before she'd even found her stirrup on the offside. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. She walked him out and did a variety of loosening up exercises typical in this discipline, then pushed him up to a trot and began working some figure-8s.

The stormy day outside had the whole building creaking and flurries of snow were settling into the arena at both ends. At the far end, William got spooked by the big overhead door that was cracked open a couple feet. Away he went as Kay pulled back with everything she had. At the opposite end she gained control and rode over to me.

"This is exactly what's been happening every single time I ride him. If it's not the doorway, it's something else." She sighed in exasperation.

"I don't know what to do."

"This is like a good news/bad news joke. The good news is that there is a whole lot you can do. The bad news is that you'll either have to learn it or sell the horse." I gave her the facts, just the facts. "On every single horse I encounter I use a sequence of

exercises that builds confidence, establishes my leadership, and flushes out problems on the ground before they find you in the saddle." I smiled reassuringly.

"Get off him now and I'll run through my program and then ride him. I'll also send you home with the foundation video on my ***7-Step Safety System***. It's called 'Discover the Horse You Never Knew.' If you can learn this well, I believe you'll be able to do whatever you want with William. But you'll have to learn how to do this and it does take some work to really hone these ground skills."

I could tell William was just looking to get into trouble, a bit like a teenager. I removed the headstall and slipped on my rope halter with the twelve-foot lead. I quickly ran through the first three steps of my program, *bonding, take and give,* and *intimacy,* and William happily complied. He was as subtle as can be and readily gave and trusted me. He knew I meant business and that I would be fair, yet firm if necessary. He caught onto the fourth step, *the dance begins*, just as easily, and he was ready and eager to move on when we found his sticky spot. I produced my extendable wand with a noisy plastic bag on the end, and he had an immediate melt-down. This was downright scary to him, and he didn't want to have anything to do with it.

"This is great," I explained to Kay. "Finally found something that really bothers him. If I can help him through this, his confidence will blossom and doorways won't be such a terrifying deal, nor will a whole lot of other scary situations."

I put the wand away and got a plastic bag from my tack duffel. I squished it into a tiny ball and offered it to him with my outstretched hand. He extended his head and neck waaaaaaaaaaay out, took a sniff and gave a loud snort.

"Come on William, big, bad Warmblood drafty guy. You can handle this," I soothed him. I moved to his side and, with a tight hold on the lead tipping his nose into me, I began slowly rubbing my hand with the concealed bag on his shoulder. We began to circle and the bag gradually opened as I rubbed it on his shoulder, neck, and withers area. "Eeeeeeeeasy now, big boy. Eeeeeasy now,

William. It's just a little plastic bag," I repeated softly over and over as the bag grew larger and he continued to handle it.

When he could accept the full bag moving all over his back, I stopped and retrieved my wand. The sight of it brought another loud snort as if to say, "Well that's a different deal now." And it was, just slightly. I shortened the wand and tightened the bag, so it was as small as possible, then moved into him, again pulling his head into me. We began circling and I eased the bag and wand onto his back. He bolted forward, but I left the bag on him and circled him back down to a stop, soothing his withers the whole time; then we started again. I kissed a couple of times and he walked off impulsively, but at least he didn't bolt this time.

Around, we went. He'd speed up a notch or two but gradually he began to maintain his cool as the bag slowly became larger and explored his saddle area. "What a boy, William," I complimented him with gusto. Within a couple more minutes he was accepting the extended wand and bag all over his back as well as on and off him, as it came down from overhead onto his saddle area. Now it was time for him to handle it right in front and then the other side.

I knew full well that this would probably be the horse's biggest hurdle and when he could accept me riding him with the bag, his whole life could change for the better. So, we stayed with it until he was rationally moving around me as the plastic bag cracked all around him and on him.

"That's just great. I believe I'll take him for a short ride and then call it a day. A good first session for old William, don't ya think, Kay?"

"Wow. I can't believe how you worked him through that. He was terrified of that bag. I've been riding for thirty years and never seen anything like this. Is this what they're calling 'Natural Horsemanship'?" she asked.

"Sure is. You see, if you avoid issues, they're like time bombs just waiting to explode. But if you address problems, you heighten the horse's confidence as well as your own. Heck, I look at problems as my friend—they're my opportunity to build the horse's confidence." I smiled. "As well as William handled all this, I believe you've got one very bright, but slightly immature horse.

He just needs to grow into himself, more mentally than physically. I like him, don't I, William?" I assured soothingly as I rubbed his left eye. He leaned hard into me in sheer delight. "This is going to be a fun project for me."

"How long do you think it will take? I've already got $100,000 into him, buying and shipping him over."

"Oh… not more than half that," I replied with a wink. "I'm guessing about a week of confidence-building will have him in a good place. Then you'll have to learn how to keep it going. Won't do any good if you don't continue with this. You do understand that don't you?"

"From the change I've already seen, I'm ready to learn how to do this Natural Horsemanship stuff," said Kay with a newfound confidence.

William was a perfect gentleman for me, though I did feel a sense of hesitation and lack of confidence at certain spots in the spacious indoor arena. He just wasn't moving out freely—not like the Conqueror he should be. I left him in a good place that day and, just as important, I left Kay feeling good about it all as well.

As the spring weather deteriorated over the next couple of days to the point of not being able to drive anywhere, Kay and I had some interesting phone conversations. She'd been riding for years, but always well-schooled horses. She always advanced them from a solid level of training into higher levels of dressage. She'd never faced a truly challenging horse that could easily hurt her.

"I've read over the *Western Horseman* articles on your work," she told me. "And I watched the 'Discover' video at least four times. I guess I've always kind of jumped into the middle with horses. This system you teach is really foundation type work, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's exactly what it is. You see, when a horse and rider really have my 7-Steps down cold, to where it's as rote as, say, your foot finding the brake in your car, then the whole world of *riding in confidence*, as I call it, opens. When the horse and handler understand there is a safe loving place to regroup at any time, then a real partnership can flourish. I'm guessing you won't believe

what you two will be accomplishing in a couple weeks, let alone months," I predicted. "Tomorrow looks like a good day, so I'll get to the stables after lunch, around one o'clock. See if you can make it. The more of this you observe, the more you'll understand how to build this foundation solidly under William."

As it turned out, Kay had a doctor's appointment and didn't make it, but William and I had an eventful afternoon. I did my ground exercises with a special emphasis on the flagging. While it just wasn't easy for him, he did finally accept the flag again all over his body as he moved around me rationally. Then I drove him in some circles and slapped the lead hard on my western stock saddle. He was pretty concerned at first, and we had to regroup a couple of times before he finally realized this was just part of the whole program. Eventually he made it and invited the ride, so I obliged him. Instead of using a snaffle, I rode him with my rope halter/lead combo, which he seemed to enjoy and relax right into.

I began as always by teaching him the exercise I call *ballet in the saddle*. This not only firmly establishes the one-rein stop, but turns it into an art form, a dance that heightens the safety for both horse and rider. The highly athletic William took to this like a horse to a grain bucket. His turns on the forehand were followed with glee by turns on the haunches. He rocked back and just shot out as his powerful hind end propelled him forward. We were both smiling away as we used his energy in a constructive manner. But this was just the warm-up. The true litmus test was about to take place.

I rode William over to the viewing area and deftly took hold of my extendable wand from the top of the fence. He instantly noticed and tensed up. His whole demeanor became rigid and his head shot high into the air. Then he snorted loudly. I was prepared to unload the wand, but figured I'd at least try to work through this. I assertively pushed his hind end with my leg and pulled his head on the same side, thereby successfully disengaging the engine, his powerful hindquarters. I circled him down, back to safety and the nurturing he so needed, all the while keeping the flag from his view.

"Eeeeeeeeeeasy, man. You can make it through this now. Eeeeeeeeeasy, William," I soothingly cooed again and again, in reality to calm both of us. I was pretty shaken up. This was one very, very powerful horse who could have gone over the top had I not spent the time earlier perfecting the all-important one-rein-stop.

Once William and I had regrouped and were both breathing normally again, off we walked as if nothing had happened. I kept the flag hidden and pushed him with my whole body as if to say, "Just another walk in the park, William." We circled down into a couple more stops, and then I allowed him a quick glimpse of the flag. He took notice and gave a half-hearted snort but held it together as I pushed him right out of the circle with full life in my body to reassure him. He'd known all along that the flag was up there somewhere but clearly trusted me.

I knew that this would be the "big one" for him. When I could ride him and wave that flag aggressively, he would then be able to overcome most any challenge, so we stayed with it. I slowly began working the wand in small circles within his vision on the right and then switched to the left. When he tensed I reassured with my hand kneading his withers, all the while my seat and legs were busily saying, "It's all just fine."

And it worked. Within about twenty minutes he was handling the flag everywhere and riding quietly and confidently on a slack rein. Then I started banging the flag on the walls and the fence and the overhead door at the end of the arena, the same door and area that used to spook him. He rode by without a care in the world, that William the Conqueror did.

But in my mind, there was another huge hurdle to overcome. As with most dressage horses, outside riding just isn't done much, if ever. Having no idea of his history, I figured this to be the last big confidence-building step, so out we went into the brilliant, early spring Colorado day and what would become William's greatest adventure to date.

Pee Wee's Big Adventure

Pee Wee's Big Adventure is the name I give to every horse's first ride out, away from home. I mounted William out in front of the barn, and we went for a discovery ride. What could we find of interest? What would push his buttons? What might send him over the top? My job was to take him to the edge and then reassure and regroup with the reliable one-rein stop that was firmly cemented into our mutual psyches.

Heading to the back of the barn, we circled around and rode by the other horses' runs. William's neighbors eagerly came out to greet us as we walked by. I stopped next to one striking light bay mare and stroked her forehead and then reached down and began lightly shaking the fence progressively louder and louder. Ms Bay Mare shot back into the confines of her stall and watched from afar as the mighty William tolerated the rattling. I was careful to stroke his neck as I rattled. He wasn't too sure at all and trembled under me, but I stopped just this side of trouble and praised him lavishly. His head dropped and he licked his lips in understanding and acceptance.

Behind the building was the predictable junk that lives on every ranch. The gas tanks high in the air. The garbage bins. Pieces of metal and pipe of all dimensions were piled throughout an area the size of a couple of tennis courts. We weren't leaving until we'd checked every single challenge and he'd completely relaxed. The trick was riding him and not allowing him to stop and focus on any booger too long. So, with exaggerated life in my body, I pushed him in, over, around, and through that mess of discards until he completely let down. Time for the next leg, the discovery tour.

The hay shelter had an inviting look and was located about a hundred yards in front of the barn. It was on the way to endless rolling hills preceding the front range of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. We rode right into the shelter as barn cats scattered almost at William's feet. A snort here, a pointedly focused gaze there—we weaved through the shelter. We did some ballet which forced his concentration away from the claustrophobic conditions and the plethora of farm equipment, ranging from pitchforks to

wheelbarrows and piles of discarded twine on the floor. He noticed but kept his cool and clearly said to me with his demeanor, "Let's go for a ride now."

Our Ride to Remember

The rolling hills around Castlerock are scattered with scrub oak trees. The terrain is mostly gentle, but some areas are quite steep and tricky. Overall, the footing is superb, but the snow and mud around it can be deceiving. This country is called chaparral and offers endless riding.

I side-passed William over to the gate, leaned over, and pushed the long handle back. The metal screeched loudly in the cool spring air. He tensed up a bit, but my hand on his neck brought him right back to me. We walked through and secured the gate with another loud groan, but this one didn't bother him. An obvious trail led up a long medium grade that extended as far as I could see. Huge cottonwoods formed a border on our left next to an old irrigation ditch. Mammoth limbs littered the ground, forming convenient jumps of all sizes.

I felt a tiger under me in a good way. William was confident and eager to see this new country. I was ready to oblige him. We drifted into a ground-eating walk as his frame reached out with glee. The trot was our mutual idea. His legs shot out with a snap as his back rounded and absorbed the ground concussion like a sponge.

Up ahead loomed a downed limb from one of the cottonwoods. It looked like a reasonable jump, maybe two and a half feet high with obvious vertical branches on each side and a convenient open spot in the middle. As we closed in, William's ears—in fact his whole manner—suddenly became extremely focused. We cleared that limb by at least two feet.

Thus began the canter. Now there are comfortable canters and there are simply great canters. Then there are addictive canters. I'd never felt anything so smooth as this in my career. We loped up the gentle hill through the cottonwoods and fallen limbs like a hot knife through soft butter. My pictures became his as I moved him

laterally with the slightest touch of my leg to weave us through the field of debris.

He chose the jumps and became bolder until the ultimate challenge presented itself: One of the really big trees had fallen, creating a jump that had to have been three and a half feet, maybe four feet high. We were smoking along at a very controlled medium canter.

"Ok, William. Your choice here." I felt him gather under me and collect himself, then spring like that tiger in him. It seemed as if we were in the air for a full minute, and then we touched down as gracefully as if he'd been leaping over Colorado cottonwoods for eons. But the challenge wasn't over—just the other side was a ditch. We'd been so focused on that huge tree trunk that neither of us had noticed what lay beyond, a three-foot deep drop eight feet wide. Again, the mighty William quickly gathered himself, bunched up, and then just glided softly through the air to the other side without missing a step or his balance one iota. We backed off to a trot and allowed our hearts to settle. Then we slowed to a walk.

We continued to explore the chaparral and endless scrub oak with its crackly, dry leaves, perfect at that time of year for desensitizing horses to noise. At last, we turned toward home. His whole being drooped as if to say, "Oh no, not back to the confines of that place." He wanted more and more and more, but I couldn't give it to him that day.

"Maybe another time, William," I assured him as we worked our way back to Highplains and into the setting sun.

Once through the gate and into the barn area, I gave him his head. He went right to exploring the same places that had frightened him not an hour earlier. He walked right up to a manure spreader and sniffed and took a long look, then to the tractor that dragged the spreader. This was a changed horse whose confidence had just blossomed and was now exploding. I felt like the proud father of the winning pitcher at a baseball game.

I called Kay that evening to report. "Yep, toward the end of it he was really acting like a three-day horse. He couldn't get enough of jumping, and over some pretty good-sized fallen trees. Heck, he

just soared over a ditch like a seasoned campaigner. He is really some athlete and loves it outside. Didn't want to go home. Have you ever considered three-day eventing?"

"Interesting. It's been on my mind, but waaaaaay in the back. We know he can handle the dressage and if he likes jumping, the stadium part of it should be a snap. Now you tell me he'd be a good cross-country candidate," she confirmed.

"It's all about listening to the horse and letting him guide us, isn't it?" I said.

"I guess you taught me about that part of it, didn't you? So, I have you to thank. I'm sure William is full of gratitude as well."

I lost track of Kay Streeter and William the Conqueror, but the memory is as vivid as if it all took place yesterday. And that is my greatest reward.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Milo Moves into the Passing Lane

"A man on a horse is spiritually, as well as physically, bigger than a man on foot." – John Steinbeck

One of the exercises we do in my clinics involves having riders pass each other weaving in opposite directions. When horses and riders can do this proficiently, I ask them to slap hands as they pass, first at the walk, then at the trot. This is demanding for the horses and riders. Not only does it require accurate control over the horses, but also the horses must be well desensitized to the slapping and close passing. As we ramped this challenging exercise up a notch last weekend in Sedalia, Colorado, one of the better-trained horses suddenly whirled dangerously. His rider, June, stayed with him until he quieted down, then she came over to me and asked for help.

I had the riders in the clinic circle June and her whirling horse Milo at a walk while they stood still; then we moved up to a trot. Everything was fine until I asked June to slow Milo into walk and face oncoming riders. Once again when the horses trotted toward Milo, he came unglued, dangerously so. I climbed on him and tried to support him through the same challenges, but he whirled violently.

"I've dealt with this before," I told June and the others. "The only way I know to fix it is to lay the horse down."

"I thought that's what you were going to say," June said.

"Several horse acquaintances suggested having you do just that. What do you think?"

"I've been successful with this exact issue in the past, but there is no guarantee. And it's an extreme measure." I gave her the hard facts. We agreed to hold a lay-down session the next morning before the clinic.

The next day had us both thinking a bit differently. We met early and agreed that such a drastic session might be a bit much for the public to handle. We rescheduled for the next morning, Monday, when it would be quiet and the clinic finished. I asked June to line up several riders who would be instrumental in helping Milo get over this very dangerous behavior.

Milo's Elk Confrontation

As it turned out, there was a lot more to the story than originally met the eye. Milo was a seven-year-old dark bay quarter horse of about fifteen hands. He was well built and very athletic with an intelligent look. But he was worried and had ulcers to prove it. Several people had owned him before June and something very disturbing had taken place. As the story unfolded, it became apparent that Milo had had a run-in with a big bull elk. It was not clear whether the elk had actually attacked him, but there had been some kind of incident, a close call, and the horse had just not been the same since the incident.

I figured something traumatic had taken place, as I'd dealt with this kind of irrationality before. The horses I'd helped with the same issue all had one common denominator: they'd had a head-on with another horse. Colliding with a wild animal presented an interesting new scenario. The troubled horses I'd helped had all been downright dangerous, doing serious whirls that sometimes left their riders on the ground or in the hospital. This was not something to be taken lightly or easily fixed.

Monday morning was cool with bright sun warming the crisp Colorado air. Everyone felt good, including Milo. We had a sixty-foot roundpen to work in with soft sand footing and a handful of spectators and helpers. June and I had firmly agreed to allow only those who could "take it." Lay-downs can be emotional as the horse struggles while he faces his demons. We had four riders and as many helpers and observers.

I led Milo into the roundpen and loved him up thoroughly until his head was hanging low and his tongue was lazily working in and out of his mouth in a sign of relaxation. With June's help we wrapped his legs for protection, and I secured hobbles on each front foot and a surcingle around his girth. He was relaxed and trusting under all the attention and high-stepped in animation as we walked off around the pen. He'd never felt wraps around his back legs and lifted them high, hesitantly, with almost an air of delicacy. Once he was moving along at a good fast walk, I lifted his front legs with a firm yank on the rope from his offside. He immediately went to his knees and looked around as if to say, "What is this all about?"

June and I lowered our stature, and I cautioned everyone watching to be very quiet and still. I eased in and stroked Milo's face, eyes, and ears. I got my fingers into his mouth and helped him find trust and relaxation, then backed off. He struggled for a few minutes, then very quietly lay down with a deep groan, just as horses commonly do when finding their own way down. I immediately went in and reassured him, stroking his neck and talking soothingly, then asked June to do the same.

"He needs to know you're there and everything is okay," I instructed. June eased into place, keeping her stature low, and knelt beside him.

"Be ready to roll back," I said. "He could lunge up anytime, so be careful and don't have your head hanging over him."

June helped Milo relax at his head as I worked to relax his back half. His tail was soft and his leg on the high side eventually found its way to the ground, a good sign. He was handling the process quite well.

When he seemed reasonably content, I had June move out away and begin walking half circles back and forth within his vision.

"Talk to him," I said.

"It's okay Milo. You're going to be alright," she cooed repeatedly.

But this was stressful for him. He would sit up when bothered and watch her intently as she walked by, then relax and work his mouth again as I eased him back down. June's movement

concerned him to the point of his needing to bring himself up and observe exactly what was happening. Time and again I helped him lie back down and relax and learn to trust. Gradually he found his trust and began to handle June's meandering back and forth.

"Okay. Now I need a rider to walk around the outside, way out, quietly." June's friend Cindy was on a striking sorrel paint, of which she had complete control. Slowly she began riding serpentines forty feet from the edge of the pen.

Suddenly Milo shot up onto his knees and lunged forward with fear in his eyes.

"Move back, way back," I yelled.

June rolled back away into the sand onto her side; her face planted into the soft sand. Cindy quietly walked off away from the roundpen. June and I calmed Milo back down and he slowly relaxed again. I helped him find his way onto his side as he watched Cindy intensely.

"Okay, now start working serpentines back this way," I said.

She followed instructions perfectly and wound her way back to the edge of the roundpen as Milo kept a close eye on her. With a big sigh he let out a huge breath of air and with a little encouragement found his way back all the way down. "What a boy Milo. What a boy," I whispered over and over.

This picture story played itself out for the next half hour until Milo was able to eventually, now I mean eventually, handle horses trotting and even cantering very slowly right by his head, both lying on the ground and sitting up watching the show. It was incredible. He progressively handled more and more. As the minutes ticked by, he gained confidence and stature. At one point I had Cindy and Mary inside the pen trotting fast right at him and turning at the very last minute. On the outside, Sharon and Melissa were all over the field, changing gaits and directions at will. Then I invited each of our helpers to come in and allow the horses to just be together and sniff noses and reassure each other that it was all just fine.

At that point I knew the moment of truth was upon me.

The Moment of Trust

I slowly and gently removed all his paraphernalia as he patiently waited. When the hobbles and surcingle were off, he sensed his moment and stood up. It's quite common to have horses lie for fifteen or twenty minutes, very relaxed and quiet and glad to have found peace, but not Milo. I rubbed and loved him up on one side as June did the same on the other. He licked his lips and dropped his head as June removed his wraps. Cindy and Mary were still in the pen with us.

I instructed them in the next steps. "June, walk Milo over to the other side along the edge. Walk him out. Let him unwind a bit. You two just ride over and be with him. Let them sniff noses. Stroke him from your horses."

At first Milo was kind of curious about being so close to other horses. He seemed to feel surrounded and a bit claustrophobic but tolerated it pretty well. Then I instructed them to ride toward him, one on each side. He kept doing his best to avoid them, but really couldn't, not completely. Mary would ride along the fence toward him as Cindy tried to pass by him on the inside. But he would turn and move away and do his best not to let them both come by on either side. He was a good escape artist. But he wasn't freaking—he was using his head; he was being smart about it. He was handling it.

How he handled it, though, was interesting to watch. Gradually, he moved toward being agitated by the other horses, annoyed by them. He started laying his ears back with the clear message, "Get away from me, jerk." This was a good sign. Instead of shying from other horses as he'd done for some time, he was becoming proactive and asking *them* to leave.

"This is fantastic, June. Have you ever seen him like this with other horses?"

"Never," she said firmly. Milo's blossoming confidence was boosting June, as it was helping all of us.

I walked in and took the lead that was wrapped around his neck.

"June, go get your saddle and snaffle bit," I suggested. June had a good stock saddle with a reasonably deep seat and a

derrière-grabbing suede finish. I saddled the man without fanfare and adjusted the stirrups. After a second tightening of the cinch I snapped the stirrup leather loudly and he jolted backwards.

"Ohhhh. Got a little issue here, do we?" I asked Milo. Sure, enough the slapping of reins on the saddle and snapping of stirrup leathers really bothered him. So, we stayed with it for a while. With my hand under his neck supporting him I gently helped him learn to tolerate these challenges. Within ten minutes he was more relaxed, as I aggressively worked on the saddle loud and hard. "Very, very good boy. You're just fine." I kept encouraging, and apparently, he believed me!

I guess he invited me to ride because at one point it just felt right and I climbed on. He was totally relaxed. I asked for his head to each side, which he gave happily. I then walked off and did a couple of one-rein stops in each direction. He was a little behind in finding the stop on the right, but we got there after a half dozen tries. With a bump on his shoulder, his front quarters reversed back over his haunches to the right. I knew we now had an interesting challenge to face. Show time.

I turned to the helpers. "Okay. Now two of you start riding around nice and quiet. We'll come up to you very slowly, then build to speed and squeezing him." We started moving around in a very unassuming manner, not pushing too hard or fast. First, at the walk, toward each other. Doing great. Now speeding it up a bit. Doing fine. Now with them trotting toward us, as Milo began to get kind of jumpy, right on the edge of losing it. "Easy man. Easy man." Over and over, I talked and rubbed with my hands and reins on his withers in support. "A little faster now. Let's find out if he's going to make it."

There was a fine line on which to balance here, very fine. The old behavior was just so entrenched in his psyche. He wanted to flip, but with my verbal and tactile encouragement, he made it until he could handle the two trotting right at him and not flinch while still moving straight toward them.

But it sure wasn't as solid as it needed to be for me to call him "fixed."

"Let's head out to the arena," I announced.

I coaxed Milo over to the gate and leaned over. I rattled it lightly at first, then louder. He didn't even notice. Out the gate and over to the arena we walked as four of the horsewomen followed us. We walked in and spread out. "You guys stay down at this end and just kind of walk around and make yourselves accessible. Let's not pressure him too much at first." As I slipped on my helmet, I made sure my instructions were clear. I then walked past Cindy, then Sharon, at an animated walk, then turned and followed the fence as Mary came up toward me.

"You take the inside and let me keep him on the rail Mary. Speed up just a bit." Mary was on a little dun mare with a pronounced stripe down her back, handy little horse. She was almost at a trot as we approached. I felt Milo hesitate and tighten and immediately took hold of him with my whole being and said, "You're okay, big fella," and pushed him by. With a tight hold of the thick leather reins, my hands kneaded encouragement into his withers. We turned to face Melissa on her sweet chestnut thoroughbred. As we passed we both reached out and high fived loudly. My right hand was again on Milo's withers saying, "It's just fine. This is what life is all about Milo. What a boy!"

The tempo increased as Sharon on Raphael, her magnificent Peruvian, whizzed by in a controlled but animated *corto*. I felt Milo almost bolt. He was right on the verge when my legs, hands, body, and mind said to him, "Keep it under control. You can do it." And he did. Moment by moment, he was becoming a different horse right before our very eyes. I did less as he did more. His confidence exploded. His entire demeanor began to exude supreme confidence. Back and forth, in, under, around and through we weaved at all gaits in all directions.

"Yes! He's making it. This is unbelievable. I love it!" I exclaimed with absolute glee. The tears were welling in my eyes. But it wasn't only me—tears were running down June's face as Milo made the transformation from a frightened, timid and reactive animal to a magnificent, confident—almost brash—and very elegant horse.

"My whole year is made, Frank!" June shouted with unbridled happiness. "So is mine." It was the absolute truth.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sahib Waltzes Through His Trauma

"And God took a handful of southerly wind, blew his breath upon it, and created the horse." **–** *Bedouin Legend*

I had heard Sahib's tragic story long before meeting him. A year earlier, as a yearling, he had spooked and run through not one, two, or three fences, but four, and two of them barbed wire. His whole body had been slashed up, and it was questionable whether he would survive. Hundreds of stitches and thousands of dollars later, he had not only survived, but even to a discerning eye, had healed up remarkably well. But the mental scars were far too deep for his owner, Kathy Raider, to deal with. The sight of a lead rope would send him flying into the walls of his stall in terror. Kathy had wanted to bring him to my clinic the previous weekend, but of course he couldn't be loaded, nor would it have been the right venue in which to help him.

I arrived at al-Zarka Arabian Horse Farm in the middle of a beautiful, windless afternoon on the first day of November. Kathy Raider raised high-end Arabians of rare Egyptian bloodlines. Her attractive adobe house fronted the property that sat high on the mesa above Colorado Springs. The majestic Rocky Mountains with Pike's Peak at the center framed her views to the west. The twelve stall barn, white fenced arena, and roundpen sat a good distance behind the house and they were well positioned to function as a breeding and training facility. It was truly a show place with very fancy horses to match it.

Kathy greeted me as I drove up to the barn. The serious demeanor mirrored her concern for her traumatized horse and her

hesitancy to trust anyone to handle him. There had been other attempts, all unsuccessful. There had also been discussions about tranquilizing the horse to begin his training. Even her vet was at wit's end.

As Kathy filled me in on the actual details of Sahib's accident, I shook my head in disbelief. I'd heard countless horrible stories at this stage in my career. I'd been told about and subsequently dealt with horses from trailer wrecks, racetrack freak-outs, abused and starved horses, and countless runaways. Yet this one really got my attention. We walked to the rear of the barn, past stalls with horses of all ages, shapes, sizes and colors. In the last stall was Sahib. He was a surprisingly large and filled-out stallion of about 15 hands. His coat gleamed a deep red chestnut and his mane and tail a brilliant flaxen. With four white socks and a pronounced blaze, the horse was drop-dead gorgeous. I stared in awe of his perfect proportions and carriage. Yes, this was a horse that needed to remain intact and propagate for years to come, especially as a grandson of one of the most prestigious Arabian stallions in modern history, Sultann. This was a horse of true breeding quality. But what about his mind?

He had an intelligent but fearful look, with too much white in his eyes. He was beyond alert and suspicious, which made me a hair nervous, or should I say, raised my level of caution. Stallions of this age are so full of hormones and unbridled energy; sometimes they are dangerous to themselves and their handlers. And here was a horse that hadn't been handled in a year. He shot around the stall like a rocket and stopped abruptly in the corner next to his older brother who seemed to calm him.

"I believe I'll leave my glasses and hat with you Kathy," I said. I'd been bumped too many times in the head to consider allowing anything sharp or breakable anywhere nearby. Caution. Extreme caution with this horse.

Kathy opened the stall door and we both walked in. We left the door slightly open for a hasty exit if needed. Surprisingly she walked right up to him and stroked his neck, but when she introduced me, his head shot up in the air as he surveyed me with wide eyes and a very high head.

"Eeeeeeeasy, boy. Eeeeeeasy, boy," I cooed softly and reached out to touch his forehead. He accepted me hesitantly. "Well, I'm amazed he is even this trusting. You've done a nice job of bringing him back," I said.

Kathy sighed. "You would not believe how long this has taken. He couldn't be touched at all after the accident."

The three of us stood together for a few minutes as we all tried to relax a bit. Then I asked Kathy to leave me with him.

"Be very careful, Frank. He is lightning fast. He'll throw himself right into the wall or try to climb out when he freaks." There was a distinct nervousness in her soft voice and I sensed she was more worried about me than the horse.

A Previous Trauma Situation

I thought back to another trauma situation I'd dealt with several years earlier. Oftentimes my previous experiences help me with the current challenge. I had been called to work with a horse of almost the same age, color, and proportions, about fifty miles to the north in the town of Castlerock. That horse had been a quarter horse of racing lines, but similarly high-strung. The sound of the stall door sliding open sent him up on two feet and climbing the walls of his stall in sheer terror. In fact, the walls bore numerous hoof marks, and the floor had deep holes where the poor horse had been pawing madly.

As I recalled now, I'd been able to finesse a couple of pieces of twine over his neck, which I'd allowed him to drag around the stall for a half-hour or so, before I let him into his run—but not before positioning the owners on two sides of the run and my helper on the third side. I instructed them to block him from running through the fencing by waving arms, yelling, and doing absolutely anything needed to keep him from trying to go over the top or through the wire fencing. The horse raced out toward the far end with the twine chasing behind him. His eyes were white with fear, but when he reached the end of the run and met waving hands and voices, he turned and circled back. Success!

He circled for a while longer, but he eventually settled down. I was able to then get a hold of the twine and begin the process of

bringing him back. Today he is one of the fastest horses on the quarter horse circuit.

"Bring me a couple of pieces of twine," I instructed Kathy. While she was running the errand, Sahib and I got acquainted. I positioned myself off to the side a bit, leaving him plenty of room to move if he so needed. I explored his head and face, *search touching* for his secret spots. He enjoyed the attention but remained extremely alert. I rubbed his eyes firmly and scratched his forehead with my fingernails. The V in the underside of his jaw was deep and clogged with matted hair. My fingers found their way up inside and suddenly his head quivered with delight. I indulged him for about fifteen seconds, then suddenly quit and walked to the diagonal corner. He lowered his head and licked his lips, then looked at me and his eyes softened. The white in his eyes lessened a bit. After a few moments he deliberately walked over to me and asked me to work that V under his jaw again.

By now Kathy was back with three pieces of orange plastic bailing twine. I tied two together with a square knot and put a three-inch loop in each end. With the twine coiled into my right hand, I turned around to find Sahib standing back in the corner with his buddy. He knew something was up. This was a very alert horse with the senses of a wild animal. I eased over to him and again worked on his face and neck and talked reassuringly. He saw the twine and whirled abruptly, crashing into the plastic feed bin before shooting forward, going deep into the corners all the way around the stall and banging hard into each wall. He landed back in his secure corner.

I had moved to the middle of the 12' x 12' area to allow him to settle. I told Kathy to have the sliding door open about 6" and be ready to open it for me if it all got too wild. My heart was beating fast and hard as I gave us both some time before pressing on.

I coiled the twine into a tighter ball and concealed it in my hand again, before turning back to Sahib. He watched me very closely as I approached. Again, I allowed him plenty of room to leave as I began indulging him with my touch. He relaxed to my hand, and I was able to get both arms around his neck and reassure him. I then opened my right hand and allowed half the

twine to drop over each side of his neck. I moved back quickly as he became aware of the feel of the twine and shot past me.

"Let me out," I said.

Kathy slid the door open, and I darted out as Sahib began another round of corner-banging and wall-slamming. When he hit the corner near us with extra force, Kathy and I looked at each other.

"Don't worry. He'll settle," I reassured her. "He has to work through this and find that the twine is nothing and that he can handle it." My prediction was spot-on. After moving around the stall another half dozen trips, he finally planted himself back in his favorite corner.

The twine, now hanging off his withers, was touching his back leg on the offside. I entered the stall again and walked over to him. I stroked his neck and his secret spots to settle him down. I guided his head to the side and into my chest. I worked the corners of his mouth with the knuckle of my index finger, then got inside and feathered his tongue. He was breathing hard and sweat was beading up on his chest, but he was trusting me and seemed to understand I was here to help him.

I gathered the twine on the near side and reached under his throat to pull the slack up from the floor and make a loop. I backed away and began a very light sawing motion, running the twine up and down his neck, gradually increasing the pressure until he yielded to it. He took a tiny step in my direction, and I released immediately and praised him.

I turned to Kathy and smiled. "The worst is over. He's really beginning to trust again and understand the basics of take and give." I heard a sigh behind me as Sahib let out a deep breath. Kathy and I did the same. I allowed him to digest our success for a long minute, then moved in and praised him lavishly.

"You are the best thing that ever happened," I complimented him as I stroked his face, eyes, and ears. He licked his lips and dropped his head in a sign of relaxation.

Let the Twine Games Begin

From this point forward it was a matter of playing the *take and give* game and building Sahib's confidence by asking him to handle more and more. I slid the twine up his neck and positioned myself about thirty degrees off to his left side. I pulled and waited. I could see his mind working through this as his alert eyes and ears flicked back and forth in deep concentration. Each time I pulled, he yielded to the pressure in a shorter time and with more confidence and understanding. Before long he was following me around the stall like a champ, bursting with pride and budding confidence.

Now it was time to turn up the heat a bit and challenge him at a little higher level, but not before loving him up and reinforcing the first three steps of my **7-Step Safety System**:

- ***Bonding***
- ***Take and give***
- ***Intimacy***

I moved into him and gave him a thorough session of *bonding.* Confidently and almost aggressively, I was now able to work on his face. I scratched his forehead hard with my fingernails, rubbed his eyes, and got into his mouth and nose and all around and inside his lips. I worked his ears with gusto. He loved the attention and didn't show any signs of resistance— until we moved to the second step, *take and give*.

I positioned the twine over his poll, just behind his ears, and pulled downward firmly. Not only did he not understand this, but he also resisted and raised his head high in the air trying to find relief. I stayed right with it and held tight for almost a full minute. His head went higher and he tried twisting it to each side, but I held tight. Suddenly he gave me a quarter inch. I released immediately and praised him lavishly, telling him he was absolutely the most brilliant student I'd ever had. He bought it, lowered his head and licked his lips with pride. I winked at Kathy while this all sank into his highly impressionable brain.

"He's really coming along now," I said. "This is so important, the lowering of the head. He's understanding pressure and

release, which is the basis for all training. Equally important, he is lowering his head in a sign of relaxation. Think about it," I explained with enthusiasm.

"Head up is an uptight horse. Head down is relaxed. This is great."

I then started again. This time he figured it out in a couple of seconds and lowered his head immediately. Within a few more minutes his head was hanging almost to the ground, signifying extreme relaxation and equally extreme trust in me.

Now it was time to ask for his head to each side—lateral flexion. I allowed the twine to hang off his neck and gently guided his head to the toward me, using the convenient nose-handle just above his nostrils. He yielded his head with delight right into his girth area and found me there waiting for him. We exchanged air for a bit as I breathed into his nose. My right hand drifted back to his flanks with a firm stoking motion, then up to the dock of his tail. I scratched the dock and top of his tail as he raised it with pleasure and anticipation; I then indulged him by stroking the silky underside with my fingernails. He could not have lifted his tail any higher! Sahib was just the right size, and I was able to easily perform this the third step in my program—*intimacy*. I was breathing in his nose while stroking the underside of his tail! He was wrapped around me like a pretzel. This was a huge step for this particular horse, signifying big league trust. Let the twine games continue.

Since ropes, leads, and lines of any sort were Sahib's nemesis, it was time to help him handle this disturbing issue. His demeanor and progress told me he was ready to deal with *desensitizing,* the fourth step in my program. I moved away from him and began swinging the twine like playing jump rope. He handled the swinging pretty well, paying close, curious attention, and not needing to move. But when I flipped it up high and did a complete loop, his head shot up in the air with concern. He had suddenly seen the loop of twine with both eyes instead of just the left. But I stayed with it and continued doing big circles until he accepted it and relaxed a bit. Then, while I had the twine really swinging back and forth, I flipped it up over his head. It landed over one of his

ears. This was just too much for him. His head shot up, white filled his eyes, and he exploded off around the stall, carrying the twine with him. I let go completely and bolted out of there.

Kathy and I watched as he raced around the stall irrationally three or four times and slammed into each corner.

"It's tough putting him through this, but he has to get over it." I squeezed her shoulder reassuringly.

Kathy began to relax a bit as Sahib stepped on the twine and it moved back behind his ear, then down his neck. For such a little thing, it was doing a great job of finding all his sensitive spots while I stood back and allowed this to unfold. Gradually he realized that this line dragging around his legs, over his head and neck—in fact, all over his entire body—was nothing to fear.

I went back into the stall. Again, I loved him up and praised him. He was progressing fabulously, considering where we had started. And this time, when I started all over with the jump-rope program, he calmly stood and accepted it everywhere on his body. I stopped, walked over to the far corner and kneeled down. He watched my every move closely, before lowering his head in my direction. He took a step, then another, and then he was there beside me, sniffing me all over. His soft whiskers tickled my face and neck as his warm breath mingled with my own. He suddenly lifted his head high and looked down as if to say, "Hey. That all you got?"

The Dance Begins

The fourth step in my system is where I begin to direct movement. It is a driving procedure that is quite practical when one needs to send a horse out in front, like into a trailer, stall, or paddock. Having mastered the earlier tasks, which heightened his confidence, Sahib was clearly ready for this. I began an overhand swinging motion that culminated in tapping him lightly on the sides with the end of the twine, then gradually progressed back to his rump. I watched closely for forward movement. He stood perfectly still but did flinch noticeably each time the twine made contact. When the twine found its way to his hind end he leaned forward to get away from it. I quit and let it sink in for a bit. I was

after forward movement as well as his acceptance of the intermittent touching as the twine fell lightly on his body.

After this, I started again, right from the very beginning. I showed him the twine, began swinging it in the air, made contact in his shoulder area, and then worked back to his point of hip. He moved forward. I encouraged him with my body language, hand, and a clucking sound. Before long he was moving around me in complete understanding. *The Dance* had now started. After I'd sent him on a half dozen trips around the stall, I eased into him, made contact on his side with my hand, and took the slack out of the twine. With the twine guiding his neck to the side, we found our way down to a stop. His head came around to greet me. We had just performed a one-rein stop on the ground!

In another year or so, with the right handling, this would transfer right into the saddle, which is the whole point of my system. Get it on the ground first, then in the saddle. And we're both a lot safer for it.

I threaded the twine under his neck, over his rump, and behind his hocks around his offside. I pushed his head away from me and helped him unwind away from this pressure. He awkwardly moved off and kicked out at the twine touching his back legs. When I encouraged forward movement, he immediately found complete relief from the twine. He lowered his head in understanding as I wound him down to a stop, back to the safe loving place we'd created earlier. One more time I asked him to move off away from the twine on his right. This time he confidently worked right through and didn't even consider kicking out.

This particular exercise is one of the best I've ever found because it accomplishes so much. When a horse can confidently unwind away from the lead on the opposite side, he is working through a number of lessons which include:

- The horse is learning to follow the feel of the lead even while the handler is completely out of view for a few moments.

- The horse is stepping away from the pressure of the lead around the hind legs. Yielding to pressure is the basis of all training.
- The back legs and entire hindquarters are being desensitized to touch and ropes, which helps in foot handling and makes farriers very happy.
- The horse is changing eyes. For some horses this is highly traumatic. They are challenged by the blind spot as they change focus from one eye to the other.
- The horse is learning how to use himself properly, finding that a cooperative forward movement will meet success and relief. The hind leg must step forward underneath to succeed. This will later aid in the disengagement of the hindquarters, which is critical to the one-rein stop.

The one-rein stop is the one tool every horseman should perfect and accomplishing this is the primary goal of my safety system. Riding without a one-rein stop is like driving a car on black ice without brakes!

I discovered this exercise years earlier quite by accident when working with Argentine polo horses in South Carolina in the late 80s. I'd broken a collarbone when I came off the second horse I'd ever started and got slammed into the side of a solid wooden roundpen. The recovery gave me some time to think and plot a wiser course. As I healed during that month and a half, I made a promise to myself that I would NEVER mount another horse without first fully establishing a ground system that would promote my safety as well as the horse's.

When I could use my left arm again, I started experimenting with a variety of horses and exercises, and when I stumbled onto this *unwinding procedure*, it seemed to really settle the horses. It forced their minds to fully engage. It challenged them and prepared them for life and for a whole plethora of tasks. To this day, I have yet to discover a ground exercise that is more encompassing than this one, as it truly does emulate a dance when performed with grace and precision.

Finally… Time for the Halter

With Sahib doing so well with the twine, I felt the time had come to use my custom halter/lead, which is the handiest tool I own and fits nearly all horses. Kathy had warned me about the effect of even the sight of a halter, but by now he was almost begging for it. I draped the lead over my arm and arranged the soft rope halter in preparation for an easy and efficient haltering. I gave Sahib a good stroking around the head and got my arms completely around his neck to pull him into me. He readily complied. I gently slipped the soft nosepiece up and over his muzzle, slipped the long end of the halter over his neck and secured the knot. *Voilà!* With my halter/lead securely on, we were ready to conquer the world.

I drove Sahib around the stall several more times and finally had him unwind away from the thick yacht-rope lead. When I was satisfied, Kathy opened the top of his stall door, and we allowed him to look out to his run. I did not want him abruptly flying out the door but wanted to prepare him for this next stage. When his mind seemed right, we opened the bottom. I stepped out in front and, with my hands in the air blocking him, I asked him to stay back in the stall. Only when he seemed calm did I ask him to join me. He very hesitantly stepped to the edge, placed one foot out, then the other. Before he could pick up momentum, I immediately circled him down and reassured him that what went on inside would also continue out here in the run.

We started with small circles, then progressed to larger ones. He pranced around me with glee. When he approached irrational exuberance, I wound him down, quieted him, and started over.

Sensing it was time to introduce the final step in my ground program, we waltzed right into *ballet on the ground*. Within a few minutes he was performing astonishing turns on the forehand followed by a weight shift as he rocked back and executed his turns on the haunches with grace and agility. This superb athlete was now truly using himself and even showing off, just a bit. He'd been cooped up for so long without any direction and now had a chance to strut his stuff and perform just as his magnificent appearance and stature so fitted him to do. My eyes welled up as I

delighted in our progress. I glanced at my watch and was astonished—this entire transformation had taken exactly one hour!

I left Kathy with specific exercises, homework of sorts, along with several videos and my pocket card to review the first six steps of my system as she worked with Sahib. She ordered one of my custom halter/lead combos as well to help her perform the exercises as their education continued. As for Sahib? This is a horse I'll keep track of for years to come. I hope one day to be on his back. If his mind and athletic ability progress as they should, he'll be a delight to ride and a sire to extraordinary horses for generations to come.

In Conclusion

I thank each horse for teaching me, and Sahib was no exception. We had thoroughly worked through the first six steps of my 7 Step Safety System—*bonding, take and give, intimacy, the dance begins, desensitizing,* and *ballet on the ground*. But especially because of the trauma Sahib had suffered, it was of vital importance to move very slowly, especially in the early stages. Baby steps and patience are the operative words here: Allow each success to sink in fully while giving the horse adequate time to digest mini bits of information. Beginning with the twine in a stall was a great start with Sahib as it is with all young horses. Most important, it is safe. They are not intimidated by it, nor does it require haltering or slipping anything over the head, a common hurdle for young horses. Only after the understanding of pressure and release is fully instilled is it time for the halter. As Tom Dorrance expressed at one of his clinics years earlier, "If you are really tuned into the horse, it can all be accomplished with two pieces of thread, one on the horse and one for the roundpen." Thanks, Tom!



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Wally and His Girls Have an Afternoon Adventure

"The one best precept — the golden rule in dealing with a horse — is never to approach him angrily. Anger is so devoid of forethought that it will often drive a man to do things, which in a calmer mood he will regret." – Xenophon

It was a beautiful crisp fall afternoon on Colorado's Front Range. Alex and I had crested the long hill on Route 105 and were starting down through beautiful ranching country, when we noticed congestion a good mile to the north. From a distance it looked like an accident. At least two dozen cars were backed up in three directions from where Tomah Rd. intersected Route 105. The scenario unfolded as we approached. Several cars were off the road. Horns were honking and people were out of their cars running around waving their hands in the air. A man on a four-wheeler was racing frantically back and forth. Suddenly horses appeared from between the cars. They dashed over to the fence line on the west and began moving along it in our direction. They were still several hundred yards away, but heading toward us at a steady pace.

"This doesn't look so good. Why don't you see if you can help?" Alex suggested. I pulled in behind the last car in line, and we watched the show for a few moments, then I jumped out of the car, grabbed my 12' halter/lead, and moved toward the confusion, ready to lend a hand. Alex replaced me in the driver's seat.

It looked like about ten horses, a colorful lot with a several paints, a roan, a palomino, some buckskins, bays and sorrels. Then

there was the massive jet-black Percheron who towered above the others—this statuesque creature was every bit of 18 hands. He was dripping with sweat and breathing hard as steam poured through his nostrils into the cold fall air. As he moved, so did the others.

We were in the middle of prime ranching country populated by cattle, bison, llamas, and horses, only a few miles from the easternmost edge of the Rocky Mountains. It was normally a low traffic area, especially mid-week. But today there were a lot of vehicles and people waiting for this drama to end. As I passed the cars, it was evident that the occupants had neither intention nor inclination to get involved. I couldn't blame them. They wouldn't know what to do and would probably end up in the way or possibly get hurt. This was a dangerous situation for everyone, let alone the inexperienced.

The horses were advancing along the fenceline until they found themselves blocked by either a car or someone's waving arms, then they went back across the road to the other fence. Now they were coming south toward me at a solid clip. I rushed up and blocked the gap between a car and the fence and turned them back to the north.

As they moved up the fence line, I yelled at the ranch hand on the four-wheeler, "Where do they need to go? Which horse is the lead horse? Who will they follow?"

"If you can catch Wally, the big black draft, the mares will follow him. Careful, he's a tough one and would just as soon kick your head off." He pointed to a spot in the distance. "You see the gate up the road on the east side?"

I nodded.

"If you can get him in there, the others will follow him right in." Then the hand roared off in hot pursuit.

The whole scene was chaos. There was no plan and not much horse-sense in evidence. The horses were highly agitated, and the atmosphere was not conducive to a happy outcome. One of the buckskins had a wire cut and was bleeding. The roan was heavily favoring his left side and trying on three legs to keep up with the gang. These horses were wild-eyed, traumatized and dripping

with sweat–this must have been going on long before we arrived. Direction was needed desperately. It was time to take control.

I whistled loudly, waved my arms, and got the attention of the six people on foot. "Spread out and block their exits," I yelled out. "But give them room. They need to settle down. Move back." I motioned with my arms to signal those at the far north end who were well out of hearing range; then I did the same to the south. But there was little help in that direction, where we had just come from.

The horses circled, searching for any opening they could rush through. They all continued to the north, met resistance, then circled back south along the western fence line. They broke into a canter with Wally in the lead. I looked down along the alley to the south. There was a huge opening with nobody in it between the cars and the fence. The horses were gaining momentum and tightening up as a group. If they got past us to the south they would be gone. There would be nothing to stop them for miles and getting in front of them to turn them would be a real challenge. It would require racing by in a vehicle then somehow turning them around in the direction of all the cars and congestion. And turning around again was exactly what they did not want to do. They just wanted their freedom.

Suddenly Alex appeared from the car. She bravely positioned herself right in the middle of the opening. With a coat in one hand and a hat in the other, and making guttural predator sounds, she aggressively moved toward the horses. She held her ground as they bore down on her at full speed. In silent prayer I glanced at the other helpers. All eyes were on Alex. Everyone stopped breathing for a few seconds as the horses closed in on that lone figure standing up to ten frantic, highly irrational horses. When the herd was about twenty-five feet from her, they abruptly veered up onto the road, threaded through the cars, and circled back north. I gave Alex thumbs up, then raised two arms in a sign of success. She motioned the same back to me with a huge smile on her face.

Now the plan might just work if everybody kept their cool. The horses had plenty of room and were adequately

surrounded. Even the guy on the four-wheeler smartened up and quit racing back and forth. The horses circled around from one side of the road to the other for a few minutes then Wally and a bay mare stopped right in the middle between the cars. The other horses continued to mill around, but stayed close, keeping their eyes on the huge black horse for direction. One of the helpers, a middle-aged ranch gal with obvious horse savvy, approached the bay with her halter. Her advance was non-aggressive and slow. She caught and held the mare's attention then succeeded in getting a hand on her. She draped the lead around her neck and finally secured the halter. I waited for a long minute, then slowly eased in, focused on getting my hands on the Percheron. He eyed me with suspicion.

"Eeeeeasy, big boy," I cooed as I slowly advanced in a slightly sideways, crouched position. "Settle down now. Eeeeeasy, boy." I moved in, side-passing to present myself as small and non-threatening. He trusted me enough for me to get in close and offer my outstretched hand. He sniffed it, then allowed me to make contact on his glistening neck.

I stroked his wet hair just below his mane and talked softly.

"Everything's going to be okay, big boy. It's all over now. You can relax." I kept the dialogue going to keep his attention with me and help him settle down. He was trembling and breathing hard. His eyes showed far too much white, especially for a draft horse. My right hand stroked his neck, and then I kneaded his withers soothingly. My left found the V under his jaw, then the corner of his mouth, then inside. I feathered his tongue with my index finger, and he began working his huge mouth. I removed my finger and watched as his mammoth tongue licked his lips in a welcome sign of relaxation. His eyes softened and he dropped his head. He seemed to ask me to help him as he offered his head and neck to be haltered. My halter was far too small to fit his massive head, so I created a loop around his neck with the lead, and we started up the road to the north, back home, back to safety. It was over.

The other horses filed in behind as we walked by the cars and people. What a sight to behold, me leading this gargantuan

horse with a mere loop around his neck, and all the others in a single line directly behind. Cameras snapped away through the windows as this gang proceeded past with heavy steam rolling off their damp coats and pouring from their nostrils. But now they were all relaxed and docile, ready to return home and have a good rest and a drink, and no doubt reminisce about the day Wally and his girls had their big adventure out on the road.

With Wally looming above me, we walked through the entrance gate into the ranch. I waited until the rest were through and it was closed securely, then I asked Wally to drop his head and slipped the lead off him. He complied, and even with the lead off, seemed content to hang with me. We exchanged air as I breathed into his vast nostrils. His breathing had slowed considerably. My hand moved up to his left eye, and I began rubbing it with my palm. He leaned into the pressure and I pushed back, working his eye vigorously. He leaned harder into my hand and I braced myself. It felt so good to him. Before he could push me off balance, I stopped. He looked intently at me with those calm, glassy eyes and he thanked me. I learned later that Wally was indeed the ringleader. He had lost his younger brother in a lightning accident a year earlier and had taken up with the brood mares. They worshipped him and followed him anywhere, including into trouble. By now his harem had moved off a good way to the west toward the ranch buildings. He looked at them, then at me again.

"It's okay, big Wally," I said, giving him a final rub. "You go on now, and stay out of trouble, at least for a while."



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ambella Reincarnated

"Horse, thou art truly a creature without equal, for thou fliest without wings and conquerest without sword." – The Koran

I was driving back to Colorado through Wyoming and feeling the need to connect with some creatures. My eyes were scanning the landscape for horses as I entered the Wind River Reservation at the edge of the Popo Agie Wilderness near Riverton, Wyoming. As I came over a rise after a long uphill haul, my eye caught a herd of horses running through the sagebrush in the waning sun. The dust was thick in the dry, late fall as the horses circled and then settled at the bottom of the draw next to a very small creek. As I neared, they drifted singly and in pairs into the water for a good drink, then ambled back into the sage and began to graze, spreading out in search of the scant fall grasses.

I parked about a hundred yards away and got out slowly. Just as I closed the door and was slipping on a coat, a beautiful buckskin emerged from the water. Our eyes met as water dribbled from her mouth. She was magnificent—almost statuesque as the sun gleamed off her deep tan coat, black mane and lower legs, and the very pronounced black stripe that ran down the middle of her back.

As I walked toward her, my heart pounded when she did the same. I felt an immediate connection—I was reminded of a horse named Ambella that had stolen a piece of my heart early in my equine journey. This one passed the other horses, several of them looking up as she walked by with purpose and direction. I hunkered down and worked my way through the barbed wire

fence, getting my coat caught en route. As I awkwardly tried to free myself from the barb, the buckskin approached.

"Hey, baby," I purred. "What a pretty girl you are." She kept coming, but I still wasn't through the fence. In front of humans, it's called embarrassment. In front of a horse, it's about keeping cool. Again, my attention was totally on my predicament. By now she was right there, saying, "You humans are something else." I finally eased back toward the road and the barb released itself. I slowly took my coat off and hung it on the fencepost. She came right over and gave it a good sniffing as I worked my way all the way through the fence and slowly approached my new friend.

"Well, aren't you something," I said as I approached humbly and bent over. She lowered her head to meet mine, and we exchanged air as our greeting. I tried to match her slow breathing with mine as my hand touched her shoulder, stroking with the hair, then up to her neck. Where her neck met her chest, I began scratching softly with the tips of my fingers, then increased the pressure. She arched her head up into the air at an odd angle with sheer delight. I knew I had her and quit. I very slowly eased off and walked to the fencepost, took the coat and walked off down the fence line a couple of sections and stopped there to put it on. Her head was high and inquisitive, saying, "Where do you think you are going?"

"Come on down here with your new Papa," I cooed. And she did. When she arrived, I gave her a big rub beginning at the neck, then all over her body. When I got to her tail I scratched the dock vigorously. Again, her head shot up into the air in ecstasy as her tail lifted and formed a perfect arch. I stroked the underside lightly as she enjoyed a place, she'd most definitely never been with the human. Working the offside back to her head, we reconnected. I placed the palm of my hand over her left eye and rubbed lightly. She leaned into it with delight and began pushing against my hand as I rubbed harder. She pushed so hard I lost my balance. Laughing at where this was going, I used her nose-handle and guided her head around to her offside. I slipped my little finger in her mouth and worked it around, then my index finger in her nose and breathed in her nose all at the same time. She stayed there

only because she wanted to. I worked my left hand back to her flank and stroked with assurance. Her flanks quivered at my touch. Then I was above the tail, then under her upraised tail.

We had achieved intimacy in a matter of a couple of minutes. I had her fore and aft, and she remained there just loving it. I slowly lowered by hands and walked around her other side to pick up her near front foot. I worked the foot in circles clockwise and counter, she completely relaxed and trusting. Then I pulled her foot forward and extended it as far as I could. She stretched out, enjoying the process. Then I did her off front leg the same way. As I fished for my gloves, I mused to myself how completely relaxed and trusting of me she was.

The sun ducked behind the butte to the west, and I found a couple pieces of yellow twine which I made into loops at each end. I tied them together and slipped it over her neck creating a lead. We walked to a grassy area and did some dancing, she performing perfect ballet, first turning on the forehand, then on the haunches. Our symmetry was magical. I finished by winding her back down to that intimate place we'd discovered only minutes before. She happily complied. About fifty yards off was a dead cottonwood lying down, offering a good mounting platform. I lined her up next to the tree and leaned over her, bellying her. She seemed a little unstable with my weight on her back and took a couple steps to balance herself. I stroked her offside and she turned her head to see and smell me there. I reassured her with voice and stroking, then eased back off. I untied the twine, put one end in my pocket, and placed the other around her neck, then I pulled back just slightly. First, she leaned into the pressure. I increased the tension from slight to substantial and she leaned back.

"Release," I said to myself and did. I stroked her lavishly and told her what a brilliant buckskin she was, then let it sink in for a few moments. She worked her mouth in understanding. The next time I applied a little pressure she immediately took a step back. Again, big reward. I lined her up again next to the tree and lay over her back. Very slowly I slid my right leg over her rump, staying low and stroking her neck the whole time, then slowly raised my body until I was sitting upright. I kept

working that neck reassuringly and talking to her, then clucked and wiggled my seat. She took a shaky step forward and stopped abruptly. Again, big rewards, then I began again with slight leg agitation and some kissing. This time she walked off with confidence toward the creek. By now the light was fading fast and the cars on the highway were beginning to use their lights. We walked toward the creek and the other horses, doing a couple of circles en route and a stop or two just to make sure I had some control.

But this was a little over the line. I didn't know this horse from Adam and had no idea how much riding she'd had. As we neared the other horses an old red ranch truck pulled over and honked. A grizzled and rough looking cowboy hurried out of the vehicle and yelled out, "You crazy, mister? That horse ain't never been broke. What the hell are you doin'? Who are you?"

I leaned back and circled back to the road, trying to act as nonchalant as I could, thinking about my story line. My girl and I walked right up to the fence, and stopped, and took two or three steps back. I released her neck and she stood perfectly still. "She invited me to go for a ride and I obliged her. I'm really sorry. I just stopped to get my hands on some horses and take a breather and enjoy the sunset. She came right up and wanted to make friends and well, one thing led to the next and here we are."

"Well, I'll be damned. I've never seen such a thing and a piece of twine on top of all that. My boss just won't believe it. We were kinda worried about riding her. She doesn't like people too much—well, usually that is! What are you? One a them horse whisperers or something?"

"Something like that." I smiled. "Mind if I take her for a little ride before it gets too dark?"

"You go right ahead. Just don't get hurt. I think Mr. Turner will be real happy about this. You lookin' for a job by any chance? Got about a hundred to start this spring."

"No, just passin' through. Thanks for the visit."

I walked back toward the creek, right by the herd. We went through the water and up the other side where the footing looked good and broke into a trot up along the creek bottom. From the

trot we drifted into an easy slow canter and followed the creek right up into the hills for a good two miles before it started getting rocky. We slowed to a walk, then crossed the creek and began traversing back to the road. The old ranch-hand watched for a while from below, but then he drove off as darkness pushed the day to an end.

My new girl and I communed as two best friends all the way down. Suddenly this connection again vividly reminded me of the same one I'd had with that special horse, Ambella. We fit each other. It was perfect and felt right for both of us. In a whole lifetime, these connections are rare events that usually come along out of the blue when we least expect it.

I eased off her back, removed the twine, and loved her all over. We melted right into each other, both seeming to fully understand the depth of what had just taken place. She followed me back to the spot in the fence where I'd gotten stuck. With a tear running down my cheek, I bid farewell to a horse I'd probably never see again but would remember always.



CHAPTER TWENTY

The Stall Climber

"A Horseman should know neither fear, nor anger."

– John Rarey

In the mid 90s I lived at a fabulous boarding facility in Larkspur, Colorado. The hundred and twenty acres was nestled right against the easternmost edge of the Rocky Mountains and had a plethora of fascinating sandstone rock formations scattered throughout the property and adjacent lands in which I rode. As my reputation for helping troubled horses grew, I was almost constantly challenged with interesting situations.

One spring morning I received a call about a problem unlike anything I'd ever dealt with or heard about. The owner of the racing-bred yearling quarter horse stallion was almost frantic.

"We've raised this magnificent horse that has gone out of his mind. It's gotten so bad that entering his stall sends him up the wall. I mean literally up the wall," explained Dick Hodges. "I've been to the hospital, broken my glasses, and cut up my face just trying to halter this young stallion. We're in over our heads here, Frank. Do you think you can help us?"

"This is sure a new situation to me, but I'm pretty sure I can make some headway. Let's set up a time to get together. But it's absolutely imperative that you and anyone who handles your stallion is present."

I drove with my assistant, Peter, over to Dick and Luanne Hodges' place in Castlerock the next afternoon. They lived on a plateau above the little town of Castlerock and had commanding views of the Rockies. The Hodges bred and raced very high-strung

quarter horses that performed quite well at the track. Now these are not the laid-back, dude string quarter horses that happily amble down the trail. These are a completely different breed of cat that is much closer to high-strung breeds like thoroughbreds and Arabians; they have to be, to compete. These horses are fed high protein food, and some have hair-trigger personalities. It's what is needed to play this extremely fast game. You see, these horses are bred to sprint a quarter mile, hence the name quarter horse.

I had little experience with this particular class of horse, but plenty of time with the hotter breeds, which did give me a starting place. The Argentine thoroughbreds from the fast world of polo, and the numerous Arabians I'd worked with over the past few years, gave me valuable experience in dealing with energized horses. These horses need a job to keep their overly active minds focused. They just aren't set up to do much of anything at a relaxed pace.

Dick's Trip to the Hospital

Dick and Luann walked with Peter and me from the Hodges ranch-style stucco house out to the barn. Horses were happily moving around their runs and enjoying the warm Colorado afternoon sun.

"You know, Frank, we've been playing this game pretty successfully for almost ten years but never encountered anything quite like this. Lightning has been a handful right from the day he hit the ground. Nothing comes easy to this guy, and he just doesn't seem to warm up to anyone. I'd say his hormones have kicked in over the last couple months, and it's just been nothing but trouble. I dislocated my shoulder a month ago, and well—" He gestured. "You can see how my face is healing up." He had a bright red scar coming right off his left eye. "Eighteen stitches and plastic surgery," he said shaking his head.

At this point, I was actually feeling queasy as my heart began to beat much faster than normal. This was not the average appointment.

We walked into the old wooden barn and down a dark narrow alley to the very end.

"He's in there," Dick motioned to the right. "But don't move fast. Just peek in from over the top. I don't dare open the stall door. It'll drive him up the wall."

I gently eased myself up onto a mounting block and peered over the edge. The very moment the horse caught sight of me he bolted into the corner. The solid wood stall groaned as he collided into the sharp right angle.

"Man, he is freaked out. Whew," I breathed out quietly. Inside the stall was a truly magnificent creature. Lightning was a brilliant chestnut with four striking white socks. He had an ample flaxen mane and tail and most of his eyes showed way too much white. He shook in terror and as I edged higher, he rose up on two legs and frantically pawed the walls in the far corner in an attempt to escape. I lowered myself back down for a consultation before proceeding.

A Dangerous Equation

"What is outside this door?" I asked.

"That's his run. Wanna take a look?"

"I sure do. Let's take a walk out there and survey his boundaries," I suggested.

Dick opened the door from the alley out into Lightning's run. It was about twenty-five feet wide and probably fifty or sixty feet in length. The problem was the boundaries. The fencing was only about four and a half feet high, five at the most, and consisted of page wire. There were four-inch wooden rails over the top of the wire fencing all the way around. But this was not a great arrangement. Most any horse could go over or through this fence in a panic. I shook my head. Yet another dangerous set-up that could completely compromise my plan. But this was what I had to work with, so I put a plan together.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do," I said. "I'll get a rope on him inside and allow him to drag it around until he's handling it pretty well. Then we're going to let him out with the rope dragging behind. He'll want to go right over or through the far end when he first comes out. So, you three will be there to stop him. If we can turn him, then we've won the battle. But we'll need

some things to wave at him to make this end seem impenetrable. Can you go get some plastic and paper feed bags, Luanne?" I asked.

She nodded.

"You get that stuff together, and I'll begin with him." I walked back to the stall and removed a thirty-foot half-inch cotton rope from my tack bag. I again eased up over the edge of the stall, and he again freaked out and began climbing the walls.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeasy, boy," I cooed over and over. "Settle down, now. No one's gonna hurt you now. Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeasy, now." Eventually he found a corner that he was comfortable with and stood there shaking all over. Very, very slowly, I allowed the thirty-foot rope to slip from my hands and dangle down the side of the stall. He eyed it with suspicion but handled it. Then I began putting some life into the rope and slowly moved it back and forth along the wall. Within five minutes I was able to work it in big arcs along the wall and even flick it out into the stall. He jumped back several times as if a snake were after him, but he did deal with it. I then coiled the rope up and gave it a good toss toward the other end of the stall. He didn't miss anything and watched with an intensity unlike anything I'd ever witnessed.

Again, I coiled up the cotton rope, and this time tossed it to the middle of the stall. This sent him into a tizzy, and he bolted into the corner away from the motion. The dust was almost unbearable, and I breathed through my shirtsleeve until it settled. But he stopped and watched as I dragged the rope back to me and tossed it again. Within a few minutes he handled the rope falling from the top of the stall into his world. And now it was time for the moment of truth. Could he handle the soft cotton rope on his body?

"Let's let the dust settle for a few minutes," I suggested. The four of us walked out into his run. "He's doing pretty well. At least he's not trying to climb out," I commented optimistically. "You do know this is pretty dangerous stuff and he could hurt himself?" I queried.

"What else can we do?" asked Dick, shaking his head in exasperation.

"I think we'll be okay. But this is dicey and you have to understand that," I explained. "He's so wired up that he could very easily hurt himself. That's all I'm saying. This isn't the ideal set-up. A roundpen with six-foot walls would be ideal. But there aren't a lot of choices here. I feel like it will be ok, but I just need you to completely comprehend what this is all about."

"I trust you here, and I do understand what you're telling me," Dick replied.

"Okay then. It's show time. Let's go back inside," I instructed my helpers.

Off to the Races

The dust had settled, as had Lightning. There was a tad less white in his eyes and his head wasn't sky-high. I'd left the rope hanging off the stall wall and a good length of it was lying on the stall floor not far from the stallion. From the alley I shook the rope and listened for his explosion. It didn't happen. I shook the rope harder and harder and then climbed up above the top of the stall—and above him. His head shot up and the white filled his eyes again. But I wasn't going to back down and so I continued shaking the rope back and forth. He handled it quite well, so I reeled the cotton rope back to me and coiled it up. I now had a half dozen big loops in my hand; I began to wave the rope back and forth aggressively along the wall. Each time the arc was higher and higher until I felt the time was right and I let fly. The coiled rope landed on his back, and we were off to the races.

Round and around Lightning shot, carrying the cotton rope. About the time the dust had thickened to the point of choking me, the rope worked its way off his body. He stopped instantly, then turned and faced the culprit and dropped his head to get a very good look. He snorted loudly and struck at the rope with his front forefoot several times. Then after about thirty seconds he confidently licked his lips as if to say, "I can handle it."

I again began lightly shaking the rope and progressed until I was putting as much life into it as I could. The end snapped all over the stall and he didn't move an inch. He didn't take his eyes off it either. I quickly reeled in the rope and without any pause,

again tossed it onto him. Off he went, but a hair more slowly this time and the rope stayed on him, hanging off his back. Round and around he went, probably a dozen times. I held the rope as high as I could and he didn't lose it. Finally, he found his favorite corner and stopped. Very, very slowly he turned his head to his left and took a long sniff of the well-used horse-scented rope.

"Smells just like horses doesn't it, Lightning?" I asked. He almost seemed to nod at my comment, then took a very deep sigh and suddenly, quite visibly, let down. He lowered his head and licked his lips with gusto.

"That was huge. You guys all see that?" I asked.

"Wow," they said, along with some other, more colorful language as we all digested what had just taken place. As Lightning let down, so did we.

"Let's take another short break and breathe some fresh air," I suggested. We all walked out again and filled our lungs with crisp spring Colorado air. "I think we're over the hard part now. There's just one more huge hurdle, and that's when he comes out. You guys ready?"

Everyone nodded and we walked back in.

Lightning was standing back in his favorite corner with the rope draped over his side. His demeanor was reasonable. I climbed up high onto the mounting block without precaution; he handled it well. I deliberately banged on the side of the stall and then urged the others to do the same. Lightning's head rose up, but he was still okay. With my end of the rope I began playing jump rope, swinging it back and forth until I was doing complete circles. The rope was falling time after time onto his back and he was okay. Finally with a flick of my wrist the rope formed a circle and landed over his head. I kept the momentum going and another loop enveloped his head and neck. Perfect.

"Shoulda been a cowboy. Shoulda learned to rope and ride," I sang softly with a smile. One more loop over his head and he was caught, at least to my satisfaction.

I eased down off the mounting block and fished in my bag for my extendable wand, which had a plastic bag on the end. I began to lightly agitate the bag behind my student. It didn't take much to

get him moving forward. At first, he was impulsive, and herky-jerky in his movements. But before long, Lightning just walked around the stall like a champ dragging about twelve feet of rope behind him. Perfect. I got a bit more aggressive with the wand and plastic bag until he broke into a trot, and then I backed off.

"Let's move the party outside," I said. "You guys all get at the far end of the run and have your ammunition ready. This is the big test now. Everybody ready?"

To silent nods of agreement, we all walked back into the clean afternoon air.

Out the Gate

"The moment he comes out, you guys begin waving your arms and plastic bags and making a hissing noise. Get as aggressive as necessary. You've got to turn him—don't back down, no matter what. Everybody okay?" I searched their eyes for confidence and found it.

With my team assembled, I unlatched the top of the double door. Lightning shot into the corner and my heart leapt with a thump.

"Eeeeeeeasy now, Lightning. Eeeeeeeasy, boy," I soothed him as best I could.

He looked at me wide-eyed. New game here now. It was all fine inside. But this was different. When he'd settled, I unlatched the bottom door, swung it all the way open, and moved back out of the way. Almost instantly, the overcharged chestnut horse screamed out of the stall, dragging the rope behind him. At the other end, three people became a huge crowd of waving and hissing mania as Lightning rushed them. I held my breath and for a very, very long second or two, froze, in high hopes that my plan would work. The stallion's speed and agility were equally impressive as he bore down on my team of three. Then with only feet between the end of the run and a wildly moving racing-bred quarter horse, did he veer off and somehow come out the other side back toward me. Voila! Success. We'd done it!

He seemed to want to go right back to the security of his stall, but I blocked his way with waving arms and a loud guttural

sound from deep in my throat. Again, he veered, circled, and headed toward the other end. But it was over now. He made another half dozen laps at the canter, then dropped down to the trot and the walk, and finally settled right in the middle of the run that he hadn't entered in weeks. Steam radiated from his whole body as the sweat glistened in the bright sun, and two distinct streams of heavy breath shot from his extended nostrils into the cooling afternoon air.

I raised both clenched fists high in the air in a sign of success as the others did the same. "We did it guys. We did it," I yelled.

Back to Basics

I slowly walked by Lightning to the other end of the run and the four of us huddled up.

"Now what, Frank?" asked Dick.

"Now it's about trust building and reintroducing the basis for all training, *take and give*. Then it's about directing that quantum energy with total purpose and helping Lightning face his fears." I reassured Dick, "But I'm pretty sure the heavy lifting is done. Watch closely and you'll see your horse completely transform into my new best friend."

By now Lightning was breathing close to normal. I eased up to him and offered my extended hand. He took a wary sniff and was close to leaving when I backed off. I walked behind him to the end of the cotton rope, picked it up, and then walked out in front of him and stopped about thirty degrees off to his side. Very gently I picked up on the rope, applied pressure, and waited. My stature was non-threatening, and my eyes were soft and averted. After about thirty seconds he deliberately leaned forward. I gave him a big release. All the tension in the rope was gone the very instant he thought about yielding to that forward pressure on his neck. His eyes softened in understanding and his head dropped. Again, I applied pressure and he almost immediately took an assured step forward. My release was again well timed.

I walked up to him and stroked his forehead, then scratched the V under his jaw. His head arched up at an awkward angle in a

sure sign of pleasure. I quit while it was working and allowed my attention to sink in for at least a half minute. Then I lowered myself to my knees and applied downward pressure on the cotton rope and waited. It took Lightning about fifteen seconds to understand my desire, and then his head dropped a good two inches. Again, I asked for his head to drop and this time he gave me about six, and then he was breathing right into my face as I stroked vigorously under his jaw. I stood up and walked over to the fence at the far end with the lead lightly in my hand. He followed on a slack lead and stopped just off my shoulder. Not a word was spoken by anyone as he thoroughly sniffed my neck and head, then dropped his own head almost to the ground, and let out a huge sigh of relief.

The heavy lifting was indeed over.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lone Ranger Loads Again… Finally

"Look back on our struggle for freedom. Trace our present day's strength to its source and you'll find that man's pathway to glory is strewn with the bones of a horse." – Anonymous

Chuck Brazier came out to shoe our two Arabians in mid-July this past summer. A seasoned farrier with thirty years experience, he was so impressed with our horses' manners that after finishing Lakota Breeze, my Anglo/Arab, he had some questions about training. He had a nine-year-old thoroughbred that he could not load. Ranger would have to stay home when the other horses went into the mountains. Hence the nickname Lone Ranger. He'd had a couple of seemingly competent trainers give it a go and while they did get the horse loaded, it took hours; but the horse didn't learn anything in the process, nor did Chuck. And Ranger *still* refused to get into his four-horse trailer. The few times he had loaded, it had required five big men manhandling him into the trailer. It had been the same coming home from the racetrack two years earlier and that had been a real ordeal. Chuck was exasperated. We set up an appointment for the following week.

I arrived at the stable in the late afternoon. The wind was gusting heavily, which did not bode well for a tough loading situation. The trailer was parked in the middle of a large, corralled area on flat ground. It was an older, four-horse, in-line unit which could have had more headroom for a big horse as I sensed Ranger was. I was then introduced to Ranger in the barn and immediately took a liking to him. He was a massive, 16.2 hand, black thoroughbred with a white sock front and back, and a bright white blaze on his intelligent looking head. I led him into the center aisle

and we got acquainted. He seemed to enjoy my touch, especially the eye rubbing and lowering of the head, which he complied with happily. I then drove him in and out of a stall from both sides using my 12′ halter/lead. Certain that he understood the driving procedure perfectly, we then proceeded to the trailer.

I walked him up to the trailer, positioned him right in front and encouraged forward movement. Almost immediately he pulled back violently and jerked the lead right from my hand. He pranced around the paddock like a standard poodle as we all watched. I was embarrassed and off to a bad start. He evaded the half dozen people trying to grab the lead for a few minutes and really seemed to enjoy the game. Once cornered, he gave in and we went back to work. Again, I positioned him directly in front of the right-hand single opening and asked for forward movement. I'd wrapped the lead around the center post and when he exploded backward, this time I was ready. He pulled back with everything he had for about fifteen seconds, then came forward fighting and striking violently with his front legs. I was safely up inside the trailer and watched his theatrics while waiting until he was through with his blow-up, then we started again. I started encouraging with clucking and kissing noises, then light tapping with the lead on his rump. He took a small step forward; I quit and rewarded him heartily. And then we started again.

This time the step was more pronounced, as was my reward. Before long he was standing right in front of the step-up and seemed relaxed, ready to get in. But that was not the case. The coaxing from here only drove him to the edge again and he exploded backwards only to hit the end of the lead and hang there, pulling back with everything he had. Now he'd checked out. His eyes were glazed over, and he was in another world. I moved behind him and tapped his rump gradually more aggressively. But he wasn't responding at all. He just wasn't there mentally.

I stopped tapping and switched to Plan B. I moved into the trailer and unwound the lead from the post. Once he felt the release he exploded backwards. I stayed right with him, backing him hard with the lead under his chin while uttering a loud *shhhhhhhhhh* noise, making the wrong thing difficult.

"You want to go back," I said calmly, "we'll go back, way back, and it won't be much fun."

Finally, he stopped, dropped his head and licked his lips. His routine was just not working out as it always had in the past.

Racetrack Baggage

As I learned later, Ranger had quite an interesting history. When Chuck got the horse from the racetrack two years earlier, there was a lot of baggage to deal with. The horse had no foundation. He wouldn't stand to be saddled. His ears could not be touched, which made bridling a circus. And on top of all that he was a bad one to shoe, especially in the rear. Then when he was saddled, he was a runaway.

It was a good thing it was Chuck Brazier who took on Ranger. Chuck came from a long lineage of horsemen. He possessed a good deal of common sense mixed with good horse-sense. His grandfather, Harry Brazier, was half Apache and a whisperer in his time. Most important, he did it the gentle way which had filtered on down to his grandson. Chuck had been a marine in Vietnam and had no use for violence of any sort. He'd had enough of that in the sixties. A gentle man, he always chose patience and restraint.

I caught Chuck's eye as I finished backing Ranger. He smiled and nodded, but his wife, Anita, looked worried.

"I don't like having to do this," I said, "but it's required. He's been using this ploy for far too long and needs to learn that it just won't work with me. You'll need to learn it too," I informed them.

"No problem. We fully understand," Chuck replied, while slipping a comforting arm around his wife's shoulder.

I allowed Ranger to digest our session for a while, then we walked back to the trailer and we started all over. It was almost a replay of the earlier sequence. He'd get right up to the step-up and hang up, then flip out dangerously, way beyond the point of reason. Remembering a trick, I'd learned from my friend, John Sharp, a fabulous Oregon horseman, we set a couple of railroad ties on top of each other and then drove Ranger over them to get him used to stepping up. Before long he was just flying right over

the ties like small jumps and seemed to enjoy the game. Back to the trailer.

Apples and Oats: Ranger's Favorite Treats!

I'd asked Anita to bring Ranger's favorite food, and she had a bag of oats mixed with apple slices. When he got his head into the trailer he'd find a treat. Not only was this a reward, but it would also help him relax. I'm not above using food to help horses relax in extremely stressful situations. So, by this point Ranger had taken a few bites and did understand where the goodies were.

We walked back to the trailer. This time, using his momentum and mine, we walked right up to the trailer, and he took a step in with one foot. You'd have thought he had done a summersault! I praised him as though he was the smartest and most important horse in the whole world *and* he found his absolute favorite food in the whole world inside that trailer and only there. He took a bite of the oats and apples and, before he decided to back out, I asked him to do just that with a little encouragement backward under the chin using the lead and a soft cluck. He stepped back out and was again heartily rewarded and allowed to rest on his success for a long minute or two. The peanut gallery was stirring and there were smiles everywhere. "We're over the hard part." I said with relief and a sense of thankfulness that there were no injuries.

This horse had wigged out worse than any of the cases I'd ever encountered. Again, we walked away from the trailer in a big circle, then lined up and walked directly toward the opening. This time he placed both front feet in and reached his nose way forward to find the goodies I'd placed on the floor. I allowed him to relax and chow down, then backed him out and did a replay. This time he walked all the way in.

"More treats, Anita," I called out.

She hustled around and quickly produced a feeder of mixed goodies.

From there it was a matter of asking him to enter the trailer, take a few bites, get relaxed, and then back out, then do it all over again. Within another five minutes I could not keep Ranger *out* of

the trailer! Then I asked Chuck to take over. Once he got the routine down and the right body language, he had the same result. It almost became a struggle to keep the horse out of the trailer. Anita was holding back tears and shaking her head in disbelief.

What Ranger Taught Me

Every extremely difficult horse teaches me some lessons. Ranger was too tall for the trailer. He needed the momentum of walking forward to enter the trailer without feeling claustrophobic. Standing in front and getting in required a jump or a lunge that would force his head up and perhaps bump the ceiling. He seemed to know that, but we'd missed it. Ranger also taught me to be flexible and keep looking for solutions, even if that meant changing the game. Ultimately, it was changing the game that made all the difference.

I instructed Chuck to continue loading Ranger on a regular basis. Absolutely the only place Ranger would find his oats and apples would be in the trailer, but less frequently. He might just be a bit hungry when asked to go in as well. In the event that Ranger resisted, I'd demonstrated a mild reprimand with a firm jerk on the lead, or a more aggressive backing and a *shhhhhhhhh* noise or a firm

"No!" Chuck fully understood that there is a white zone and a black zone. When the horse is co-operating, he's in the white zone and is rewarded with stroking and kind words. When the horse acts up, he's entered the black zone and needs reprimanding. As Tom Dorrance espoused for so many years, "Make the right thing easy or comfortable and the wrong thing difficult or uncomfortable."

About six weeks after loading Ranger, Chuck came to shoe our horses. He wore a big smile. "Old Ranger just loads like a champ now. He tried me once on the second day. I gave him a firm jerk on the lead and a loud 'No!' and that was it. He walked right in and has been doing that ever since." Chuck's delight was visible. "Your approach makes so much sense to me and to my horses. What a relief after all we've been through. And he's the Lone Ranger no more. We went into the high-country last weekend and

he eagerly broke trail most of the way. I can't thank you enough." Chuck offered me a sincere handshake and another broad smile. "You've changed both of our lives for the better."



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Leroy Learns to Let Down… On the Ground

All in green, went my love riding, on a great horse of gold into the silver dawn. – E.E. Cummings

Chris Pachel is truly a student of the horse. His insatiable appetite to learn matches his enthusiasm for horses and everything about them. And Chris is no spring chicken. He's been at this game for some time, so he has a few years wisdom under his belt.

Chris called me early in the summer about a horse that he wanted to help conquer some challenging issues. Apparently, his horse, Leroy, just had a hard time really letting down, trusting and relaxing, especially around loud noises like guns. You see, Chris participated in battlefield re-enactments and wanted to confidently use Leroy. He'd fired some rounds with Leroy in tow, and it just wasn't a pretty sight. Leroy was right on the verge of seriously melting down. A patient man, Chris wasn't in a hurry, so it was well into fall before our schedules coincided and he was able to bring Leroy to Windrider Ranch.

Chris arrived early afternoon on a warm day. He was exactly two minutes late. Now, leaving Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and driving a stock trailer over Teton Pass, then negotiating the winding roads in central eastern Idaho up to my place, well, it's a schlep and a half.

"You're two minutes late, Chris," I chided with a smile. As we shook hands firmly he let me know he'd have arrived at least fifteen minutes earlier had he not encountered road construction. I immediately took a liking to this medium sized, truly western man. From his dress to his demeanor, everything about Chris

Pachel reeked of "The West." Sometimes this doesn't work so well for me, especially with macho types, but Chris was different. He had an openness and obvious yen for learning that just jumped out of him. His calm son, Brett, had accompanied him on this adventure. It felt like a good team to me as we moved to the rear to unload the infamous Leroy.

Leroy the Magnificent!

As I was preparing my gear for a lay-down session, out from the trailer emerged a magnificent specimen of horseflesh. Leroy was huge! Not so much by height, just by presence. He was part draft with huge bone and feet, and the coloring sometime associated with native American horses, almost indescribable. A medium gray/brown with splashes of white and black and even red, and a big, white, paint-horse marking on his belly, he was truly a sight to behold. His full floating mane and tail were the icing on the cake. But even more impressive was his movement. He seemed to move, as so many drafts do, in slow motion. He glided and drifted and covered the ground with amazing grace. And he had a friendly and curious eye with a tinge of uncertainty. That uncertainty was my challenge.

"How old is he?" I asked Chris. "And remind me a bit about his history. I just don't quite remember what you told me when we first talked."

"He's seven and I've had him three years. He was really freaked when I got him. He'd been in a dude string and obviously abused. They told me that after about four miles straight uphill, he'd settle down a bit. He's not a mean horse, Frank. He just can't completely relax. So, it's pretty hard for me to do the same. Ya know?"

"If you're not riding in confidence, you're riding in fear and horses know exactly where you are." I added my two cents, "My goal is to find the hole or holes in a horse's understanding and fix them; then I can ride confidently. It's kind of like a puzzle to me, and that's the challenge. I can't dominate. I'm not that big or strong. And I like to think I'm above that attitude. I want to finesse it and use my mind to help him overcome his stuff. It's a searching

process. So, I'll get to work and see what I can find inside old Leroy's tangle."

"Do you guys know much about my work," I asked.

"Not really," Chris said. "I watched part of your demonstration in Jackson in '97. In fact, I helped set up the roundpen with Virgil Bailey. We're pretty good friends, and he and Kathy suggested I get with you for help."

My Wild Ride to Notoriety

I flashed back on a fundraiser I'd done in Jackson Hole six years earlier. What a show I'd put on, if I do say so. I started a two-year-old quarter horse filly, worked with a sketched out eighteen-year-old Morgan with foot-handling issues, and then took on a mustang. This last was a wild one that had hardly been touched and was a handful; but I rode that horse as well, if only for a short distance. It was only my third demonstration raising funds for handicapped riding programs, but I was pretty tuned up and confident at the time. Articles appeared in both local papers. In fact, I shared the front page with a fella named Al Gore. I got the big picture and article. His picture was somewhere on the back pages. A columnist named Skip Sheffield had been visiting from Florida. He did a piece for his home paper, the Boca Raton Gazette that the Associated Press had grabbed and suddenly everyone in the country was reading about my day with three horses in Jackson.

At the end of the riding clinic several days later I'd asked the participants for suggestions. Kathy Brody, one of the organizers and Virgil's better half said, "You need to break it down into steps—an ABC so people can get it."

I'd taken her suggestion to heart and within a couple weeks outlined the exact exercises I did to gentle horses. From that humble beginning, my world burst open as horsemen and women empowered themselves and their horses with this logical set of exercises that *Western Horseman* magazine later published in a three-part series by equine journalist Karen Boush. My whole horse career flashed right before my eyes as I reminisced on that summer day some years ago.

I came back to the present and to Chris and Brett. "Let me give you a quick rendition of my deal with horses," I said. "I got busted up about fifteen years ago and didn't much like it. So, I promised myself not to ride dicey horses or unridden ones without a ground system in place that would promote my well-being. So, I religiously work through this set of exercises with every single horse, every single time. I'm even talking about foot handling or vaccinating or trailer loading. If I do these exercises, then the horses are ready for whatever I throw at them. It's amazing even to me how well it works." I had their full attention.

"The lay-down session is pretty serious stuff. So, I want Leroy to feel real good about me at the front end. That way we'll probably get there a lot quicker and with less stress. My goal is to stress your horse as little as possible. But this is a heavy deal so he will be somewhat stressed no matter what. I really kind of hate having to do this, but realize in the long run, it's best for the horse. Tom Dorrance said so wisely a long time ago, 'The long way is the short way.' Those two brothers, Tom and Bill, changed the whole world for horses and people." I caught a glimmer in Chris's eye. "You've read their works?" I asked.

"Sure have. Read Tom's book, *True Unity*, years ago. And Bill and Leslie Desmond's *True Horsemanship Through Feel* was a mammoth effort. A true masterpiece. I'm crazy for all this stuff. In fact, here's something you might like to see." Chris handed me a tiny old hardback by John Rarey.

"Oh my God, where did you get this? I don't believe it!" I gasped as I looked at this, another masterpiece itself.

"I collect all kinds of horse books. Aren't too many who even know about Rarey," Chris said. "I'm glad you can appreciate it. I told ya. I'm reeeeeal into horses and everything horsey. It's my life. I crack backs to support my horse habit. You know, Frank, I've probably bought and sold over one hundred and fifty horses!"

"Wow. You are a nut case," I laughed. "Man, I just cannot believe you found this book. Thirty cents! Look at that. That's what it cost back in the 1800s. Unbelievable." Shaking my head, I handed the treasure back to Chris and turned to the inestimable Leroy.

John Rarey, one of the greatest horsemen/whisperers of all time

I'd read about John Rarey in preparation for a speech I'd done at a Michigan State Veterinary conference years earlier. Rarey and I had a lot in common. We both grew up in Ohio and thrived on the challenge of difficult horses. Rarey literally took on horses that had killed people and turned them around fast, real fast. He traveled the world showcasing his talents and wowed crowds unfailingly. And he was young when he did this; I believe he was in his thirties when he did most of his road shows. To those in the know, Rarey is regarded as one of the true icons of this historic genre that is now re-emerging, now being popularly called horse whispering. But while there are charlatans now, just as there were then, he was the absolute genuine article, the real deal. His name, along with Xenophon, Alexander the Great, Daniel Sullivan, and the Dorrances, will always be in the history books. I remain in awe of the fact that I truly understand these men's affinity for the horse. We feel what the horse feels. We ache for their anguish. We hate the abusers and do our best to show the lost horses their way home, back to being okay with themselves and with the humans.

Back to Leroy

Leroy was animatedly inspecting the roundpen, along with its smells and boundaries. He seemed happy to stretch his legs and unwind in the shade of the lodge pole trees that surrounded the pen. I walked over to him and offered a hand. He took a short sniff then tried to resume his wanderings. But I blocked his exit, laid a hand on his neck, and we "shook hands." I stroked his face and neck and ears and then rubbed his eyes. He leaned into me in appreciation. "We're gonna get along just fine, Leroy. Here to help you, old boy," I cooed as I tried to make a good first impression. Then, beginning our journey into the deepest part of his soul, I took my soft rope halter with the twelve-foot yacht rope lead and slipped it on the willing horse.

We moved to the center of the forty-foot roundpen and had the big get-acquainted session that I call *bonding*. It's the first and perhaps most important step in my sequence of exercises; it puts

the horse almost immediately at ease and sets the stage for a fruitful session. And so it was—me 'n' Leroy getting to know each other.

He melted into my attentions and almost immediately trusted me to manipulate him in any way I chose. His big mouth worked in a sign of relaxation and understanding. His tail wasn't clamped down, but soft and pliable. For his size he had amazing agility. The exercise I call *Ballet on the Ground* is a turn on the forehand followed by a turn on the haunches. Once he understood my directions, he performed it like a well-practiced dancer.

"This guy's quite an athlete. You see how well he uses himself?" I noted to my two attentive observers, explaining the exercise. "This connects the brain to the feet, helps the horse get focused, forces his attention and demands his complete involvement. Fabulous exercise. Do this one before your rides and your horses start off in a real good place. So instead of heading Leroy uphill for a half hour and burning off that valuable energy, you have a sane horse ready for a pleasant day of riding."

"You need to teach us that one," Chris said. "I really like that. You look like you're doing Tai Chi with the horse. It's so graceful—the two of you."

"Yes, you do need to learn this one. Both of you. You will not believe how well this puts you and the horse in sync," I replied.

After Leroy accepted my tossing the twelve-foot yacht rope lead over his head and then his body, I then moved on to a more difficult challenge, a loud plastic bag on my extendable wand. Leroy was able to handle it well without moving, but I had something else in mind.

"I want him to be able to move *rationally* around me as I wave and touch him with it. That is the true test of his cool," I informed Chris and Brett. "This is something I do a little differently than most trainers. Most want the horse to stand perfectly still. But my thinking is—how much standing still do we really do when riding? Aren't we moving most of the time? And if your slicker gets loose or the wind whips a bag by, is your horse going to blow? This exercise really helps horses prepare for staying cool under pressure and is one of the

best of my series of confidence building exercises. It's all part of the desensitizing process that in my mind is a huge and extremely important hurdle for most horses."

"That is a little different twist on 'sacking out,' isn't it?" asked Chris.

I nodded. "It's a part of the puzzle that so many miss. Sure, I want a horse to stand still when confronted with challenges. But to me it's far more important to stay cool while moving, *Rational* movement is the key," I added.

This was not easy for Leroy and definitely new thinking. He shot around me and stopped abruptly as the flag waved around him and touched his back. I eased off a bit and talked calmly in soothing tones. I clucked him forward with the flag resting on his back and just allowed him to carry it. Once he handled that I got progressively more aggressive with the bag until he was beginning to accept it calmly while moving. Then we quit and I allowed it to soak in. He lowered his head and licked his lips as if to say, "Okay. Took a minute but now I get it. You're not trying to hurt me."

Show Time

With Leroy accepting my version of desensitizing, the fifth step in my program, it was time to proceed to the lay-down session. Leroy stood patiently as I secured a hobble on each foot and a surcingle around his girth area. Then we took a little walk around the pen. At first, he comically lifted his front feet high in the air as we walked around the pen, but then he settled into it.

"Time for his first real test. I always start with one leg up. If he can handle that, then we go to the other side. When he can walk around a little on three legs and stay cool, then he's ready to lay down with the running W." I lifted his leg up and attached a two-ended clip to the D-ring on the surcingle and to the hobble, then moved back quickly.

Leroy just stood there quietly like the big quiet draft that was part of him.

"Okay, Leroy, gotta move now. Boy. Doesn't do any good if he doesn't take some steps. His attitude will help give us an idea of

how he'll accept the laying down. Does he lie down on his own much, Chris?" I asked.

"Hardly ever. Nothing like my other horses who will just about throw down anywhere," Chris answered.

"Hmmm. That usually does indicate some uptightness," I said.

With some urging from behind, Leroy leapt forward a couple of steps, then I led him a few steps. He performed just okay, but I didn't make a big issue of it. He was a huge horse, and this may have been quite difficult because of his size. Smaller, more nimble horses will move around the pen as thought nothing bothers them, and that is what I prefer—that is, as long as it is sane, rational movement. But Leroy tried hard and stayed cool, so we moved on.

The Moment of Truth

With the other front leg in the air Leroy moved about the same—he was a bit hesitant, but by no means melting down. I loved him up and walked him around until he was relaxed, then I ran the smooth rope through the surcingle, down through the hobble ring and back up and down until there was the distinct W.

"Okay, Chris," I instructed. "I want you to lead Leroy at a fast walk around the edge of the pen, then turn toward the middle and be prepared to get away from him… fast. No telling how he'll handle this," I cautioned.

So off we went, the three of us, Leroy high stepping right along with me in the middle of the roundpen. When Chris had Leroy in just the right position, I pulled hard on the rope that would ease him onto his knees. But as strong as Leroy was, he balked when he felt the pressure and only one leg came up.

"Let's try it again," I said.

Again, we took the circle at a good pace and, with Chris in front and me behind, this time we really had him moving along at the perfect momentum to succeed. And this time we did. Leroy went to his knees as Chris scurried out of the way and I backed off. Leroy looked around with a noticeable quiver in his mouth and a lot of white in his eyes.

"Eeeeeeeeasy, boy," I cooed repeatedly. But he was not pleased about this odd set of circumstances and hopped forward on his

knees at least a dozen times before extending his neck while breathing hard and then hopping some more. This went on for an agonizingly long time until he finally heaved over onto his side.

"Good. This is what we need. Now we'll just let him settle for a bit," I told my assistants.

Leroy was breathing pretty hard and sweating in his chest area—all normal. After a few minutes I lowered my stature and began to ease in while talking in a reassuring manner. But this pushed him over the edge. His eyes widened, showing too much white, and his upper back leg stiffened and up he came abruptly onto his knees and again hopped around for a full minute before tiring and choosing to lie down on his side. Again, I waited, but this time sent in someone he knew better than me.

Chris got on all fours and crept in with a voice of constant soft assurance. He was able to reach Leroy and stroke his face and neck, and Leroy seemed to settle a bit. But the moment we turned up the heat by moving in the background or making any noise, he was back up, scrambling around with way too much white in his eyes. This went on for some time. Up and down, over and over, and I was getting worried.

Experience = Knowledge = Knowingness

I'd learned this technique for laying a horse down almost ten years earlier from a very accomplished trainer from Utah when we'd done a whole two days of laying down a number of difficult horses. Since that time, I'd done the same to dozens of horses and had some amazing turn-arounds. In not one instance had the horse not improved, and most quiet dramatically. Some horses required multiple sessions while others seemed to benefit from one good session.

Understanding that we had one day to get as much done as possible, I took a deep breath. "This is unique. In fact, I've never seen one fight this hard. He's okay. He's not overheated or hurting himself in any way. He just can't seem to let down and relax about it. My gut says we should just give him some more time and less stress when he's down and see if he'll relax. It's such a fine line how far to push. And every single horse reacts differently. He's

definitely got some serious foundational cracks that he's having to face and just can't. I think if we stay with it, he'll make it."

"Frank," said a patient and determined Chris, "I completely trust your judgment."

And so, it was. The quarter hours turned into half hours, and we gained ground slowly and then lost ground abruptly with Leroy back on his knees or even at times all the way up. But we didn't quit on Leroy. Every time he was down and beginning to accept stimuli he got better and better, and more relaxed, making very slow but sure progress.

Getting a laid-down horse to let down is like a three-ring circus. One person is loving on the horse as the other walks within his vision and the third rattles the gate lightly. We were all sensitive to Leroy's reactions and the others understood that my word would stop everything. Slowly we gained ground until something clicked in the big horse's psyche and he seemed to progress past a huge threshold.

"Acceptance" would be a good word here. Finally, the progressively louder rattling of the gate didn't bother him. Finally, he accepted the walking around in front of him, finally he progressed to handling my stepping across his neck from each direction. And finally, Leroy kept his cool. His eyes softened and the white almost totally disappeared. His tail relaxed, and his back legs rested quietly on the ground. He sighed deeply several times as Brett stroked him lovingly. And now I felt it was time for the real test, the sharp report from a pistol.

Leroy's Final Test

I instructed Chris to walk a good distance away behind his trailer. I raised my hand to signal, and he fired a single blank. Leroy flinched noticeably and straightened his upper back leg, but Brett calmed him right back down. Again, Chris fired and again Leroy flinched, but not quite as much. We were all elated to observe Leroy accepting the shots without flipping out. Gradually the shots became closer in repetition and proximity until Chris was in the roundpen, firing three or four shots in a row only several yards from where Leroy was stretched out on the ground.

I removed the hobbles and surcingle and encouraged Leroy to get up. By now he was so relaxed he would have preferred to stay down, which is quite common for the tough ones. They finally break through the heavy barrier and completely let down as if to say, "Nothing can hurt me because there's nothing to fear. Now that I've learned how relaxed I can be, well, I believe I'll just hang here for a while longer." And that is exactly why we work this process with the extremely difficult cases just like Leroy.

When Leroy did stand up, we lavished him with praise and stroking. He had indeed become the most important, brilliant, calm horse in the whole world or at least that's what we wanted him to believe. And he did. His big drafty eyes were calm and showing very little white. He was alert but had mellowed noticeably as he licked his big lips and let out a long sigh of relief.

With Brett at the end of the 12' slack lead, Chris fired off a series of shots closer than ever before. Leroy noticed but had no inclination to pull back or freak out. Then Chris took the end of the lead and fired another series with the last of his blanks. He watched Leroy closely as he fired a mere twelve feet from his horse. Leroy continued to stand quietly as Chris walked in and praised him with genuine gusto; then we all followed suit. Chris was elated.

"What do you think, Chris? Have we achieved what you'd hoped for?"

"This last round is exactly what I was after. If Leroy can stand quietly as shots are fired, we have a good chance of doing the re-enactments."

Brett took Leroy for a good walk to let him unwind and work out the kinks as Chris and I tidied up. The book Chris had shown me earlier by John Rarey was just where he'd left it, sitting on a post at the edge of the roundpen. I handed it to Chris saying, "Need to take good care of this classic."

"No, Frank. That's for you. I want you to have it."

I couldn't believe it. "How will you ever find another one?"

"Oh, I'm on the lookout all the time for such rare works," he said with a smile. "And I find them. I've got a huge library. Don't worry about it. Just enjoy the book."

By now Brett was back with Leroy the Magnificent, and everyone was ready for the trip home. I gave Leroy a good eye rub as I bid him a hearty farewell. He leaned hard into me, then pulled back and took a long look as if to say, "Thanks for the help. I needed it."



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Fishing for Mustangs

"A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" – William Shakespeare, Richard III, Act V

John Sharp has forgotten more about horses than most of us will ever know. He's been at it for about eighty years and in the last two of those years has taught me the art of using the bamboo pole to make first contact in the gentling of mustangs.

I met John in '97. I was doing a benefit demonstration for a handicapped riding program in north Denver when he asked the question, "How would you catch a difficult horse in the roundpen?"

"I'd find a good cowboy who can rope and let him do it. I can take it from there," I replied with a smile.

He liked that answer—it seemed he saw someone who knew his limitations and didn't pretend to be something he wasn't. Later, after the show, he asked me to work with a difficult mustang that was at the Horse Protection League. We arranged to meet a couple of days later at the end of a clinic I was doing. Sure enough, he was there with the two-year-old in a stock trailer.

"I can get a rope on him if you'd like," he offered.

We only had a big indoor arena to work in and no confined area, so that would have to do. Out came a 12' bamboo pole and a length of cotton rope with a loop on the end. "Now we'll do a little fishing." he informed me as he wrapped the rope around the end of the pole and left about three feet dangling. He eased the pole over the horse's back, draping the rope on the other side, and left it hanging there. Then he proceeded to get the

loop with the pole and pull it back to himself. With a loop around the horse's neck, he then formed another loop, which ended up over the horse's nose. "There. Now you can get some work done and have some control," he said, smiling. My mouth was probably so wide open it was catching flies.

We opened the door of the stock trailer and out rushed the mustang. I grabbed the end of the rope and off we went all over that arena. Eventually I was able to get the horse circling and get a hand on him, and then it was just a matter of time. John watched very closely and, when I had the horse in hand and quieted down, he came over.

"I like the way you work," he said. "It's quite similar to the way I do it—that is, once you can touch the horse. Here's a little book I wrote a few years back that might come in handy when you need some special knots. I hope we get a chance to work together some day. You're not a cowboy, but a good hand just the same."

We stayed in touch with a few letters and phone calls. He invited me to one of his clinics, which I could not attend, although I really wanted to be there but had a prior commitment. Then I was invited to participate in the first Wild Horse Workshop in Antioch, CA, in late September of '98. A local mustang club organized it in conjunction with the B.L.M. who managed the wild horses in the area. I agreed to come, but insisted that John Sharp be invited as well, knowing his wealth of knowledge would greatly benefit everyone. He'd told me a couple of stories of using the bamboo pole to make initial contact, but I wanted to see it work and figured there was a lot to learn for all of us.

Truer words have never been spoken. John Sharp stole the show with his technique. By the time the week was over I was a complete convert. I was predictably gentling wild horses in 1-2 hours, practically turning them into puppy dogs with their heads hanging in my arms and just loving being with the human. There is absolutely no violence or abuse, but instead, it's an extremely sensible solution to gentling these creatures in the most humane method imaginable and doing it quickly by comparison to conventional techniques. Furthermore, almost anyone can do this,

and most people have the simple requirements right in their backyard.

Bamboo Pole on Withers

A 24' square pen is ideal with 6' walls and two extra panels attached in one corner and hinged in the middle. That panel will remain closed until needed. It seems best to allow the horse to settle for a while before entering the pen, and the length of time completely depends on the temperament of the horse. Ten minutes would be a good place to start. The handler then enters the pen, staying in the middle and allowing the horse to accept his presence by avoiding direct eye contact and maintaining a non-threatening posture.

Using a 12' bamboo pole allows the handler to reach the horse at any time. Begin by allowing the horse to see the pole in front, then over his head, then behind, moving the pole slowly, but with purpose. Some horses will rush right through the pole, bumping it and ignoring it. It may be necessary to tap the horse on the nose to gain the respect for the pole. What you're after is the horse stopping in a corner and settling. Using body language and keeping the pole in front of the horse, this is usually accomplished inside ten minutes or so.

Next, place the pole on the horse's withers, pressing down firmly. Again, avoid eye contact and assume a non-threatening posture. This is a soothing spot for all horses. This is where they nuzzle each other, so we are using nature's gift to help them settle. Some horses will tear around the pen when they feel the pole touch them. Try to maintain firm contact even as they move. When the horse seems settled, begin sawing back and forth ("fiddling," as John says) using probably 3 lbs. of pressure. Work up the neck along the mane, then down the back to the dock of the tail. Watch closely for what feels good and what bothers the horse. Drift into the problem areas for a moment, then leave and go back to the familiar. When the horse does get bothered or leaves, go back to the firm pressing in the wither area to settle and reassure.

From here it's a matter of exploring out farther and farther as the horse gains confidence. Using the end of the pole to scratch the

back, rump, and neck areas can gain the horse's confidence fast since it feels good, just like rubbing on a fence or bush, but the handler is doing it for the horse. As the confidence grows, work the pole under the neck, then down the chest and the front legs. It's the same with the back legs. Run the pole back and forth on the rump, then down the back legs, watching closely as some will kick violently. In that case, stay high, but stay with it until it's not a problem, inching into the difficult areas a little at a time. The most difficult area seems to be in the girth, as it's never been touched. Work the end of the pole from the withers down the side maintaining contact, if possible, then place the pole firmly in the girth area pushing up with firm pressure and hold.

Many horses will try to escape but try to keep the pole in place even if the horse moves.

It's basically the same everywhere. You are teaching the horse to deal with the touching and maybe even to like it. And they all seem to get there eventually. It's a game of finesse, just as it is in all aspects of horsemanship. Before long the horse is accepting touch everywhere and actually enjoying it in some places immensely. Scratching the rump and saddle areas vigorously with the end of the pole has worked consistently for me.

Now, depending on the horse's level of comfort, you will be easing in slowly closer and closer, all the time working your way up the pole. Before long the horse will take a sniff of the pole or an elbow or even your face. Just allow it to happen and maybe throw in some soothing words like "eeeeeeeeeasy . . . eeeeeeeeeeeasy." When you're close enough, replace the pole with your hand, touching initially with the *back* of the hand in the shoulder, neck, and wither area. When the hand is working well and the horse is accepting the closeness, ease the pole to the ground or outside the pen with a minimum of disturbance, then begin rubbing and scratching all over, but bearing in mind that the wither area is the comfort zone, all the while talking soothingly and reassuringly. I prefer to keep one hand in the shoulder, neck, wither area and explore with the other drifting into new areas then back to the familiar.

Every horse is unique and will accept different and varying touch. I call this process "search touching." Some horses will not be comfortable with the handler being that close or even allow touching. The point is to be able to touch the horse pretty much everywhere with the pole before getting in close and using the hand. Some will move along fast and accept almost everything while others will be very wary. In either scenario, once the pole has been everywhere, and the hands where they can, it's time for the chute.

Time for the Chute

Back off and open the chute wide enough for the horse to enter easily. Drive the horse in, then close it quickly and rope off securely. I prefer to have the panels open enough to allow the horse enough room to get turned. The horse should be ready for this step and not freak out. Have a sharp knife nearby to cut the rope if you must—even at this point pretty wild things can happen. Use lots of soothing words all the time. Again, allow the horse to settle and if agitated, use the pole to help relax him while you're easing in closer and closer. Providing the horse with a flake of hay is advisable during this work in the chute. A horse that is eating is a relaxed animal—period. Once the horse seems settled, move to the shoulder area and begin stroking, again maintaining contact in that area while exploring the rest of the horse's body. From here it's a matter of using good judgment as the horse becomes comfortable. Ease the chute closed to the point of almost touching the horse and secure the end. A competent assistant can begin on the other side, though be very careful not to overload the horse with stimuli. At the workshops we would eventually have four to six people stroking the horse everywhere. But this has to be gauged and is completely dependent on the horse's temperament. When the horse is accepting and even enjoying the touch, it's time to do John's rope treatment process.

John Sharp's Rope Treatment

Using a length of 1" soft cotton rope, begin sawing the rope around the horse's neck, gently running it up and down the neck

on both sides. Experiment with the pressure, but a fair amount seems to settle the horse and get them used to touch and the feel of the rope. A handler on each side can work together in this process to expose the legs, girth, belly, and flanks to the cotton rope as it touches the horse's body everywhere. Again, use caution in not moving too fast or creating too much pressure. Most horses melt right into this process. This could easily take a half hour and should not be rushed but gauged to the horse.

When the horse accepts this, it's time to slip on the soft rope halter with a 12' lead. The handler will climb up on the panel above the horse, being certain the horse sees him above with each eye—in other words, be sure as you are overhead that the horse sees you out of the left eye, then the right by leaning over and tilting the head to the right. This will prepare the horse for riding later. Now slip the halter over the nose and secure it on the left side. Again, giving the horse adequate reassurance and some time to settle is always a good idea.

If the horse is doing well in the chute, some facial exploration is a good idea as well. Stroking under the chin, rubbing the eyes, ears, and getting in the corner of the mouth are all big steps if the timing is right. Remember the horse can explode at any time, so use great caution in the placement of hands through the metal panel.

Reading the Animal

Keenly observing how the horse is progressing and accepting all the touching and various stimuli is extremely important in this whole process. Key indicators of acceptance and relaxation are:

- A lowered head which is encouraged by access to feed
- Working mouth and lip licking
- Relaxed tail
- Rational movements. If the horse does need to move, is it calm or verging on explosive?
- Relaxed state of breathing
- Absence of sweat. Profuse sweating usually indicates nervousness

Teaching Leading and Backing with the Horse in the Chute

With the halter on I begin by simply asking with constant downward pressure for the horse to drop his head. I typically run the lead under the bottom rung on the panel and apply 5-10 lbs. pressure upward which pulls downward on the horse's head. This places direct downward pressure on the horse's poll and just above the nose. Most horses will struggle with this as they look for relief from that downward pressure. The instant the horse drops his head *one iota*, it's a complete release and time for the horse to digest the most important lesson of all, the concept of pressure and release.

Give the horse a full minute to digest this. Usually, another half dozen repetitions or so and the yielding to pressure lesson is clearly understood. During this whole chute process, it's critical to maintain an unthreatening stature and soft eyes.

Then it's time to teach leading. I typically run the lead around one of the uprights on the panel to create a horizontal connection to the horse's head. I don't want it too high or low, but probably about wither high. The help of an assistant to encourage from behind can speed up the leading process. Again, I'd apply constant pressure that would build gradually to approximately 5-10 lbs. The moment the horse makes any attempt to move forward, there is a complete release and ample time to digest what just took place. Thirty seconds would be a good rule of thumb. Then I would apply forward pressure again and just wait for the give. If the horse hangs up, have your assistant create agitation from the rear or tap the rump lightly until the horse comes forward. When the horse is well forward in the chute, then it's time to ask him to back. Grasping the halter just under the chin, create a backward sawing motion. The horse will predictably move backward away from that pressure. RELEASE IMMEDIATELY.

Usually with good timing the horse will be leading, backing, dropping his head, and even yielding his head laterally within a short time. Remember to reward for the smallest try, the slightest change. This isn't about perfect leading; it's about an understanding. And this understanding of yielding to pressure is

the basis for all horse training! If this is not accomplished in the chute, it will be a much larger hurdle in the pen.

From here it's a matter of opening the chute and allowing the horse to move with the lead dragging behind for a few minutes. When the timing feels right, pick up the lead and teach the most basic of all steps in the training of horses, *take and give*, which was already initiated in the chute. If the horse is hanging up and refusing to move forward, have a helper drive the horse from behind. This is the good guy/bad guy game. If the horse is leading well, he's with the good guy. If he isn't, then the bad guy will encourage forward movement with the flick of a plastic bag on the end of a wand from behind the horse. Pretty quick the horse learns it's easier to lead and stay with the good guy. The bad guy leaves the square pen when the horse is leading reasonably well.

I then introduce the horse to the logical sequence of exercises as outlined in my ***7-Step Safety System***. I use these exercises on all horses regardless of age or issue; I begin by teaching the horses to yield to pressure and next, to accept a variety of challenging stimuli, a process which I call *desensitizing*. After that, I teach the horse to perform a simple dance that I call *ballet on the ground*. When the horse understands this process, then it's time for the saddle, and when given the invitation by the horse, the rider.

I have observed and personally worked a wide variety of techniques in the gentling of wild horses. Nothing in my experience comes close to this bamboo pole process followed by the chute and rope treatment, then teaching the horse to yield to pressure. We all have John Sharp to thank for sharing his vast knowledge that is rapidly revolutionizing the way mustangs are gentled and which will be used for generations to come.

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My ***7-Step Safety System*** is well explained in my foundation video, "Discover the Horse You Never Knew." It is exactly where I am headed after working the above process with every single mustang or with any horse for that matter. And we now offer "Pole Gentling the Wild Horse" in our visual library. This is actual footage that captures the transformation of a horse that is literally throwing himself into the side of the square pen to finally standing

quietly tied to that same pen after going through this amazing process.

7-Steps to Gentling Wild Horses

1. Touch the horse all over with the pole, returning to the withers as necessary to help settle the horse. Use soft eyes and a relaxed, non-threatening stature.
2. Ease up the pole until able to make hand contact in the wither/neck area. Use the back of the hand for first contact. Don't push it and do be careful. This is a wild horse!
3. Drive the horse into the chute and allow to settle. Provide hay to help horse relax. An eating/masticating horse is a relaxed horse.
4. Beginning with the withers, make firm hand contact. Add handlers who begin exploring the horse's body. Don't overload the horse with stimuli. Back off when necessary and allow the horse to settle. Soft eyes and stature for all handlers.
5. Perform rope treatment all over the horse, beginning with the neck.
6. With the halter on, teach the horse *take and give* in the chute. Get the head to drop first, then teach leading, then backing. The horse learns from the release of pressure, not the application of it.
7. Open the chute and drive the horse out, allowing him to drag the lead rope. Teach the horse to lead around the 24' square pen. Play the good guy/bad guy game to help the horse when he hangs up. From that point, teach the horse ***Frank Bell's 7-Step Safety System***.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Bubba Comes Full Circle

"Riding: The art of keeping a horse between you and the ground." – Author Unknown

I first heard about Bubba's plight in the middle of the summer. This four-year-old quarter horse had very serious melt-down issues. In fact, the situation was so serious that the previous owner's husband had insisted she dispose of the horse. His wife's broken arm required a plate and a long recovery, so this gentleman had no patience for this seemingly disturbed horse. As it turned out, a good friend and neighbor took the horse. While this did seem like a quick solution, Nancy Lee was apparently in way over her head.

We spoke several times on the phone and after a series of emails, Nancy and Julia Kolva, Bubba's original owner, arrived at my ranch in eastern Idaho in early October, having driven all the way from the Olympic Peninsula at the extreme western edge of Washington State. Where I live in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem, October is a crap shoot. There can be several feet of snow on the ground, or it can be classic Indian summer weather, or anything in between. The weather forecast wasn't good, calling for rain. But these ladies were not to be dissuaded. These were two women on a mission—to find help for the very troubled Bubba.

I returned from running errands to find my visitors unloading the young blue roan of about fifteen hands. It was a pleasant afternoon, but expecting the anticipated deteriorating weather, I hurriedly gathered my gear and introduced myself to this challenging horse.

Bubba the Paradox

Bubba was blanketed and waiting at the edge of my roundpen when I walked over to meet him. He had a curious and friendly eye and immediately accepted my initial stoking. I removed the blanket and began my groundwork with bonding, simply giving to the animal. Bubba delighted in my touch until I stroked his girth. Suddenly he flinched in that area and braced up ramrod rigid. His head shot into the air and white filled his eyes as he verged at the edge of losing it.

"Wow. He sure is touchy in there," I exclaimed, concerned as I stroked his neck and allowed Bubba to settle.

"You haven't seen anything yet. He'll turn into a raging bucking horse when saddled," supplied the equally concerned Nancy. "It is scary and that is where the other trainers always quit. Nobody will work with him in our area."

"I've got a few procedures to prepare him for saddling that'll push his buttons as well," I answered.

I fished through my tack bag for my lariat, which I looped around his girth and ran the end up between his front legs through his halter, then tightened up, pulling forward. With a soft cluck and constant pressure, Bubba took a very tentative and jerky step forward and was immediately rewarded with the release and serious praise as I stroked his neck and provided a couple affirmative *atta boys*. Within a few minutes he was responding well to the slightest pressure and moving forward as his girth was simultaneously being desensitized. That accomplished, I unraveled the lariat and moved it back toward his flanks.

And that is when he came seriously unglued, exploding without warning into a raving maniac, wildly kicking out and frantically tearing around the roundpen. It was downright scary to see this seemingly rational horse turn into an absolute, out-of-control, highly dangerous horse. I backed off on the pressure, and he came down a few notches, but was still clearly very uptight.

"Well, I've sure found the first thing that really bothers him. That's completely irrational, unless there is pain involved here," I observed as both women shook their heads knowingly.

"He just seems about half crazy at times and you never know when. Heck, I saddled him up a couple weeks ago and the very moment I lifted my foot toward the stirrup, he just went off bucking and squealing like a complete nutcase," Nancy said, looking at the ground in despair.

"At least now I can see what you're dealing with," I admitted as I tightened up again on the lariat. "Man, oh man, that is really something," I said as Bubba immediately melted down alarmingly, turning into this alter-ego. I eased off, but not all the way as I wanted to challenge him, but not so far that he couldn't process it. Around and around, he went, kicking out both hind legs with a resounding snap that send shivers down my spine. I could see how dangerous and irrational this horse could suddenly become, and it was terrifying to witness.

"You've had him checked for pain, right?" I asked, probing for answers that might explain Bubba's problem.

"I've had several vets and a good chiropractor look him over," Nancy said. "And our friend Marie is an equine massage therapist. She really took time to see if she could find anything and couldn't. He's really a case, isn't he?" Clearly, Nancy was seriously worried.

"You just can't blame him if he's really in pain and I'm guessing that is what is going on. Let me allow him to chill out and then I'll check his back," I suggested as I eased off on the lariat.

As sweat dripped from between his legs and his heavy breathing subsided, I ran my index finger deeply down his back on either side of his spine. But that wasn't it or I didn't find it. I ran my hands back to his flanks where the rope had been and he flinched noticeably. I worked that area with my open hand and built from slapping his flanks very lightly to quite firmly as he tolerated progressively more and more; then I quit and asked him to lower his head, and I worked inside his mouth and over his tongue with my index finger. With a big sigh he noticeably let down and lowered his head as his eyes softened.

"Just started to chill out a bit," I supplied while reading his demeanor.

"I'm betting this time he'll be a bit more rational."

Sure, enough when I tightened up on the lariat this time and gave him a soft kiss, instead of freaking out, he took a step forward. I rewarded with a release and some deep stroking. Using this process, within a few minutes he was leading forward with the slightest encouragement around his flanks, which had been his nemesis only minutes earlier. Progress.

Bring on the Saddle

I allowed Bubba to chill out and take a good long drink of cool water from my trough as I prepared Nancy's heavy stock saddle. He drank deeply which was a good sign after his long trip east.

"This is where it falls apart, Frank, so be careful. Please be careful," begged Nancy.

"He knows what he's doing, Nancy," Julie assured her calmly.

"I really do try not to take many chances. In fact I'm quite concerned about my health, you know," I assured them both with a disarming smile. I rubbed the heavy saddle blanket all over Bubba's back, then brought it up over his head. I worked it assertively from each side until he could tolerate the blanket actually thrown from a distance onto his back without reacting. After a couple of firm pats with my open hand on the Circle Y saddle, I placed the absurdly heavy old thing on Bubba's back. His head rose.

He took very close notice and knew exactly what was coming as his eyes filled with white. His anticipation was palatable and at this point completely predictable, but I did my best to assure him with constant soothing words and stroking in his neck and wither area. I brought the cinch up firmly with just hand pressure, then eased off and loved him up. Then I repeated that procedure, increasing the pressure until I was pulling upward with everything I had. He handled the gradual tightening well. It made sense to him. I then threaded the latigo and snugged the cinch up but didn't cut him in half by any means. I wanted the cinch secure, but not uncomfortable. Immediately putting a bend into his body, I walked him in a couple fairly tight circles, then wound him down to a stop, instilling my regrouping exercise right from the get-go.

"This has to become 1000% rock solid. He must understand this means stop unequivocally and it might take doing it a hundred times before it becomes rote— 'a conditioned response,' to quote John Lyons," I explained in detail. "This is my life saver. And it will be yours, too, if and when it comes time to ride."

Bubba was doing well; even better than I expected. I was actually beginning to think the worse was over and after slapping the saddle with the lead as he circled me quietly, I wound him back down to a stop and lifted my foot, as if appearing to mount. His head shot sky high and when I put just a wee bit of weight into the stirrup with my left toe, the volcano erupted with vengeance. This horse, that only seconds earlier had been calm and relaxed, was now ripping around the pen, kicking out in the same completely out of control craziness that had prevailed in the first wild go-around. It was beyond belief—I half expected him to crash right through the heavy wooden rails of my pen.

I bolted outside to protect myself and watch the show in sheer wonderment. I had never seen anything quite like this. This was not a disturbed horse acting out. No, this was a completely crazed wild animal on the verge of self-destruction. But then this was why he was here and I had to see it and understand it, and if at all possible, I had to try to help this lost soul. Admittedly at this point I thought he was way too far gone to help, though I did not let on. The three of us stood back and watched as his back legs kicked out into the air with that crisp snapping noise that only such crazed horses exhibit.

"In twenty years of working with the tough ones, I have never seen anything like this," I admitted. "This is simply absolutely nuts behavior. Now I understand why you came this far," I conceded with a strong sense of despair in my voice. At this point I thought this was a completely lost cause, though of course I hadn't stopped hoping for the best.

Eventually Bubba worked through his fit and stopped abruptly. With the slightest encouragement I asked him to move out and again he exploded into his frenzy. By now we could all see that he was expending his quantum energy and it was just a matter of time before he just didn't have any strength left to melt

down anymore. As rationality seemed to seep back into his soul and sheer exhaustion stripped him of his reserves, I walked in and used stroking, head lowering, and soothing words to help him settle. That accomplished, I again raised my foot toward the stirrup and he tensed up immediately. Instead of attempting to place my foot into the stirrup, though, this time I pushed downward with my hand, applying plenty of weight. Bubba handled this calmly, so by now I had isolated at least part of his phobia. We went around several times as I did this exercise on each side; then again, I placed just the slightest weight into the stirrup with my foot. Though he didn't lose it completely, he was clearly right on the verge of yet another serious meltdown. Searching for a good place to leave this session, I ended as he accepted at least a fraction of my weight in the stirrup.

I had to hurry to the airport to pick up a friend/photographer who would attempt to capture this adventure, and I was already behind schedule. I felt like I'd discovered a good part of his issues and left him in a reasonably relaxed state.

Then the Rains Came

The rain started pelting the metal roof of my house in the early hours of the morning. By dawn it was steady and puddles were accumulating. I donned rain gear and my broad rimmed canvas hat and fed my shivering horses as the two horsewomen tended to Bubba.

This predicted weather confined us to the house all… day… long. It was brutal. We all so wanted to get on with it, but that just wasn't nature's plan and so we found other productive ways to fill the time. After a leisurely breakfast the two ladies took in a number of my instructional videos in the comfort of my cozy home. Later we dined well and talked horses and went to bed early, hoping for improved weather. And by golly, Sunday brought an end to rain, and the ground absorbed the bulk of the moisture.

The roundpen was a mess and way too muddy and slippery to saddle the explosive Bubba. I walked him down to the widest part

of my drive and got to work. The Saturday rains had given Bubba time to digest the Friday session and he had improved noticeably. So I didn't waste any time getting the saddle on him. And everything went well as I religiously did my groundwork—that is, until I lifted my leg toward the stirrup. His oversensitive demeanor exploded once again as he anticipated the worst. All of a sudden, he was bucking wildly and I lost my hold on the lead. He did his rodeo performance then bee-lined it to join the safety of my two horses a mere fifty yards away across a fence; there, he settled right down. I walked calmly over, took the lead, and walked back to the center of the drive. We had clean gravel to stand on, insuring good footing. Again, I raised my foot, and he predictably began his meltdown, but this time I was ready.

"Heeeeeeeeeeee," I growled, jerking backward on the lead, driving him aggressively in reverse. Then I stopped and allowed this tough lesson to soak in. He looked at me with wide eyes as if to say, "Well, that sure backfired on me." And it did. And he got the message. This was completely unacceptable behavior. I just wasn't buying into it anymore. I rationalized that he'd learned this bad behavior and needed to run right into the brick wall that I conveniently set-up for him.

I gave Bubba a few minutes to think it all over, then we walked back to the center of the drive, and I proceeded to mount halfway. I had his head tipped decidedly into me as I pulled myself up. He tensed ready to blow, but I talked him through it and dismounted and loved him up. He had to know right from wrong and my job was to make it obvious, abundantly obvious. And I did and he got it.

A half dozen times on each side; I pulled myself halfway up without swinging a leg. He wasn't real happy about all this and was at times right on the very brink of losing it, but I finessed it to the best of my ability. But I was not about to mount him in this dangerous location, nor without a helmet. On top of that I was hungry. So, we left him saddled in the roundpen and gave him ample time to digest the Sunday morning session, then headed in for breakfast while the roundpen dried out.

Almost an hour passed as Bubba chilled and ate some breakfast and we did the same. Then it was showtime. I donned my helmet and without too much fanfare began mounting halfway on each side. It was challenging and he certainly wasn't relaxed, but I persisted until he was handling this halfway mounting to some degree. And I didn't need to have his head cranked in so tightly, which was a good sign. But I admittedly wasn't too excited about mounting him in the roundpen. Even this forty-foot pen was too much space for either of us to really relax, so we moved to Plan B.

Plan B

Earlier in the summer I had constructed a very small pen for the early rides on my wild horse, Owyhee. And it had worked like magic. The horse felt secure in a small area, as did I. The horse couldn't get much of a jump on me and I was able to relax. Figuring this might be the panacea for Bubba, I led him into this ten-foot square enclosure. We did a series of one-rein stops on the ground in each direction until it was rote for both of us, and then I mounted halfway on each side. As I read his demeanor, he seemed to be handling this just fine, so while I mounted only halfway with only my toe in the stirrup, I clucked him into a walk and after a few steps, wound him down to a one-rein stop. The two ladies were watching and reading him as well, watching closely for signs like nervousness or increased white in his eyes.

"He sure looks calm to me, Frank," Nancy observed.

"You just watch very closely and let me know if you see him begin to lose it, okay?" I said.

A half dozen circles in each direction and I swung a leg over his back and found the stirrup on the offside. Maintaining a feel with his head tipped to me on the left, I reached down and stroked his face and assured him with a soothing tone. "Everything's just fine, Bubba. Just fine now," I repeated over and over, not only for Bubba, but for myself too.

Then with his head still tipped to the left I simply asked him to disengage his hind end as I leaned forward to take my weight off the moving part. He complied readily and again received praise.

Then I did the same on the right. This exceedingly simple exercise had worked wonders with my wild one. And it did the same with Bubba. He felt safe and so did I and we were communicating. Something was happening, albeit so simple, but effective. Then we progressed to walking around the pen a short distance and winding down to a one-rein stop in each direction. From there it was figure-8s as we both loosened up more and more.

Nancy was delighted beyond belief. "He looks so calm. I think you're over the hump," she said. "His eye is mellow. He's licking his lips and his head is low. Wow, Bubba. You're making it, boy!" she exclaimed with glee.

"You ready to get on, Nancy?"

She nodded confidently as I relaxed into riding Bubba around the tiny enclosure and loosened up in the saddle.

"Shoulda been a cowboy. Shoulda learned to rope and ride," I crooned away with a huge sense of accomplishment and a smile to accompany that unbelievably satisfied feeling.

I insisted Nancy put on my helmet before mounting up. She adjusted the stirrups and mounted the transformed Bubba who was by now acting like an old, seasoned riding horse. I instructed her to do the same exercises I'd instilled earlier. She followed my directions to a T and within a few minutes was sitting tall and confident. The amazing part of it all was Bubba himself. He was proud. He had overcome his completely irrational nemesis and just seemed to know and revel in it.

I opened the little pen and allowed Nancy to direct Bubba straight into the roundpen, then after ten minutes or so, on into my arena. I watched very closely and barked instructions, instilling the basis for everything I do with horses—the one-rein stop—until it was rock solid for both parties.

"I'll saddle up Lakota and let's go for a trail ride," I suggested. Nancy was completely trusting and unfazed as we rode down my drive, then into the rolling fields that adjoin my place. Bubba was a champ. He did not have one single miss-step or concern. In fact, he was so proud to be carrying his owner that he wanted to speed up and trot to express his exuberance. The four of us had an absolutely delightful ride through field and forest, culminating

back at the same drive we'd calmly walked down only forty-five minutes earlier.

Mid-afternoon, the two horsewomen loaded Bubba and hit the road, mission accomplished.

Reflecting Back on Bubba's Transformation

Every single challenging horse that I encounter leaves me with more knowledge and in some cases a lesson learned. Bubba was a gift because he reaffirmed…

- The value of riding in a very small pen for that first challenging ride. This was the second horse that had been transformed dramatically using this procedure.
- Bubba also needed to be jolted out of his dangerous pattern of melting down irrationally. When I growled at him and backed him aggressively, he did indeed hit the proverbial brick wall. And it worked. Instead of reverting to that flip-out stage automatically, he learned to process instead. This bought us both time to replace that behavior with something positive. Irrational behavior leads to broken bones for horse and human. Rational behavior leads to safety.
- And finally, beginning with very simple maneuvers in the roundpen made us both winners. We were both accomplishing something. We were communicating, yes, in a very basic level, but we were indeed communicating, and that in the end is what it is all about.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Steamer's Tap Dance

First, you must trust in yourself. Then you can also trust in the earth or gravity of a situation…Your discipline becomes delightful rather than being an ordeal or a great demand… Balance comes…from learning to float with the movement of the horse as you ride. Each step is a dance, the rider's dance as well as the dance of the horse. – Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, "Shambala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior"

It was early in the summer when Fred Bertolus first contacted me via e-mail about a trailer-loading problem with a young thoroughbred gelding. Seems the horse would go most of the way into the trailer, and then suddenly explode backwards when Fred attempted to secure the butt bar of the new trailer. I made some suggestions and Fred purchased my video on this exact subject. Yet by summer's end Fred was still exasperated and ready to bring me to California to face this challenge. A strong organizer with a following, Fred had a dozen boarders ready to learn my approach at the end of September.

I arrived in time for a late dinner Friday evening and was in for quite a surprise. A young gentleman named Yannick answered the door and said "Fred" would be right down. Several minutes later Yannick's wife, Frederique, glided down the stairs and introduced herself with a firm handshake and self-effacing smile. We had a wonderful French dinner and talked horses over a fine bottle of Pinot Noir. Though we didn't actively discuss her horse, Steamer, she did mention her "little horse" a time or two.

As it turned out, Fred was a very accomplished rider-trainer who specialized in jumping horses. She and Yannick and their two children had been in the states ten years, and she had developed quite a following at the stable in Los Gatos. I settled into my cozy

guest bedroom for a good night's sleep in anticipation of the pending two-day clinic starting the next morning.

The morning at Bear Creek Stables dawned crisp. I quickly set up my sound system and passed out registration forms to the participants as we indulged in coffee and breakfast. After some warmup ground exercises without horses, I instructed everyone to bring their horses into the arena. One by one the horses arrived, ranging from colorful paints to huge thoroughbreds of all colors and confirmations. I was busy helping to halter one of the horses properly when Fred entered the arena with "little Steamer."

Enter Fred's Steamer

Steamer was every bit of seventeen hands and very well-muscled. He was a light bay with a mischievous look in his eye and the energy of a teenager. He immediately reminded me of a gangly, fifteen-year-old boy about 6'-3" with huge feet that he hadn't grown into. He was quite a specimen of horseflesh, and I easily understood Fred's desire to teach him to jump. If he could get this down, he could probably jump the moon. But concentration and sharp focus were not his strong suit and I knew I had an interesting and quite likely serious challenge on my hands.

The first morning of my clinics is always the same: total immersion in my ***7-Step Safety System***. Developing heightened levels of trust and confidence between horse and human logically leads to the rider becoming the respected director and leader of each duo. From there, problems are addressed as horses learn to accept a plethora of challenging stimuli. This fifth step I call *desensitizing* but think of it as advanced problem solving on the ground. It is a discovery process.

Far too often we avoid what bothers the horse and end up enabling the horse in the process. Before long the horse has us well trained to do and not do exactly what he wants. My philosophy is the exact antithesis of this. By flushing out the horse's phobias, I can dramatically raise the horse's confidence as well as the rider's—that is, if I can help the horse through his issues. Steamer had his share of sticky spots that I was able to help him and Fred work through.

Before lunch I introduced the sixth step, *Ballet on the Ground.* This is an interesting exercise that helps the horse connect brain with feet. The turn on the forehand is followed by the turn on the haunches as the horse rocks back and changes direction. Taking the place of mindless longeing, this exercise generally has horses completely focused within a few minutes and most really do seem to enjoy it.

And I've used the exercise everywhere. I've told the story dozens of times about walking down the very front of the Rocky Mountains after a hike and using ballet to quiet an anxious horse. I had needed to speak with Shannon, one of the Colorado boarders, whose huge Arabian was doing wild circles around her. We simply could not communicate.

"Mind if I take your horse for a couple minutes?" I inquired.

"Please do!" answered the flustered Shannon.

"I've found that if a horse is forced to focus on his feet, pretty quickly that crazy energy becomes directed and a sensible horse emerges," I pointed out as this 15-2 hand horse began to settle. After two or three minutes the Arab was standing quietly as we carried on our discussion.

Back to the clinic. This is not an easy exercise to master at first. In reality, two parties are learning a new dance. And that is exactly why I introduce it before lunch. I simply want to plant the seed and have people and horses thinking about this effective exercise later, away from the arena. From my experience, three to four hours of work a day is about the limit for horses and people in my clinics. Therefore, I focus on problem solving in the heat of the afternoons and seek any and all available shade. I also knew Steamer was on the list, and I just wasn't in a huge hurry to deal with trailer loading him, especially in the hot sun. Problems with foot handling, ears, clippers, bathing, and pullback consumed several hours until the sun receded and the day started to cool.

The Moment of Truth

I'd put off the inevitable for long enough and so I asked Fred to move her trailer and bring on the inestimable Steamer. The crowd anxiously gathered and found shady seating for this highly

anticipated session. But I had some confidence building exercises for Steamer prior to heading to the trailer.

I found an empty outdoor stall with plenty of obstacles in the vicinity. It was absolutely critical, that Steamer fully understand the fourth step in my program, *The Dance Begins.* This is a driving procedure. I wouldn't be leading Steamer into the trailer; I would be driving him in from the rear and he needed to have a very firm grasp of this beforehand.

In and out of the stall Steamer rushed frantically as I drove him forward. I needed it slow. Rational. When he could handle very deliberate walking in and out quietly, I stacked several large blocks of wood for him to step over. With pylons and buckets and hoses scattered all around him, finally Steamer zeroed in on his job and quietly walked in and out of the stall as I drove him from each side. Now it was time to quietly walk over to the trailer and the eager crowd.

I'd instructed Frederique to park the trailer, so the afternoon sun shone right in, making it a bright and inviting place to be—except Steamer didn't think so. The moment he understood my intentions he began to act out and become the hyped-up teenager again. I needed a focused, rational horse so I immediately retreated back to an exercise he now knew well, namely *ballet on the ground*. Back and forth we went as he was forced to use that excess physical mass constructively. Within a few minutes he'd found his sensible side, and we walked up to the ramp and just stood there for a long minute.

What I was seeing was a horse that easily melted down and quickly regressed into a senseless and potentially dangerous giant. This horse was huge and powerful and when he lost it, he went way over the top. My challenge was to keep him from going over that threshold because at that point I would have nothing to work with except a massive hunk of wild horseflesh that could hurt himself and anyone else nearby. I had to walk a very fine tightrope here and keep my own cool. "*Patience and empathy,*" I quietly reminded myself.

I took the plastic bag off my extendable wand and began tapping his rump very, very lightly, though progressively more

intensely, until he took that step forward; then I quit immediately and praised Steamer as if he'd just scored the big touchdown. Again, I started with the tapping and this time he took a high step and pawed the ramp. Progress!

"Okay, now time for a step up, Steamer," I thought as I tapped a bit more assertively. All of a sudden, he exploded backwards. I dropped the wand and stayed with him, jerking down on the lead to make his running backward more uncomfortable. Back, back, back I drove him, almost to the stall where we'd practiced driving. Then he stopped and so did I. His huge head was high, and his eyes were filled with too much white, way too much. Again, I just let him chill for a long minute or two and kept my eyes off him. With time he finally dropped his head and worked his mouth as if to say, "Sure got into trouble this time."

At this point in the game, I knew this was going to be a long ordeal and wished we'd parked the trailer facing the opposite direction. That late afternoon sun had me already sweating heavily. Someone offered me a bottle of water that I gladly accepted and gulped down as we walked back to begin anew.

Steamer's Troubled History

There was a whole lot of history here and Steamer really had a severe phobia and genuine dislike of the trailer. I later heard stories of a tearful Fred spending hours, many hours, getting Steamer to load after a show. Something really was amiss here. My gut even sensed he'd been in a trailering accident, but that was never confirmed.

"Food," I thought, and then said aloud, "What is his favorite treat, Fred?"

"He's nuts for his grain. It's got molasses in it. Want me to get some?" she asked.

"Please."

I'm not above using feed in situations where horses become highly irrational. A genuinely freaked out horse will not eat. But when they do and that mouth starts working, masticating, well, it signals a return to the rational.

Fred showed up with a rubber feeder filled with sweet feed. I allowed Steamer to take a sniff, then a hearty bite before I placed it up into the trailer entrance. Suddenly Steamer became the longest horse in the world as he stretched out to reach the grain while managing not to step on the ramp. But he just couldn't quite make it, which is exactly what I had in mind. Back to progressively assertive tapping on the rump with my training wand.

Suddenly the chewing stopped, Steamer's head shot into the air and he erupted backwards. Again, I stayed right with him, and this time alternately snapped the rope under his chin and jerked down as we backed into the cluttered stall area yet again.

"What have I gotten myself into?" I quietly asked myself, shaking my head in sheer disbelief. This was a really serious case, about the worst I'd encountered in a couple of decades dealing with difficult horses.

Once Steamer had recovered from this latest meltdown, we quietly walked back to the trailer and started again as though nothing had ever happened.

"This time baby steps. Very, very tiny baby steps. Don't let him lose his cool. And don't lose yours," I reminded myself. The taps, this time, remained exceedingly light as I exuded extreme patience. And lo and behold, old Steamer took a step onto the ramp. I knew right then and there that we would succeed. It would just be a matter of time. And time it did take. A lot of it.

The process took the proverbial one step forward, two steps back as the sun finally began to wane and the day began to cool off. Steamer progressed step by step up the ramp and remained a cool head, as did

I. Before long his massive hulk was actually standing in the trailer entrance and he was eating and being a very good boy. With praise, grain, and keeping my head, we went back and forth up and down the ramp time after time. Each time he inched in a little farther forward.

We'd actually evolved away from tapping as I began a very soft kissing sound that preceded the tapping. Wanting to avoid the annoyance of the tapping, Steamer opted to take the required step forward when he heard the kissing sound now. Yet he did know

full well exactly what was coming if he didn't take that step. I always gave him the best deal possible and then progressed to the assertive if he hung up. And it worked!

Before long Steamer was completely inside and with a light tap with my hand on his rump, he took the much-needed final step that would allow me to secure the butt bar. But instead of quickly jamming it in place I simply began to rattle it. I was certain that this was the exact spot that had been his nemesis in the past, so I wanted to build his confidence and deal with some noise first that might emulate the butt bar or a door closing. As he ate, I stroked and rattled away louder and louder until his head shot up, then I stopped and stroked and praised him with gusto. A glutton for attention, Steamer melted right into the bonding. When he relaxed and lowered his head again, I started with the noise and actually banged the butt bar against the middle divider loudly, time and again, until I finally lifted it up behind his rump and dropped it into the latch slot. Success.

Yet even now we were far from finished here. What I was after was a relaxed horse that would move freely and be completely comfortable in the trailer. I needed him to understand that he could move forward and backward and relax about it, so we began with that theme and before long he completely understood that a gentle tapping with my hand on his rump meant a step or two forward. Then I would move to the front and ask him to back into the butt bar. Back and forth we moved as he greedily ate the sweet feed.

Fred Takes Over

Next, I unloaded Steamer and sent him back into the trailer for a quick bite of grain several more times and then signaled for Fred to come over.

"Okay. You ready? This has to transfer to you being the director now," I encouraged. "But don't begin until you have it all worked out in your mind exactly."

Fred nodded confidently and took the lead. At first, she was a bit nervous and awkward keeping track of the 12' lead, the wand, and her horse all at the same time. But within a few minutes she

had it all figured out and was communicating effectively with Steamer. He danced around in front of the ramp, but Fred got right after him and harnessed that energy into forward motion, and he hustled right up the ramp into the trailer. A tap or two on the rump sent him to the front and Fred secured the butt bar.

"Love him up now, big time, Fred," I coached.

She moved around the divider to the front and exuded lavish praise on her horse. He lapped it right up and seemed to share in the success.

A couple more in and outs to the delight and praise of the swollen crowd and we called it a day. To say the least I was relieved and a bit proud of this accomplishment. The group of spectators had easily doubled, and Yannick was beaming proudly at his wife's success. We were now all ready for the evening barbeque and after tidying up we had a relaxing evening with several dozen of the boarders.

Plotting a Course with Steamer

I'd moved the trailer to a location that would not interfere with activities and suggested Steamer be loaded at least three times that Sunday while I was there. Then he would have his breakfast in the trailer every morning in the coming week. Some afternoon loadings were suggested as well. I wanted Steamer to get fully comfortable in the trailer.

Before and after the clinic Fred prevailed, receiving praise from all of us. She was all smiles and really did seem to understand the program. The following morning, I was able to leave with a high degree of satisfaction and the feeling of a clinic job well done.

Follow-up in Fred's Words

"When I got Steamer, he lacked confidence and was afraid of jumping. Your exercises and the success of the trailer loading boosted his confidence dramatically. Now he jumps anything I point him at. That was a big step in his life."



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Cloud Walker

"Show me your horse and I will tell you who you are."–Old English saying

I was traveling through the enchanted state of New Mexico just before Christmas '05 when I heard about yet another horse and farrier disaster.

A knowledgeable horsewoman on the north end of Albuquerque had a four-year-old Tennessee Walker gelding that had serious meltdowns when the farrier even approached, let alone when he went for the back feet. I rolled up my sleeves in anticipation of what sounded like an interesting and always welcome challenge. You can tell I love to help horses.

My friend Bobbie Stacey accompanied me the short distance to Diana Zenk's home just west of the Rio Grande River. The tidy home, barn, and paddocks were nestled neatly against a mature grove of massive cottonwoods, providing welcome shade in this arid climate.

Diana, a middle-aged woman with obvious horse sense, explained, "Walker just loses it at the appearance of strangers, especially men. And if shoeing tools are anywhere nearby, well, then it turns into a real circus. I mean it becomes downright dangerous. I can't find anyone with the skills or patience to take Walker on."

Diana had Walker in hand, and his snorts seemed to shake the very ground we stood on. His head was sky-high in a sure sign of suspicion of the next new stranger… me.

Cloud Walker was a striking, well-proportioned horse of about fifteen hands. A dark chocolate tobiano with truly magnificent markings, he had an intelligent, though very wary eye. His snorts literally obliterated our ability to discuss his challenging behavior.

"Let me make friends and slip my own halter on him. Magic halter," I winked at Diana. I removed my sunglasses, handing them to Bobbie.

"I don't want any glass close to my eyes with this guy or in any situation like this," I explained. "He could flip that head and my face and eyes are all cut up."

Diana held the lead as I changed over to my 12' rope halter/lead combo that serves me well with all horses, easily the most valuable tool I have, beside my two hands.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeasy, big boy. I'm here to help you now. Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeasy now," I cooed repeatedly as he snorted over and over, sending his mistrust back at me. With my halter secured I concentrated on settling him with gentle but firm strokes on his neck and withers. Then I began searching his face for his pleasure zones. But he wasn't buying my program, not one bit. He was so tense and distrustful of me, a man, and an unfamiliar one at that. I ached for whatever horrible journey had led him to this extreme distrust of the human. And I sensed it was gender-specific distrust.

I put constant downward pressure on the lead to ask him to drop his head, and he did give in a sign of understanding, but that head shot sky-high the moment I released him. And guiding his head to the side was about the same, tiny gives to show me he got it, but he wasn't really letting down and giving in to me. His tail? Tight, clamped, full of distrust and nervousness.

Gaited Horse Tradition

Walker was not a mean horse by any means. He just probably had a harsh introduction to training, not so uncommon in the gaited horse community. These horses were expected to comply… period. No nonsense about it. And that seems to be the common denominator with so many of the gaited horses I've encountered. They're intimidated into submission and compliance—not my idea

of evolved training. At the opposite end of the scale, only a week later I met perhaps the most trusting, well-adjusted Tennessee Walker, (and maybe the most well-adjusted horse in general) that I'd met in my career of over twenty years. So there you have it. There are obviously wonderful, gaited horse trainers with warm hearts.

I decided at this point that expending some of that suppressed energy might be the place to go from here and so I asked Walker to move forward in the driving procedure I call *the dance begins*. Again, he was snorty and unsure, but finally, with some exceedingly obvious signals, he was moving forward around me in a circle. That accomplished, we went around a half dozen times or so, then began winding down, like a snail to a stop, culminating with his head at least partly giving to the side as he finally halted. I wanted to show him a way to get stopped quietly and for the first time in our interaction he didn't snort. I loved him up thoroughly and slipped my fingers into his mouth. He followed by licking his lips with gusto and dropping his head a fraction. Success.

From his off-side I drove him out and this time he seemed just a hair more relaxed, so I upped the ante a notch by swinging the lead in a jump-rope fashion to give him just a bit more to deal with. At first his eyes widened and he tried to stop abruptly. But I pushed him right through it and then he actually licked his lips for a just a second. *Voilà!* Movin' on up.

Again, I wound him down to a stop but this time I tossed the lead over his back as I helped him find that safe, loving place on the offside. He lurched at the sight of the flying lead; then it landed on his body… but he accepted the sensation and gave to me with a release of his head to the side and a sigh of relief.

We repeated this valuable exercise again and again as he improved and let down, noticeably giving to me with each succeeding repetition. Then I deliberately tossed the lead so it would hang on the opposite side and desensitize his hind legs. While at first this was a very big deal, my supporting hand on his neck helped him find the way.

I settled him down and ran the lead under his neck and then around behind his haunches, then encouraged him to unwind away from the lead on his back legs. He shot out quickly, clearly nervous. But I again wound him back down to home base with his head around to the side and we practiced that exercise several times in each direction until he was calm about it.

This unwinding exercise pays huge dividends for all horses because it accomplishes so much, including:

- The horse has to move away from that pressure behind his back legs
- He changes eyes with each unwinding as he comes out the opposite side
- The back legs become progressively more desensitized as the horse gets used to that feel of the rope on the opposite side
- The horse must disengage his hind quarters, stepping underneath himself to move away from that lead and pressure

As Cloud Walker's confidence and trust blossomed, I sensed he was ready for the next challenge, dealing with the plastic bag attached to the end of my extendable wand. I first allowed him to take a sniff. He reached his head out front and took a wary gander. Then I moved the bag onto his back, right in the saddle area. He stood still, frozen and nervous about his challenge. I gently moved the flag over his back and down his hind legs, then over his sides. He handled it, but not happily. He was extremely suspicious. Time to move out. This exercise doesn't prove anything until the horse moves forward *rationally*. And that is my goal, completely rational *forward movement*. With a cluck and a tapping motion on his rump, he shot forward abruptly. I maintained the bag on his back as he hesitantly moved forward in a very unsure, impulsive manner.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeasy, big fella. I'm not going to hurt you," I repeated in a soothing tone until he let down. Whenever he tried to stop abruptly, I pushed him right through that abruptness and kept him moving until he could stop gracefully. Time after time I helped him progress to relaxing with the bag and moving out rationally, when he consciously decided to, not when his emotions shouted, "Get out of there!" Within a few minutes he was Mister

Rational and handling the bag all over his body and from up above while he walked out quietly. Bingo!

Showtime

At this point he basically said to me, "Bring it on. I'm ready for the feet now." His courage and progress requested the next step, actual foot-handling. I asked for a front foot to which he complied. I gave him a good foot massage, then with his front foot up, reached back and ran my hand down his back leg. He flinched at the initial touch, then sighed, relaxed, and actually drifted into enjoying the stroking of his back legs. That accomplished on both sides, we calmly walked over to the solidly built, round steel hitching post adjacent to the barn, where I tied him up, but not tight. I didn't want him uncomfortable; I was just looking for some control and a situation that would replicate the farrier's set-up.

Again, while lifting each front foot, I reached back and stroked his back legs. He didn't react. But something told me to be extra careful with this guy, so I asked Diana for an implement quite useful at this stage, a length of soft cotton rope. Diana produced a fifteen-foot piece of flat soft cotton line. Perfect. I gently fished the line through his hind legs with my extendable wand and took hold. Walker immediately got fidgety and started dancing around. I held on loosely from behind and calmed him with soothing words. Within a couple minutes he settled as I worked the soft line gently up and down his right hind; then the on side. Trust prevailed and with time, soothing words, and patience he settled and accepted this valuable precursor to the next step of applying pressure.

Take and Give

Now the real test was upon me as it was time to ask for a give with a few pounds pressure on that right side. I held the line off to the side about 20 degrees and waited, pulling from behind, yet out of kicking range. He pulled hard forward, jerking my arm, but not too hard, just enough to demand my patience and understanding. He struggled, not quite understanding my request. Then he finally dropped the foot back and to the

ground and found complete relief and the yes answer. Within a few minutes he got the picture and gave his back legs on each side in a relaxed manner. I moved into his hind end cautiously, reached out and massaged his lower leg as he gave to me his outstretched leg. I took hold of the hoof and gently removed the line, then stroked his lower leg and pastern thoroughly, and finally, I reached across and stroked in the V behind his haunches. Suddenly he sighed and relaxed to the fact that I was holding and pleasuring his back right foot. Right then I knew that the heavy lifting was over.

I eased Walker's foot to the ground in the outstretched manner with his toe resting lightly. This is symptomatic of a truly relaxed horse in any situation. I walked off and allowed it all to soak in.

"I think he's going to make it, Diana. I'm really pleased at his progress."

"I can't believe he trusts you that much. But then you did take the time. Nobody's ever done anything like this."

"I'm certain of it. He's never had a better deal in his life. This isn't my first rodeo, you know." I smiled at Diana.

Given a few minutes, my new best friend softened into his evolved acceptance and waited for the next step, actual tapping to replicate the farrier's pounding. I picked up his near hind and again gave him a thorough massage, then began tapping lightly with the flat of my hand. He immediately tensed and I stopped and stroked his leg in reassurance, taking him back to trust; then I started again. This time I tapped progressively harder, then put the foot down gently and moved to the front and loved him up BIG TIME!!

Lavish Praise Speeds up Learning by 60 Percent

Studies have proven the effectiveness of lavish praise. The results are resoundingly impressive. Lavish praise at the right time speeds up acceptance immediately! I use it with gusto. From here it was a matter of building up the tapping until I was smacking my Leatherman hard on each back hoof, then releasing it in the relaxed outstretched position every single time. Finally, I walked off, my eyes watering at the realization of our success.

"Okay, Diana, your turn. I get to watch the show now. You go in and pick up the feet and progress to pounding hard. Don't sugar coat it, now."

Diana did exactly as I'd asked and actually progressed to using an old aluminum ice cream scoop, shaped like a very big spoon. She pounded away progressively harder until there was a true ringing in the air. Not only did Walker accept her obnoxious banging, but he was hanging his head down and constantly licking his lips in a sign of total acceptance and relaxation. What a feeling!

Diana's husband, Neal, had joined us about the time I'd moved to the hitching post, and I knew he would be the next test. "How 'bout it Neal?" I asked. Neal was one long tall glass of water, lean and relaxed and I believed he was up to the task—and he was. I watched this man go in and gently stroke and talk to the animal and then lift each foot and bang on it first very lightly, then progressively harder until he too was using the ice cream scoop to send that loud metallic ring into the cool New Mexico winter air as he pounded away with genuine relish. And Cloud Walker? Well, at this point all he could manage was constant licking with his head hanging low and his eyes so soft he could barely keep them open.

Knowing just when to exit is an acquired skill and that was my cue. Shaking Neal's hand and hugging Diana, then congratulating Walker with gusto, I collected my tools and proceeded on my travels, west toward Cave Creek, Arizona, to the home of my friend Jane Reed, a.k.a. "Ryder Reed," horsewoman extraordinaire who would present to me the next plateau of my journey with the horse, a brilliant woman that Ryder had talked about for years, a woman named Maree.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Midnight's Big Adventure

The horse will leap over trenches, will jump out of them, will do anything else, provided one grants him praise and respite after his accomplishment.
– Xenophon

I was in a festive state, catching up with old friends in Denver one evening in mid-December when my cell phone rang. A familiar figure from the past, Ronnie Edwards had hunted me down from Texas as I traveled around the country doing assorted horse gigs.

"Frankie, I need your help down here. I've got a bunch of horses to work and I'm in way over my head. What are you doing?" Ronnie inquired in his easy southern drawl.

I responded, "Just got to Denver and have a few horses in front of me, then some time off. I'm ready for it. Heck I've been jammed up doing clinics and privates since early November. Tell me what you've got for me."

"For starters, I've got one that just climbs out of anything I put him in. No matter what, he's out in the morning and it takes half the day to get him caught again. Then this guy I know that hunts quail down here left a gaited horse with me that is the snortiest thing I've ever seen—ready to jump out of his skin and doesn't trust people. He's not mean or dangerous, but he's not right either. On top of that I've got a little dun mare that was abused, and well, she's come a long way, but she could use some gentling as well. So, got any free time? I'll take good care of you and show you some great country. And hey! I've just bought 640 acres next to this 10,000 acre lease we ride on." Ronnie went on and on and I had to stop him.

Ronnie Edwards had the gift of the gab along with a warm southern charm that had carried him to amazing places in the twelve years we'd known each other. Had he chosen to preach in the south, he could have had a huge following. But his focus was on brokering lumber, horses, real estate, golf, fishing and hunting, with a little work thrown in. The man was downright irresistible and had acquired the moniker "Big Daddy" in Paducah, Texas, where he was calling from. He'd come into that town by storm and in a short while had about everyone eating out of his hands.

And here I was, ready to head south about six hundred miles to the Running R Ranch to help him out and simply enjoy his alluring company. "Now slow down, you wild man. Let me look at my calendar and call you back. We can take these horses into some interesting country, right?" I asked.

"Frankie, you won't believe this place I've bought. I'm going to build a house in the shape of a V that overlooks endless craggy country they call caprock. It's got cliffs, creeks, rivers, swales, fields and forests that we can ride in for days. Wild turkey, quail, hogs, deer, bobcats, coyotes and cougars inhabit my land and the 160,000 acres right next door. Get down here," Ronnie demanded… and I did.

The drive was long and uneventful. The snow-covered mountains to my right gave way to New Mexico, the "land of enchantment" as the license plate suggests, and suddenly the landscape began to live up to its name, with elegant volcanic shaped mountains rising out of the gentle rolling open country. Then later in the afternoon, New Mexico spilled into a more flat and cultivated land called Texas. Instead of

"Amarillo by Morning," it was Amarillo in the late afternoon as the day waned. It was pitch dark by the time I pulled into Ronnie Edwards' yard in Paducah. A well-proportioned sorrel quarter horse greeted me as I stepped out of the car—a fitting greeting for a welcome arrival.

Ronnie and I embraced as old friends and soul mates. We burned a couple steaks on the grill, caught up, and called it an early night in anticipation of a busy morning. Ronnie insisted on catching the sunrise from his new property, which meant rising at

5:30a.m. A bitter cold morning was the price we paid to see the sun streak the sky into a multitude of changing hues as the day lightened and the land below took on its incredibly complex nature. It was everything Ronnie had promised. The North Wichita River had carved deeply into the land, creating the abrupt and dangerous cliffs upon whose edge we stood. Mallards dotted the river and wild turkeys clung to the taller, aged mesquite trees as the day dawned and brought this drama into play. A mature white tail buck caught scent of us and quickly disappeared into the heavy cover. Then a family of feral hogs scurried out of the river bottom as dark shapes in all sizes followed each other single file into the thick growth that lined the river.

We had spoken not a word as we watched the beginning of another day unfold below us. From Ronnie's property we scanned the thousands of acres that were available for working his troubled horses. The varied landscape would lend itself well to schooling these steeds.

"It is everything you said it was, Ronnie. Looks like we'll be able to do hills, brush, fields, and water. How is the footing in the water and on the edges?" I asked.

"All I've seen is good solid footing and the river is mostly shallow, so we'll be able to cross about anywhere," said Ronnie. "Let's head home and get working those renegades, Frankie. But first, how about breakfast? I'm starving."

Running R Remuda

After we ate a long breakfast while the day warmed considerably, we walked out to the heavy-duty pipe corrals to survey the training area. There were two long runs connected to covered stalls. One run was quite narrow, but the other was approximately thirty feet wide, just about right for working horses. A couple of shakes of the feed bucket brought Ronnie's three horses into the big run, and then, the two we wanted at the moment, right into the covered stalls.

"Let me work with the nervous black one and you take your dun mare. We'll kind of do a mini-clinic and I'll show you my routine. Do you have a rope halter with a long lead?" I asked.

"I've got everything. Let me go get one in the tack room," Ronnie replied as he walked off.

The black gaited gelding was an American saddlebred who was watching me very closely as I turned back to survey him. As soon as my eyes were on him, he snorted in a sure sign of uncertainty as if to say, "Now what? And I'm just not so sure I really like humans." His distrust was blatantly obvious as he cried out for help. His name was Midnight, so named for his jet-black coat. He had a slight build, but seemed to be a sure-footed, well-balanced horse that just hadn't had a very good deal in life. He was five years old and owned by a well-to-do gentleman who used him only occasionally for quail hunting. The man had very little riding experience, I was told as Midnight's story unfolded. And that alone might very well have been the lion's share of the problem. This young horse needed a strong leader that he could believe in.

By now Ronnie was back and had his dun haltered. I eased into Midnight and offered my hand while keeping my soft eyes off him and maintaining a very non-threatening posture. For some unknown reason I really ached for this horse. He struck me as a good soul who would try hard if given a fair shake. With a couple of firm strokes on the neck, I haltered Midnight and began searching for his melting spots.

"The first step is *bonding,* Ronnie," I explained while I was working.

"Slow your hands waaaaaay down and try to find what feels good to your horse. Rub those eyes. Scratch under the jaw in that hollow. Work the base of his ears. Get your finger into the corner of the mouth and feather that tongue until he works his mouth and licks his lips. That is a sure sign of understanding and relaxation. Try to melt him," I coached. "And breathe deeply and maintain a relaxed posture and talk to your dun horse soothingly."

Ronnie was blessed with a gentle nature and had no trouble relaxing his dun horse.

"Get after those eyes," I urged him. "I mean really rub them just like you would rub your own but use the palm of your hand.

Push and rub until he pushes back. Then stay at it for maybe ten seconds and quit, leaving him wanting more. Then watch that mouth work. I almost always go for the eyes first because the horse has probably never had that done before." I watched Ronnie rub the dun's eyes.

"Imagine you'd never rubbed your own eyes and suddenly found it. Well, that is exactly what's happening here. Heck, at my demonstrations, I can take a horse that hates men and in about eight seconds I have that horse's legs shaking with delight. Then I own the horse." As I talked, the dun was getting into the attentions Ronnie was lavishing. "The ears are another incredible opportunity," I went on. "Work the base, then firmly all the way upward in a stroking fashion with a fair bit of squeezing. If that works and he trusts you, then begin running your thumb slightly into the ear as you work upward. Before long you'll have your thumb or index finger buried down inside that ear. Then, again, you own that horse. A lady at one of the wild horse workshops I do every year taught me that one, thank you very much."

I turned back to Midnight and did just as I had instructed Ronnie. I GAVE to that animal for what was probably the very first time, ever, in his life. And he just loved it. At first, he avoided the eye stroking, not quite sure about it. But within a couple minutes he was leaning hard into my open hand, reveling in the pleasure.

"Be sure to quit while it's working," I said, turning to watch him.

"Don't wear it out, Ronnie. Always leave them wanting a little more."

We were sheltered in the stalls, and the eastern sun was soothing for each one of us. At that moment I just could not imagine a better place to be—with a good friend and horses that needed high-quality attention and handling.

"Okay. Now you've given, so it's time to ask for something back, so ask that head to drop. Apply constant downward pressure on the lead and wait." Ronnie followed my instructions as I spoke them. "Reward for anything and release the pressure immediately. Then stroke the horse's neck so he knows he got it

right. Ask, anticipate, get compliance, release, and reward. That is the sequence to teaching what I call *Take and Give,* the second step in my system. Understand that the release is the reward, but the stroking will speed up the learning process by 60 percent!!! So, give that horse lavish praise and you'll have a horse that loves to give back."

Ronnie complied as I continued the instruction. "By lowering the head, you are teaching the horse to yield to pressure, right?"

Ronnie nodded silently. He was completely absorbed in the moment and at peace.

"You are also helping the horse to get relaxed," I went on. "Because an uptight horse will have a high head; a relaxed horse will have his head low and be comfortable with it."

Midnight was extremely sensitive and caught on to the downward pressure in seconds. Then I demonstrated guiding the head to the side. Midnight complied like a champ and found solace and peace as I breathed into his nostrils while he kept his head tight in the girth area. It was magical.

"You see, for a horse to trust you enough to come right in here tight, he has to block the rest of the world out." I was delighted by our progress. "This is incredible. What a wonderful horse!" I exclaimed as Midnight drifted into the safe loving place I was creating for us both.

"Now you want to get this with the dun on each side real well, Ronnie. One side will probably be a little less trusting, a little tighter. Work that side until the trust is as good as the other side, maybe even better. Now with that head to the side, work your other hand back to the flanks and stroke firmly. From there, work up to the dock of the tail right where it meets the body and scratch deeply. Don't lose contact with the horse as you move your hands over his body," I cautioned. "Now run your hand down the rump at the edge of the tail while pushing your fingers up under the tail. If that tail loosens up… yes, like that. That's a real good sign. A tight tail signals a tight horse. A soft, loose tail is a trusting relaxed horse. Just think about it," I suggested with a disarming smile.

"Got it, Frankie," Ronnie replied with a wink.

"Man, you ought to see the cowboys slip under their big hats when I demonstrate this. I don't think they believe I'm talking about this step that I call *intimacy*. You see, when that tail is soft and you've got the head softly in your other hand, well, you've got big league trust working."

But Midnight wasn't connecting the dots now. His tail was tight. Real tight. And that was a sure sign that he just couldn't let down, not yet. Over and over, I worked down that rump with pressure at the edge of the tail, just trying to break it loose, even just a hair. And I only got about a hair's worth before moving to the other side. The right was equally tight, if not more so. This would require some patience to gain his trust.

The Dance Begins

Our foursome had performed well enough to begin some movement and so I led Midnight out into the larger run. This was a completely new place to him and accompanied by plenty of snorting as his sure sign of uncertainty, I taught him to drive in a circle out in front of me. This lunging exercise is useful for trailer loading and sending a horse into a stall or paddock. Plus, it establishes me as the alpha creature, the leader. He didn't like this one bit and was very impulsive, starting and stopping abruptly and trying to face up to me at every opportunity. But I stayed with it and supported him through his sticky spots. When he seemed to be getting the hang of this program, I began slowly winding him down, like a snail, back to that comforting place with his head to the side. As we got in close, I tossed the lead over his back. He jerked away abruptly and snorted loudly, telling me he needed some help with this part of the exercise. We stopped and regrouped as I loved him up and took him back to home base, *bonding*, the place we would always return to when he needed some support.

Once settled, I tossed the lead over his back gracefully a half dozen times while stroking his neck to help him overcome the irrational fear of ropes and hand movements. All at once, Midnight seemed to kind of let down and trust me as his big tongue worked with gusto and his head dropped with a big sigh.

"Didja see that, Ronnie?" I asked in excitement.

"Seems to be getting pretty quieted down now," he responded.

"Yep, he's finally getting it and starting to really trust me. Let me check that tail again. Sure enough, that tail is just a tiny bit less clamped down. It should all fall together now—once that tail begins to loosen up, it's usually a huge sign of progress."

Building Midnight's Confidence

"I'll go ahead and do a little plastic bag therapy now. This might be challenging for him. But you know, he's a really bright horse who seems to work through these things pretty well. So, we'll see," I explained as I arranged my extendable wand with the plastic bag so it would not be any more threatening than necessary. I offered the bag for Midnight to sniff, and he extended his nose cautiously, a good sign. Then tipping Midnight's head a hair to the on-side, I placed the bag onto his back right in the saddle area. He lurched forward the second it made contact, but I was able to keep it in place until he settled. My left hand stroked his neck in support.

"Eeeeeeeasy, big fella. You can handle this. Eeeeeeeeeeasy now, Midnight," I cooed over and over to help him deal with this challenge. He licked his lips in a sign of acceptance, so I began moving the bag on his body as he stood perfectly still. His head rose and a whole lot of white showed in his eyes. "This is a pretty big deal for him, Ronnie. If he can learn to handle this as he moves quietly, rationally, that will be a major hurdle crossed for him. Watch this process now."

Ronnie stood with the dun, both watching with keen interest.

"This is huge," I said. "And a part of the equation that so many trainers miss. He needs to progress until he can carry the bag completely rationally. Otherwise, if you're out riding and your slicker comes loose, it could turn into a rodeo."

When Midnight could handle the bag all over his back, I began tapping his rump lightly until he lurched forward, but I clucked and tapped him right through his sticky spots to keep him moving with the bag. He moved forward very gingerly with an unsure expression. Very gracefully, careful to not send him over the top, I

continued to keep him going forward while moving the bag on his back. Gradually he relaxed into it and understood the program. Within a few minutes, old Midnight was walking around me in a circle and coping with the bag as I worked it assertively, all over his back.

"You see how he's adapted so quickly to accepting this instead of being threatened? This will help his confidence skyrocket. I'm really pleased with his progress. I'll do a little *ballet on the ground* to see how he tolerates eye-changing and get a feel for his athletic ability. That will be about enough for him for today. You see how he's settled right down? The snorting is mostly gone and he's feeling a whole lot better about life in general. You know, it still amazes me how quickly a horse can settle into some pretty challenging situations. Smart horse here, Ronnie."

"Pretty astonishing progress, Frankie. How'd you figure all this out anyway?" he probed.

"A whole lot of horses, patience, time, and very close observation," I answered as I moved Midnight through his first taste of *ballet on the ground*. "You know, when I got busted up sixteen years ago, I promised I'd create a ground system that heightened my safety. So this all happened out of need and self-preservation."

I finished up with Midnight loving him up like the brightest horse in the whole world and then left him in a really good place. Ronnie put the dun horse up, then he and I headed over to the 6666 Ranch to see his convalescing quarter horse named Bert.

The Famous 6666 Ranch in Guthrie, Texas

The "Four Sixes" is unquestionably one of the most renowned quarter horse breeding and training facilities in the world. Performance horses of all shapes and sizes are conceived at this magnificent facility and semen from the stallions is shipped worldwide. As the story goes, the ranch was won in a poker game. The winning hand was none other than four sixes!

Ronnie was treated like royalty. He'd bought several horses, and again, that southern charm had everyone—the secretaries, trainers, vets, and management alike—welcoming us with open

arms. We toured the vast facility, observing various aspects of the business, from actual training to breeding and even minor medical procedures. Ronnie's stallion was healing nicely.

As the day waned, we drove back to Paducah to prepare for the next day when we would ride into the vast acreage adjacent to Ronnie's future ranch, the Running R.

I rose early and happened to find Midnight just outside. I slipped a piece of baling twine over his neck, and we walked over to my tack bag where I haltered him for a quick session before our adventure. He had digested the lesson of the previous day well and performed like a champ. His snorts were a fraction of those of the day before, and I felt confident we would have a great ride. Amazing how one thorough session can change a horse's confidence level so dramatically.

Ronnie and I saddled up, loaded the horses and headed right on down the road, sixteen miles to his land. We anticipated a wonderful day of riding into the wild caprock country peculiar to this area of West Texas.

As I always did religiously, I conducted my ground exercises before mounting, and then off we headed into this intriguing landscape that reeked of adventure. The horses both performed like seasoned trail mounts, deftly scurrying through the prickly pear and varied cactus scattered throughout this land. They each knew exactly where to place their feet to avoid the painful needles. It was truly amazing to see how quickly the horses adapted to their environment.

Over hill and dale, we rode, encountering endless coveys of quail and flocks of ducks on the North Wichita River. The day was cool and crisp, and horses and humans alike were vitally alive sharing this unique experience. Confidence blossomed for Ronnie and the horses as the miles and the day whizzed right by. All too soon—it was almost the shortest day of the year—the sun began to drop and the day cooled considerably.

"Guess we'd better loop on back toward the truck, Frankie," Ronnie suggested as we arced in on a small tree-lined creek.

I was in the lead and after finding the right spot, I encouraged Midnight to cross. He confidently stepped into the

water's edge and understandably hesitated a moment. I asked again and he complied, taking the next step, which immediately turned into disaster. The creek had accumulated soft mud at this exact spot. Midnight's front end sank immediately into the silt as he flailed wildly, his forward momentum carrying him deeper into this dangerous mess.

By now my feet were in the mud and water and I had to make a decision—stay on board or take a dive toward the firm bank. As Midnight struggled wildly, I slipped my feet from the stirrups and lunged for the bank. I landed at the edge and sank into the mud, but scrambled quickly away from his flailing hooves, gaining the firm bank and getting out of danger. But Midnight was in to his belly, white-eyed and scared out of his wits. He was shaking like a leaf and snorting with intense fear. I immediately found firm enough ground so I could move to his head which was now at my knees. I got a supporting hand on him.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeasy, big fella. Eeeeeeeasy, now," I repeated, conveying a firm sense of assurance. "Gonna get you out of this mess. Now just relax. Eaaaaaaaaaaaasy now, big guy." Over and over, I repeated this mantra to settle him—and me, too. "We've got a major mess here, don't we, Ronnie?" I took a few calming breaths. "Man, oh man. I don't know quite what to do now. At least Midnight has settled down, so we've got a little time to figure this out." I was almost muttering to myself as I continued to stroke the black gelding that trusted me, literally, with his life.

"Lemme get over there and help you. I've got a good strong lead we can use to pull him out." Ronnie secured his reins to the saddle and hustled his horse across the creek at a narrower crossing just downstream. Jack took the cue and jumped across, almost as if he completely understood the situation. What a horse! Ronnie followed and now we were all on the safe side and poised for the next step.

"Here, Frank, attach this lead under his chin and we'll both give a pull," Ronnie instructed.

"Wait just a minute here," I said. "And move back away. I think now that he's had a chance to chill and regain his strength, perhaps he can do it." I could sense the big black's energy

building. "Get out of the way. He's gonna lunge forward with a huge effort and if luck is on our side, he'll come flying up outta there with a whole lotta momentum." I moved to the front and had a mental conversation with Midnight. Now this was serious. Real serious. We could conceivably lose this horse, or he could end up hurt or permanently lame. So, I visualized him getting out of that bog and then gave him the encouragement he needed to work at it.

"Come on, big boy. Now. Let's go." I clucked and kissed and encouraged and he got the message and suddenly everything fired at once. With a gargantuan effort he lunged forward and caught the edge of the firm bank with his front legs, and then he pulled and I pulled and with one big umph he struggled up onto firm ground, finding purchase finally with his back legs. He moved forward, away from that ugly mess and shook, splattering mud all over me and Ronnie. We just laughed with glee. Midnight was out and safe and seemingly unhurt.

"Dodged a serious bullet there, Big Daddy," I said, almost overcome with a sense of relief I'd not known in a long, long time, as I continued stroking and congratulating my new best friend, Midnight.

"I thought we'd have to come back with a lariat, and he might be a goner by then, Frank. Man, we sure lucked out. You know, if you hadn't done your gentling, I doubt he'd have settled down, relaxed, and trusted you so much. I really think that was the difference between a real tragedy and what transpired. Whew!" Ronnie shook his head in relief.

We finished our trail loop as the heavy mud dried on Midnight, my saddle, and my legs. I didn't care one bit about a little mud. This horse had proved himself beyond belief.

Back at Ronnie's place we cleaned up the horses, and I gave old Midnight an extra special thanks before turning him out for the evening. As I slipped my rope halter off him, I tilted his head into me and gave him a strong hug. "You are one very special horse. I'm sorry I asked you to go into that creek," I murmured with a trembling voice and moist eyes. "Thanks for pulling me through that one, big fella."



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Leo's Plight

"A horse is the matter and subject whereupon the art worketh, and is a creature sensible, and therefore so far as he is moved to do anything, he is thereunto moved by sense and feeling. Further, this is common to all sensible creatures, to shun all things as annoy them, and to like all such things as do delight them." — John Astley, "The Art of Riding"

I got wind of a troubled quarter horse named Leo long before I ever set eyes on this well-built, sorrel gelding of seven years. Far too often, by the time I get my hands on such horses, they've had a pretty rough journey, as have their owners.

Libby Newnham followed the trainer grapevine and sent me an email in the spring, explaining her plight. Leo, it seemed, was just completely unpredictable. One day he was an absolute jewel of a horse. The next day he was a complete maniac, acting out, bucking and rearing and backing dangerously. We set a date for later in the week, and on a bright spring afternoon I finally met this horse with quite a reputation.

Libby deftly backed Leo out of her two-horse trailer, and we had a long discussion of his odd behavior. Long story short, she just never knew what she was dealing with. He was a good-natured horse who had completely irrational meltdowns just when everything seemed to be going well. At times he would bite at his sides as if something bothered him. And while saddling was not much of an issue most of the time, there were times when he just shook at the sight of a saddle and pad coming his way. I listened intently and one word just kept ringing out in my mind: PAIN.

Pain as a Possibility

In the twenty years that I've danced with horses—a lot of them—I've had the great fortune of meeting some very gifted healers and of course brilliant trainers as well. With disturbing frequency, there seems to be a very clear message coming through from many of these caring souls—a huge percentage of horses are in pain. And many are acting out dangerously because of that pain. When I reflect on my journey, I shudder at my ignorance as I unknowingly witnessed horses melting down and screaming out so clearly, "I need help. The pain is excruciating. Listen to me or you may pay a very high price later."

For five winters in the early '90s I traveled from my home in Montana south to Camden, South Carolina to prepare Argentine thoroughbreds for the fast game of polo. I also did some buying and selling to augment my income and add to my experience, buying a handful of thoroughbreds off the track during those years. One exceptionally sweet, dark bay gelding I named Top Gun. He was a real pleasure to ride and had no vices, so I used him for fox hunting on several occasions, and he performed like a champ. But I'll never forget our last hunt. As I placed my English saddle gently onto his back, he sank down under that minimal weight.

How ignorant of me not to heed his message, for he was crying out in pain, but I didn't even realize that anything was wrong. Within a few more weeks he looked bad, losing weight and hair and that bright eye that he'd arrived with. It is embarrassing to admit my insensitivity, and it was a long road bringing him back to good health. As it turned out, the saddle pad provided no protection—zip. And I was ignorant about his nutritional needs as well. It was a very hard lesson for me.

Last spring I became acquainted with a very interesting man who attended one of my clinics in Ohio. Mike had a mustang, Wyatt, that had pitched him a few times, resulting in several painful injuries. As we talked, I searched Wyatt's back and located a sore spot. He ducked out from under my probing and swished his tail angrily in a very clear signal of his discomfort. I started doing T-Touch, Linda Tellington Jones's gift to the world, working

the skin around the affected area in circles, beginning at 6:00 and ending at 9:00, thereby doing 1-1/4 rotations clockwise. As Mike and I discussed a variety of subjects I worked on Wyatt, getting progressively closer to the painful area. We probably kibitzed for twenty minutes, and then we walked

Wyatt around a bit and presto, the pain was gone! Gone. Shortly thereafter Mike rode Wyatt bareback and all was well. Today they are a fabulous team and Wyatt is rock solid.

Do not take this as gospel. It isn't usually so easy, but sometimes it is. The point is that Wyatt was in pain, obvious pain, and acting out because of it. With help, he healed and the story ended a good one.

An interesting side note: Mike, in his late fifties, was thinking about a career with horses and was quite interested in my accreditation program. While I did encourage him, I suggested several other options as well, namely equine massage, chiropractic and dentistry. Mike, who is a very focused, determined, high-energy man, looked into dentistry and ran with that ball very successfully. Sometime later, after he'd had several months of equine dentistry classes, we reconnected and he shared two very poignant stories about owners not heeding the clear signals from their steeds and who ended up six feet under. That is right. Both horses reared over backwards and killed their riders, after screaming out loud and clear, *that bit is pinching the sharp points of my teeth into my gums and mouth and I can't handle it, so I'm going to evade it by going backwards or rearing over. Listen to me, oh ignorant one!*

Our knowledge of equine dentistry is exploding to the good as horse owners become enlightened to the dangers of ignoring the horse's teeth. Learning to check teeth should be as routine as deworming, if not more so. It is not rocket science. Sad to say, veterinarians receive very few hours of dentistry and few perfect the art of floating teeth. True, some vets are excellent—so find a competent vet or dentist to check your horse and teach you how to do at least a cursory inspection as well. Those points can become very, very sharp, so be careful.

The point of this discussion is that a huge percentage of horses are in pain and crying out for help. Heed that advice. When a

horse suddenly starts acting out with odd behaviors, most of the time it is pain related. Stay off the horse and get help. If you have the desire to work with horses professionally and feel you have an aptitude for massage, chiropractic, dentistry, or any of the other budding equine careers, look into it. There is really good money and prestige in these professions and you're doing a great service for horses and their owners.

Back to Leo

After listening intently to Libby, I introduced myself to Leo. We bonded and developed trust before I began my explorations. I rubbed his eyes and under his jaw, then got inside his mouth, feathered his tongue and massaged his gums. Then I eased my thumb up along his upper molars and quickly checked the outside edge. Sure enough, Leo had very sharp points. Bingo. One part of the equation was uncovered. Leo licked his lips and lowered his head as if to say to me, "Thanks, maybe now we'll get my teeth taken care of."

Then I ran my index finger, supported by my thumb, down Leo's back, beginning at the withers. His withers shuddered noticeably and then about 2/3 of the way to his hip, he ducked out, just as old Wyatt had done, though even more pronounced. Now Libby is a wisp of a person, perhaps tipping the scale at barely over one hundred, so it wasn't her weight causing this.

"Let's take a look at your saddle and pad," I suggested. The pad was mediocre at best. It was one of those quilted pads that really look effective, but there is no protection, none, zero. So, her Aussie saddle was basically sitting right on the horse's back; upon investigation, the very spot that Leo was sore coincided with an obvious protrusion on the underside of the saddle. Bingo yet again. Saddles do change over time and do wear out!

"I'd find a good masseuse and do T-touch in the meantime," I suggested. I showed Libby the circular touches and together we gave Leo a very pleasurable half hour of relief and hopefully repair. By the time Libby loaded Leo to go home, he was noticeably improved. She called me several weeks later and delightedly informed me that after several massage sessions with a

professional, a new pad, and proper dentistry, she had a new horse. Good on ya, Libby and Leo!



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Willem's Test

"There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man." – Winston Churchill.

Willem had been studying natural horsemanship for ten years when he walked into the arena in Whittlesea, Australia, to observe my Friday night demonstration in late February of '06. He watched as I gentled a ten-year-old standardbred that had fallen with his owner, eroding each other's confidence in the process. Four months pregnant, Glenda just couldn't relax, nor could her attractive bay standardbred.

The horse came through my ***7-Step Safety System*** beautifully and I finished with an exercise I call *Ballet in the Saddle*. This elegant exercise turns safety into an art form that displays the horse's athletic ability. After finishing with the horse, I fielded questions and shook hands with a number of spectators, then began organizing my tack. The actual clinic would begin the next morning early and I needed a good night's sleep.

"I've studied natural horsemanship for over ten years, and I see how you've simplified and streamlined it. I'm very interested in your accreditation program," explained Willem, as he introduced himself with a firm handshake.

I sized him up. "You're exactly the type of person I can bring right along since you've got this experience. Watch as much of the clinic as possible and then we'll talk," I promised.

Willem was an interesting study himself. Born in South Africa, he had moved to Australia some ten years earlier, and both he and his wife were involved with the Australian army. His English was

spoken with a distinct Dutch accent with clearly some African influence. He was built like a weightlifter, very broad and muscular and had not a hair on his head. He exuded power and control, yet I perceived him as a fair and gentle man with the horses. He had to work on Saturday so could not attend the clinic, which was a real shame, but he returned on Sunday bright and early with his lovely wife Michelle and daughter Ashley.

Sensing his abilities, I had him out helping riders in the morning, and he seemed to have a good grasp of the basic principles of natural horsemanship. Over lunch we talked the specifics of my accreditation program and agreed to meet some days later, as he wanted to have me critique his mastery of my system.

Demonstrating in a Downpour

Almost two weeks later my friend Noel Landers and I sat in the back of Willem's large truck as rain pelted man and horse and Willem demonstrated his skills. Noel and his wife Libby ran the Australian branch of my company, Dances with Horses. Noel had genuine empathy for all living creatures and was keenly interested in what was about to take place.

Willem entered the arena with a rangy buckskin gelding about 15-1hands and twelve years of age. The horse had been abused, flinched at any provocation, and had a telltale jagged scar running down the length of his face. He did everything in his power to keep the human on his left side and became almost literally a terrified mess when anything happened on his right.

"The owner arrives several times a week with alcohol on his breath and runs this poor guy in mindless circles, first on the ground, then in the saddle. It is horrible to watch," Willem said, with a pained look on his own face.

Willem started his demonstration by explaining just where he would always begin and return as needed, the logical beginning of my ***7-Step Safety System***, a place we call *Bonding*. With exploring hands, he stroked and searched the horse's face, neck, and head for the place that might melt this troubled creature, but the horse

just could not begin to understand this unusual approach. And as Willem, with his whole heart sincerely in hand, thoroughly searched and tried to settle Bucky, as he came to be known, the horse just could not trust at this level and relax. Not one bit.

"Moving on to step two, *Take and Give*," Willem announced as he asked the head to drop; the horse complied readily. Then when Willem asked the head to give to the left, again Bucky complied reasonably well and actually, seemed to settle just a bit, especially when Willem created a funnel with his hand and *blew his soul into the horse's*. But when Willem started to move around to the horse's right side, the wall was erected as the head shot into the air and white filled this horse's eyes.

But Willem was not to be defeated by this distrusting horse. He bent down, lightly stroking the horse's girth area, using firm, constant pressure downward on the lead rope, and all the while, soothingly inviting a *give* with a soft voice and hand. Suddenly Bucky gave a tiny fraction. Willem's release was immediate and his praise lavish. He looked to me as I said, "Good release."

I'd seen his instant release for this slightest of tries. And that spoke volumes to me. I knew immediately that Willem had the understanding and the timing to succeed with not only this horse, but countless others in the future. Allowing this minimal success to soak into Bucky's soul, Willem asked again for a *give* on that right side. He positioned himself next to the horse's girth area, lowered his stature, and picking up on the lead, invited the horse into this space while stroking the girth lightly.

This time the buckskin gave a couple inches and was immediately rewarded with a release and a whole lot of stroking and verbal praise. But the moment Willem rose up, the horse's head shot into the air and he became rigid and nervous.

"I think I'll let him digest this a bit and move onto the next step, step 3, *Intimacy,"* announced Willem as he moved back to the left side. His hands stroked the horse's girth, then barrel, then flanks, and then drifted up to the dock of the tail. The tail was tight initially, but with downward stroking along the edge of the rump and tail, it softened a hair. Over to the right. Tight. Real tight. No surprise here. Asking the head to yield as he stroked the tail, Bucky again complied, at the level

of his trust. He gave a fraction and that was a huge accomplishment for this severely abused animal.

"The fourth step is *The Dance Begins,"* announced Willem as he positioned himself to drive the horse in a circle. And someone must have done this before, because Bucky picked up on it immediately and broke right into a soft dogtrot around Willem. This was familiar ground to Mr. Buckskin, and he seemed to kind of gloat and strut as he glided around in the sheeting rain, tromping right through the puddles while saying, "Now let me show you how much I do know." With a reasonable degree of finesse, Willem wound the horse down in progressively smaller circles until the horse finally stopped, with his head giving to the left side. On to the right.

Of course, the horse did his best to block Willem away from that right side, but Willem prevailed and drove Bucky off. Again, the horse floated up to a smooth trot and after several circles, again Willem began what we call the *wind-down,* as the horse snailed down in smaller and smaller circles and finally drifted to the stop. Willem's praise was genuinely lavish as Bucky delighted in his success and seemed to kind of revel in returning to this new-found spot on his bad side, his right. "I've taken him back to the womb," Willem explained.

"That accomplished, we'll move onto the fifth step, *Desensitizing*," he announced as he began tossing the lead all over the horse's body while stroking Bucky's neck with his other hand. At first the horse was startled and unsure about this procedure, but with constant assurance, he drifted into acceptance and ultimately handled the rope thrown all over his body. But Willem knew full well that was not the true test, so he produced a plastic bag from his pocket and began working it on the horse's body. Bucky was fine with it, so Willem pushed the horse into some movement, while handling the bag. Now this was a horse of a different color. Bucky's moves were jerky and unsure and Willem quit too early.

Knowing Willem needed some coaching here, I interjected, "Try to push him right through those sticky spots. Don't let him suddenly stop. Cluck and kiss when he begins to slow. Help him

learn he can move and handle this challenge. Here, take my extendable wand and help him learn to handle this. Once this is accomplished, you've got an evolved horse."

I handed my wand, with a bright yellow plastic bag attached to the end, to Willem, and said, "Place this onto his back, right in the saddle area, and move it back and forth. Then begin to tap it on his rump. The second he steps forward, move it back into that saddle area and let him carry it. When he abruptly tries to stop, cluck, tap, and keep him moving. He has to learn to move with this stroking his back. He must do this *rationally*. Irrational gets you in trouble, bucked off, hurt. Rational keeps you safe. Teach him to be rational by handling movement as he moves gracefully, not abruptly. We need smooth transitions up and down, not impulsive ones."

And Willem did it and so did the evolving buckskin that now seemed to realize we were his friends and here to help him deal at a more relaxed level with life. Suddenly, man and horse converged into cooperation and extreme trust and Bucky drifted around Willem at that wonderful dogtrot as that man whisked the bag all over that horse's body. It was magical for all of us to witness—evolved horse and man.

Yes, the right side was more challenging, but not by much. Not now. The trust was absolutely skyrocketing into the stratosphere as the horse moved with confidence instead of fear, knowing full well that this human was there to support, not abuse or beat on him. I was so elated, watching from the truck, that I suddenly shouted out loudly, "You've made it man. Look at that horse. Congratulations, Willem!" And we all saw it—this thing of beauty as man and horse found peace, trust, and tranquility in that mere hour, even in the worst conditions imaginable, sheeting rain, mud, and puddles.

Willem pulled himself into the saddle to perform the final and 7th step in his test, *Ballet in the Saddle*. And it was like watching two old dance partners as they performed precision one-rein stops in each direction, as the rain continued, sometimes almost horizontally. First at the walk, then in bigger circles at the trot, this team achieved this truly graceful maneuver, time after time, until it was honed down to absolute perfection.

In front of the truck, Willem stopped and dismounted from the right side. "Well, that's it," he said as he tipped Bucky's nose into him on the right. There was not a fraction of an ounce of resistance on that side, his bad side, his beaten side, his distrustful side. The horse had let down completely and relaxed and trusted the human implicitly, on both sides.

I just couldn't take it any longer. I had to get my hands on this truly amazing horse, this incredibly forgiving animal that had never seemingly known anything but rough, abusive humans. And in one hour of his life, he learned to let down and trust the human. I moved into this animal with an empathy I'd not known before. I had to let him know that he ruled. This was maybe the kindest, most forgiving soul I'd ever been in the presence of. And as I walked up to yet one more buckskin of inestimable integrity, tears filled my eyes.

I ached for the inestimable patience and forgiveness he demonstrated for this creature called man that was his steward. Then I ached for the human that could never read the goodness and heart of this animal, because sadly that is the life he would return to in the next few days.

Noel Finds his Soul Mate

My friend Noel had watched this incredible transformation. Noel had some horse experience, but not much. But Noel was evolved beyond words. His love of the earth and its creatures surpassed even mine.

"Come and be with this animal," I suggested from some knowingness deep in my soul. "You are the same. You have suffered at the hands of insensitive humans. Revel in your commonality, my friend."

Noel moved into this animal and laid his fair and knowing hand on Bucky's neck. He then asked for the buckskin's head to each side. With the slightest fraction of a suggestion this magnificently trusting, forgiving animal complied with Noel. It was magical to witness and Noel could not believe, as his merest hint was complied with, in a sign of complete trust.

"Willem, if there is any way I could have this horse, I want him," Noel confessed as the two of them reveled in a shared closeness that seemed to somehow heal and soothe each of them.

An Afterthought About Noel

On the drive home through the winding roads and hills of Victoria, Noel opened more of his life to me. He had moved with his family from Bombay, India, when he was nine years old. With two younger sisters and almost emaciated parents who had sacrificed even their own nutrition for their children, the family had indeed taken a leap of faith. They knew no one in Australia.

It had not been an easy transition for young Noel. He didn't look like all the other Aussie kids at school, and he encountered racism for the first time in his life. Now it was directed at him. His eyes translated the pain he'd felt as a ridiculed child in this new country. All he could think of was returning to his homeland, as poor and crowded as it was, so he could again be with his people, people who accepted him unconditionally and didn't judge him by the color of his skin and different look.

Sensing the need to acquire defense skills in this new place, he studied martial arts and became proficient to the level of performing push-ups on two fingers. His idol, Bruce Lee, could do the same. Why couldn't Noel? And so, he did. That confidence helped him grow into a man of high character and impeccable integrity. And that same confidence carried him throughout the world he so longed to taste. He knew parts of my country better than I, while teaching me its history. Brilliant man, this Noel. Then, when he'd traveled sufficiently, he sensed a time to slow down and taste the other side of life. He met his bride when he was close to forty years of age and she swept him right into marriage, responsibility, and two lovely children.

Today Noel is the embodiment of responsibility. Yes, he longs for the freedom of his younger years of travel, and camping in the wilds of the world, and fishing. The man loves to fish and that is our major commonality, a passion for nature and a keen sense of stewardship for this precious earth.

I've never met anyone who affected me more than Noel. When he spoke of the racism directed at him, I felt rage and the deep pain for what he endured. This empathy completely overcame me for several days after I heard his story, and I actually shed tears for my friend, in completely new understanding of human feelings. I now look at every single person differently.



CHAPTER THIRTY

Ina's Animal Farm and Fishing for Minis

"Take most people, they're crazy about cars. I'd rather have a horse.
A horse is at least human, for godsake."
– J. D. Salinger, "Catcher in the Rye"

My friend John Gasson lives in a fabulous development called High Rider. Located about forty miles east of Cape Town, South Africa, the area's theme is open land with magnificent views of the Atlantic along with adjacent and very abrupt mountains peculiar to the Cape. High Rider is, as well, a horse community. John has an attractive thoroughbred gelding off the track that he has turned into a wonderfully trusting, confident, quiet and calm animal. And it was John who organized my recent memorable visit to his country.

At our second clinic I became acquainted with an attractive middle-aged woman who did some physiotherapy with horses and lived at High Rider. As it turned out, Ina Jenkins kept a lot of balls in the air. Professionally, she was a physiotherapist for humans with a busy practice of healing people. She did the same with horses using a variety of techniques including T-touch, Linda Tellington Jones' gift to the world. And Ina collected and rescued animals, lots of them, in all shapes and sizes—tortoises, rabbits, parrots, ducks, geese, dogs (17 to be exact), cats, and finally horses. She had recently accepted a whole slew of abused and unhandled minis and needed some help.

John and I arrived at Ina's menagerie of happy creatures one mid-afternoon in early April. I'd asked John to bring along a gentling pole, ideally one of bamboo about 12' in length. He

couldn't find one at the landscape outlet, so arrived with the desired length from a small, stout tree.

Ina gave us a brief tour that wound back through the trees amidst the herd of minis. While some begged for attention, others shunned it—and those were the ones that needed my help.

Ina had constructed several small pens for the minis in which she fed them. A few shakes and flakes of hay had the subject horses just where I needed them, and yes, they were definitely nervous about human interaction. I eased into the first pen that held a seemingly pregnant black mare and her diminutive black and white son of six months that was about the cutest little horse I'd ever laid eyes on. On my arrival, they began to race frantically into the farthest corner, running over each other recklessly, filled with fear. I sat down in the corner diagonally across and just allowed them to chill, as I assessed the situation. The gentling pole was far too big in every sense, but I needed to touch them from afar.

"John, go and grab a short pole out of the fence. One of those short bamboo poles would be ideal," I instructed. We'd passed plenty of vertical fencing en route to the pens and in a few minutes, John returned with a stout branch about six feet long and with a plethora of stubby, even mildly sharp nubs where smaller branches had protruded and been removed. Perfect! With this tool in hand, I stood slowly in a non-threatening posture.

The two again bolted nervously around the pen in obvious fear.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeasy now you little guys. Not here to hurtcha. Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeasy now," I cooed repeatedly as they finally found a corner to cower in. The pinto hid behind his mama as she buried her face into the far corner.

With as much grace as I could muster, I reached out and made contact with Mama, laying the pole firmly onto her withers. What a circus it became all over again as they both ripped around the pen seeking relief from this terrifying creature with a tool to beat them with. I lost contact but stayed close enough to get the pole right back onto Mama as she slowed down and scooted into her favorite corner. She took a furtive glance at me, and I immediately

lowered my posture even more, her reward for taking that peek. And she didn't leave this time, so I began fiddling.

John Sharp's Legacy

My good friend John Sharp had taught me this pole gentling technique about eight years earlier as we gentled wild horses, mustangs in California prior to a BLM auction. For about sixty years, John had been using this incredibly effective, expedient and humane approach to making initial contact with untouched horses. Today the technique is used throughout the USA, and I'm guessing it is now spreading worldwide since I regularly sell a DVD on this subject to horsemen throughout the world. John doesn't do a lot of gentling anymore. He's 92 and just doesn't have the get up and go necessary to handle the quick ones anymore. But he's passed on his knowledge to thousands. Thank you very much, John Sharp!

"Fiddling," I explained to the small group watching me, is the name John gives to what I was doing now, working that pole back and forth, first on the horse's withers, then down the back to the rump where I worked with gusto against the hair, as Mama leaned back into that scratchy reward and sneaked another look at me, this time with a bit less fearful white in those mistrusting eyes. "Eeeeeeeeeeeeeasy now, sweetheart," I repeated over and over as I worked that pole with relish in the saddle area.

"This is big league progress. She'll make it pretty fast now," I predicted. And she did. Within a few more minutes I was rubbing her all over and she was licking her lips in a sign of trust, relaxation and acceptance. Her legs were the sticky part, but with patience, before long I had her completely relaxed and even enjoying the touch, especially as I located her itchy spots. I was slowly easing in, while talking in a soothing voice the whole time. When close enough, I reached waaaaaaaaaay out and replaced the touch of the pole with my fingers as I kneaded the wither area.

The Magic of the Withers and Mouth Magic

John Sharp had also taught me the power of the withers for gentling and as a starting place. Watch two horses groom each

other and you'll find them kneading those withers in an almost circular motion with their lips. And this is exactly what I try to emulate with my hands.

I began firmly kneading the mare's withers at the base of the mane, all the while maintaining a soft posture and a soothing calm voice but making no eye contact. And by golly it worked… just like magic. As one hand worked the withers, the other scratched the saddle area, then traveled back to the dock of the tail, down the rump and against the tail. The tail was clamped tight, but that was expected at this stage. The fact of the matter was that she was handling this really well. I worked one hand back up to the withers, then moved forward up the neck to the base of the ears and began to knead them.

Of course, Mama resisted, but not much. Then I began to focus on the head, scratching right between her ears, the vulnerable poll area. I worked the forehead, scratching vigorously with my fingernails, then down over an eye, which set her off, but just a hair. I went over the eye with more pressure this time and she didn't move. I started rubbing the other eye and she found that pleasurable, too, and telegraphed it by leaning right into my pressure. Down the nose several times, then I found the corner of the mouth and began rubbing with the knuckle of my index finger. When I had my finger into her mouth, she accepted my feathering of her tongue.

"Got her now," I stated, exuding absolute confidence. The mouth is magic. When a horse can tolerate your finger inserted into the corner of the mouth, then over the tongue with a wiggling motion that helps the horse begin to loosen up and lick those lips, well, that is huge. And now I had achieved trust with this little mare that only fifteen minutes earlier had been terrified. From there, the confidence predictably explodes to the good, so I eased my lead rope over her back and jiggled it until she accepted it.

I brought the end of the lead back to myself and now had a loop around her neck. With slight downward pressure I waited for her to drop her head just one iota. And after about thirty seconds she did. Then she gave in fifteen seconds, then in five and with only a few ounces of pressure. I walked out in front at a slight

angle and applied pressure and she almost immediately took a step forward. My release was well-timed and within a few minutes she was leading, then driving around the little pen.

"She's done. Time to get the little muncher started," I told my eager crowd of mostly children who would later continue the gentling process. The diminutive pinto was still hiding behind his mama, but I used that to my advantage and started with the pole on his back and rump, as his withers were inaccessible from my angle. The progress was as predictable as Mama's; using exactly the same process, I had that darling little creature leading and driving and accepting and enjoying touch within less than fifteen minutes.

"Come on in, John, and play with them a little," I invited. "I'm sure they'll trust you in no time."

John did just that. But there was one very distrusting mini left, another mare, so leaving John to continue with the first two, Ina and I pushed the freaked out one into the other pen along with her trusting buddy, yet another cute, mostly black mini. We used a couple of alfalfa flakes to lure them right into the pen. Now this was a differently configured pen with a big upright support pole in the middle and a V-shaped dead-end corner formed by the shelter against the fence. As I tried to make contact with the pole or my hand, the little terrorized mare scurried dangerously around and around the pen, making contact impossible. But suddenly she shot into that V. How fortuitous! I had a ready-made chute, similar to the ones we actually construct for the BLM's wild mustangs.

"This is perfect," I announced with delight. I eased in behind the animal and made first contact gently with my extendable wand stroking into that rump hair. The little mini shot forward, but there was nowhere to go, so she had to stop. Now the trick was not going too far too fast, and having done this with several hundred horses, I had a pretty good idea of how fast to proceed. The branch replaced the wand as I worked against that hair and the nubs indulged the animal, the head dropped, and the mouth worked away in a sign of acceptance and relaxation. Before long I had Ina come in and work the rump area as I moved forward

toward the withers, neck and head. It was truly magical as this very distrusting horse gradually melted into our simultaneous touch.

At one point we pushed just a hair too much and she shot backwards out of the chute. I gave her some time to settle, then drove her back in and began anew. Time for the lead over the back, then around the neck, then some *take and give* and now mini number three was accepting touch and leading. I eased out of the pen as Ina, John and some of the kids took over. Success!

Now the Rest of the Story

We left all three horses in a good place and then Ina gave us the grand tour of her animal farm. Walking right out through the house into seventeen over-the-top joyous dogs, half a dozen cats, plus bunnies, tortoises, parrots, ducks and geese, our entourage strolled the paths of Ina's estate as she scattered cracked corn, and the ducks and geese quacked and followed with expected relish.

I've always said you can judge the energy of a place by its animals. And that place, Ina's Animal Farm and Rescue Center, just exuded good feeling, trust, and love.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Renee's Reality

"Often in life, it isn't the big things that happen to us that have the most profound effect, it's the little things." – Mark Rashid

I arrived home several weeks ago to find a note on my door, not the first time I'd found something like this during my winter in New Zealand… Yet another horse person was in need of help. I unloaded my groceries and organized dinner before sitting down to digest this request. Seems a gal in town had gotten wind of me and was in trouble with her horse. She hadn't ridden this formerly abused animal in over a year and wasn't too keen to do so. I gave Renee a call and we arranged for a visit several days later when I had some free time to help her.

It was a bright Sunday morning when I drove up to find her waiting in the yard with her mare. The horse was quite fidgety, slinging her head back and forth while Renee deftly ducked out of the way as she grasped the horse just under the halter. I could tell immediately that Renee was in way over her head with this seemingly charged-up young mare.

The horse was about 14-2 hands, deep chestnut with a couple of white socks and a distinct, bright white blaze. She was well put together and appeared quite athletic; the intelligent look about her clearly said, "I've got boundless energy and I am ready to go NOW!" There had to be some kind of energetic breeding like Arabian in her lineage, I figured.

"Good morning, Renee!" I greeted her. "Quite a day indeed to work horses."

"Cracker day at that." She smiled, and introduced me to the horse, Daisy.

"So fill me in, Renee. I only know sketchy bits and pieces about Daisy, and I can see she's a bit of a handful for you," I suggested.

She glanced at the horse, then turned to me. "I've had her five years now. She came to me abused. I couldn't touch her face, or feet, and the very moment I got on, she just went berserk. So, I'd just point her uphill and hang on. Somehow, I've survived." She shrugged. "But now I'm older, and after some life curve balls that prevented me from being with her, I'm ready to begin riding her again. But I know simply getting on just isn't sensible. And I have a daughter now, so I must stay healthy and in one piece," Renee quipped. "Daisy's eight now and I guess I've probably ridden her about a dozen times. We just never got into a routine of consistent riding. So, to say the least, she's quite green and really doesn't know much—only what I've taught her, and I, frankly, am not very experienced." She hesitated for a moment. "Truth be known, Frank, I'm really quite fearful of her."

"You know, Renee, that isn't all bad. Fear is what keeps us alive. So don't feel any sense of failure. This is sensibility taking over, and that is a good thing. I see people all the time that are clearly reeking of fear, not confidence, and the horse knows it immediately. So, instead of feeling bad about it, pat yourself on the back for having the sense to seek help," I said, as I tried to soothe her sense of failure. "And she's clearly a horse with a lot of go—she needs a job. So relax and watch and listen carefully. Anyone can do what you'll watch me do. Remember, there are no stupid questions, so don't hesitate to stop me if you're confused about anything."

Renee nodded.

"The very first thing you need to do is give her some space. She's upset because you're constantly hanging on her," I corrected as tactfully as I knew how. "Let me show you what I mean." I took hold of Renee's shirt collar and pinched it together just under her chin, creating pressure and discomfort. "This is what you're doing to Daisy all the time. You just don't know it."

I slipped my rope halter onto Daisy and allowed her to move off as she pleased. She immediately shot off out to the end of my twelve-foot lead and hit the end abruptly, then came back toward me. I raised my hands high overhead and made a hissing noise. "Shhhhhhhhhhhh," I vocalized loudly, and she stopped abruptly, head high, white-eyed, and took me in. I checked to make sure Renee saw this. "Got her attention, didn't I?" I asked. "You see, with a horse like this, she needs something to occupy her. Like a young teenager, she simply can't just stand there. I need to harness that energy, and get something happening to use that energy constructively, so she feels like she's accomplishing something, and so do I. With that in mind, I'll go right ahead and put her to work. I've got a few very simple exercises that'll get her focused and feeling like she's beginning to work a bit."

I positioned myself to suggest that Daisy move off to my right by lowering my right side and raising my left, much like a big steering wheel or an L. With a couple of clucks, she got the picture and off she shot to my right, immediately at a trot. When she hit the end of the lead, her head jolted my arm, but I was ready, so I was in the perfect position to ask her to keep going around me, to the right. After a couple of rounds, she got the picture and stopped hitting the end of the lead, but she was still tearing around in circles mindlessly. I could tell immediately that she'd be a real case to ride; I'd need to take some of that energy out of her before even thinking of getting on.

I began asking her to change direction, and as she did so, she performed an obvious turn on the forehand followed by a turn on the haunches. I call this exercise *Ballet on the Ground,* and it does wonders for hyper horses. In no time she was becoming quite calm and rational. Sensing the time was right, I spiraled her down to a stop and loved her up.

Her breathing was quite hard, so she was ready to take a break for a few minutes, and I was able then to begin my usual program. "I've developed a pretty simple set of exercises that gets horses right before mounting them. In most cases I can begin by loving them up. But with the over-energetic ones, just like Daisy here, we have to put them right to work and take the top off a bit before we

do anything else." Renee was all ears for my explanation. "But now she's ready to accept my indulgences and chill out a bit, so I'll begin with my first step, which I call *bonding*."

I began rubbing Daisy's eyes and ears and got into the corner of her mouth and wiggled my fingers over her tongue. She happily licked her lips with gusto and dropped her head a notch or two, just as I'd hoped she would. "I want to make a good first impression on her and show her there's nothing to fear from this man. No more abuse with me, old girl," I cooed to her.

And she bought it! Daisy let out a couple deep sighs and lowered her head even more. Then I encouraged just that, to instill the concept of pressure and release, by applying downward pressure on the lead. She immediately resisted that pressure, raising her head, but I persisted and, head-high, she finally gave me about an inch. I released immediately and praised her big time.

"Why you are absolutely the brightest bulb on the planet, Daisy," I rewarded her with lavish praise, stroking her emphatically. Again, she licked her lips heartily and lowered her head without my suggestion.

"She has to learn the basis of all communication, pressure and release, the second step in my program," I continued. This time, when I applied pressure again, directly downward on the lead, she only resisted for a few seconds before giving with an obvious downward dip, which I followed with a quick release and praise. "Head down is a relaxed horse. So, we're accomplishing several things with this exercise. She's learning to give to pressure as she gets relaxed."

From that accomplishment onward, it all went quite smoothly. Her tail remained soft while we strived for intimacy, as I breathed into her nostrils and feathered under her tail all at the same time. Then we did some more *dancing*, followed by some desensitizing with the plastic bag to which she acquiesced happily, exuding extreme maturity and confidence.

I moved through my system as Daisy complied quite happily. She seemed delighted to be engaging her mind and body successfully. Time for the saddle. I'd brought my own Australian

stock saddle and she happily accepted it. Driving her around some more circles, she appeared ready to ride so I mounted up.

Something wasn't right though, because she was way too light in the front, rearing slightly and clearly agitated. I quickly dismounted, sensing a pain issue. Perhaps the saddle was uncomfortable. Maybe the pad was inadequate. But certainly, she was not okay and my policy is not to ride such horses until they are.

"She's really upset about something," I told Renee. "I'll get this saddle off and try to figure it out. Sometimes just the different feel of the saddle is enough to set a horse off."

I examined the saddle and Daisy's back but found nothing. The pad seemed to offer reasonable protection. I was riding with my rope halter and lead, so there was no bit in her mouth to create any issues there either. Hmmmmmmmm? So I turned to Renee and said, "Time to give it another go, since I didn't find anything obvious. But I'll tell you right out, I don't ride hyped-up horses. I do everything in my power to get them right before mounting up. This might just be old behavior, especially since she has been used to going full bore the moment your behind hits the saddle."

Sure enough, that was it. I got on her and instead of putting up with her antics, I put that energy right to work, so she hardly had time to get into trouble. But she was persistent about wanting to go. She loved the rush tearing uphill, right from the get-go, with Renee on her back. And that is exactly what had to be changed. After working my *one-rein stop* and *ballet in the saddle* exercises, we began walking around the small paddock. She could only keep it together for short periods before insisting on getting hyper and light in the front end. Before that energy built too high, I'd change direction again and again. She kept it together longer and longer until she made it, and I was able to ride her around on a slack rein. Her head was finally relaxed and lowered as she licked her lips in a sign of compliance, as if to say, "Okay, now I get it. We can do this s-l-o-w-l-y, rationally, not in the panic zone I've known forever."

It was a good place to leave both Daisy and Renee.

"I know I've thrown a whole lot at you here, Renee. It is a lot to digest in one session. You'll have to just get quiet and really think about my program. It's logical. We're using Daisy's energy constructively and promoting safety for both of you with the circling and one-rein stops. Watch my "Discover" DVD over and over until it makes perfect sense; then begin on the ground and progress into the saddle. And remember," I smiled as I shook her hand. "I'm just a phone call away if you need help."

Renee was elated. Now she had a roadmap. A seed was planted that could grow into a bright future for her and Daisy.



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

John Sharp's Legacy

"Visions of horses… make the moment brighter, inspire respect, and make the heartbeat faster." – The founders of the Sunshine Horse Lovers Club, in If Wishes Were Horses (1991)

The scene was again all too familiar: yet another untouchable mustang. But this situation was a bit more complicated. The last handler was the grandson of one of the finest horsemen of the last century… none other than John Sharp of Prineville, Oregon.

John and I had met eight years earlier when he was eighty-four-years young. I'd witnessed him taming wild horses (mustangs) with merely a length of bamboo pole. And as we worked side by side, he was getting three horses gentled to my one! Most important, they remained calm, most of them, throughout the entire process. In a half day I became completely in awe of this master of horsemanship and threw my antiquated techniques overboard to embrace his evolved approach.

Today thousands of wild horses are gentled using John's highly successful sequence that begins with a simple twelve-foot length of bamboo. Today professional horsemen, prison inmates, and novices alike have adopted Sharp's sixty-year-old approach that humanely has wild horses trusting the human to the point of allowing touching, handling, and leading, all typically in less than two hours. And now after applying this method for the past seven years, my personal challenge has evolved to accomplish this without the horse ever breaking into a sweat. In fact, I am so taken with this process that I have produced a video on this remarkable success. It is called "Pole Gentling the Wild Horse." And I give thanks to my friend John Sharp every single time one of these

videos goes out the door because I know this is the most humane and expedient approach to this delicate and exceedingly dangerous challenge.

On With the Story

I arrived at John and Joyce Sharp's ranch just before Thanksgiving in the year 2005. Our friendship of eight years brought me to this welcoming doorstep anytime I was within reasonable driving distance, and now, with a couple days off between clinics in Oregon and Washington, this was like coming home. Two horse friends, Bob Claymier and Chas Frame, descended with me upon John Sharp's Corral, the name of the ranch, about mid-afternoon on a very raw, early winter day. This typically arid country was cloaked in an inversion that made us feel as though we were being trapped in a frigid cloud. It was truly a bone-chilling afternoon, and the friendliness of the Sharp household was like a warm and welcome blanket.

John, by then ninety-two and on oxygen permanently, was his jolly and gregarious self. His bride Joyce, decades his junior, gave me a hearty hug as the three of us visitors entered the cozy house. There was an aura of peace and well-being that just pervaded the ranch. The animals were all friendly and as inviting as John and Joyce. It always felt right to be with these high-quality folks.

It wasn't long before we heard about an untouchable mustang that had recently been in a wreck with the Sharps' grandson, Brandon. Soon after they'd told the story, and knowing full well that my friends would cherish their time with master-horseman John Sharp, I volunteered to help Joyce feed the critters and we exited back into the bitterly cold and dreary day.

As we walked down to the arena where the tractor and hay wagon awaited, we came upon the subject horse. A stout sorrel of about 14-1 hands with a couple of white socks, the horse bolted into the far corner as we approached. He seemed ready to jump right out of his skin at any provocation.

"That's the one—Thunder—that got away from Brandon and ran all the way back to Pete's place a mile away. By the time he got there the saddle was pretty well destroyed. Brandon hasn't been

able to get a hand on him since. Think you can help him out?" Joyce asked.

"Sure. I'm a bit rusty with the wild ones, though. Haven't worked with one in a year or so. You may have to do a little coaching and help me out, but I'll just bet we can get this pieced back together," I replied with a well-covered hint of anguish underneath my words.

I'd had a similar situation about twenty hours earlier with another wigged-out horse that others had failed with. My heart had been in my throat for a good hour and a half as I'd worked with this rangy and very jumpy three-year-old quarter horse. But I'd succeeded reasonably well and the horse had come a long, long way in that time. At fifty-five years of age, I asked myself what in God's name I was doing getting into these highly dangerous situations. When would I grow up?

Joyce and I fed their colorful lot of horses that were mostly paints of black and white persuasion. Their famous stallion, Red Deck, had sired hundreds of successful offspring. He was a striking, twenty-year-old tobiano who just recently was beginning to show his age and slow down a bit. But today he strutted around his domain like a peacock in front of an admiring female. The pen itself was impressive and constructed of massive six-inch round, metal piping painted a soft green that had faded in years of exposure to the harsh elements typical of this region. Now this was a pen truly fit for John's special horse.

The end of the day was quickly darkening as we walked back to the cozy house to find John spinning yarns for my friends. Chas and Bob were just soaking it all in while encouraging John's willing participation. And John Sharp could spin a yarn to beat 'em all. He had more stories in his psyche and experience of eighty-plus years with horses than probably any person alive today, seriously. And he had the memory of an elephant. He could mention names, dates and details from six, seven, and even eight decades earlier as he recalled riding freight trains during the Depression and wrangling horses fresh off the open range. His memories were fascinating and accurate, and descriptive way beyond my own short experience of a mere twenty years. This

man had taught me volumes in the years I'd known him. To be taken seriously by him as a horseman is my greatest accolade.

Chas had to catch a plane out of Portland that evening so bade his farewell. Bob and I later shared a wonderful meal with the Sharps that evening and retired early after a long day of travel.

Brandon's Story

Brandon was a bright, athletic, articulate man in his mid-twenties, living in the bunkhouse next door. He welcomed us into his quarters after dinner, and as Bob settled on the sofa-bed and I on the floor for the night, we became acquainted with this engaging prodigy. Brandon had grown up with horses and then drifted toward the bright lights of the city as so many kids do. Now he was back on the ranch helping the aging grandfather he so loved and respected. And Brandon was fearless. He had absolutely no idea how quickly it could all turn from a calm situation into an out-of-control wreck. He was tight and fit and built like a linebacker and reeked of a "bring it on" attitude. We jawed for a while then turned down the heat and settled in for a restful night in the cozy bunkhouse.

The sound of the feed tractor putt-putting by woke us to another morning of heavy fog and bitter cold. Brandon had promised homemade biscuits and gravy, and we all settled at the dining table for a hearty breakfast and great conversation. It was then agreed that John and I would move onto our other pastime, playing cards, while Brandon braved the cold and caught the mustang.

John and I had a history of horses, cards, and once in a while a dollop of Black Velvet after finishing with the horses. This morning it was coffee with a dollop of crème. I arranged the cribbage board and John then proceeded to pull one of his come-from-behind acts and beat me in the home stretch. This was not uncommon. His aged arthritic hands made card handling difficult, so I arranged the cards and handed them to him. I did all the shuffling and dealing as he watched me narrowly.

"I've got to keep a close eye on you at all times, Frank," he chided as I deftly handled the cards.

"I need every advantage in my favor when playing with a card shark like you." I smiled back. We just loved to rib each other when it came to cards.

Then in walked Brandon, with the halter in hand. Not a good sign. He was clearly frustrated.

"What's going on out there, Grandson?" asked John with a tinge of humor to soften any hint of attitude.

"I can only get so close before he bolts off. He just won't have anything to do with the halter the moment I reach for him. I mean he is really freaked out. And it's really cold out there. I gotta warm up a bit." Brandon rubbed his hands. "And hey, Granddad, it's time for your morning cocktail. You guys can keep playing cards. Who's winning anyway?" As Brandon chatted, his frustration seemed to melt away.

He fixed John's immunizer with the medications and John puffed away at it like a cigar as we moved on to our next favorite game, one called Pitch. This was a faster game, though a bit more complicated and I had to refresh John's memory on the details. He caught on like a fox in the henhouse and gave me a real whooping that first game. I rebounded soundly in the second, and then we proceeded onto the tiebreaker. And it was right down to the nitty-gritty, nip and tuck right to the finish, as one more time John Sharp slipped across the finish line just ahead of me. I moaned and groaned as he gloated something about "giving Sonny another lesson." It was all in good fun and I was now ready to face the wild horse that couldn't be caught.

Joyce and I watched as Brandon attempted to halter the jittery animal. Just as soon as he reached out to actually touch the horse, off the animal bolted to the other end of the 20'x 40' paddock. His comfort was at the far end, the muddy area close to horses on the other side of the massive lodge-pole fence. The slippery mud was downright dangerous, and I wasn't about to attempt to handle this sketched-out animal in that part of the pen. I shook my head. So often we are handicapped by our environment when handling horses. But there weren't a lot of choices today and it was really cold—and I had to get down the road. Tomorrow was Thanksgiving and I was headed up toward Seattle later today.

"I think it's time for the pole, Frank," Joyce suggested.

"You want to do it, Joyce?" I slipped out with a little hope she might take me up on this generous invitation.

"No. He's way too quick for me," was Joyce's simple reply. She handed me the twelve foot pole and I eased into the pen, trying to maintain a non-threatening stature. Thunder hightailed it down to the far end into the mud and watched my slow approach with trepidation. This horse just didn't want to deal with humans anymore. I offered the pole and after about thirty seconds he reached his nose out and took an investigative sniff.

"He's been poled before," Joyce informed me.

Wasting no time, I calmly lifted the pole over his head and back behind him. I got no reaction, so I placed the pole firmly onto the horse's withers. Then after maybe twenty seconds I began working the pole back and forth, first on his neck, then up his mane almost to his ears, then back down into the saddle area and to the dock of his tail. He was completely at ease with all this and before long I was rubbing his back and rump vigorously with the end of the pole. He didn't really melt into my touch as I'd hoped, but he sure handled it well, so I began to ease in closer. That was all it took to send him spurting off, mud a-flying, right into the corner where he slipped and almost fell, then he raced to the other end into the three sided shed up near the gate.

"Whew, he sure is explosive," I commented.

"He's a hot one," Joyce said. "He's a fifteen-year-old that Rick and Kitty started some time ago on contract from BLM." Kitty was John's granddaughter and a very competent horsewoman in her own right. Her husband Rick was a superb trainer as well and together they made a great team. Joyce continued, "They took on a bunch of older horses and got them gentled down pretty well and most were adopted. But this guy was just too explosive for the adopters, so we ended up with him. He's not too bad once you get a halter on him, though."

I followed him up into the shed and blocked his exit while trying to settle him with a soothing tone. "Easy, big fella. Eaaaaaaaaaasy now," I cooed over and over as much in an attempt to settle myself as to help him. These explosive horses

could run you over instantly with the least provocation. I zipped my coat a little higher and with the sound of that noise, he shot past me in a flash as my heart took a serious leap. He could have kicked my head off, had that been his intention. My heart raced wildly. Why was I doing this?

"He is just so hyper-sensitive. Always been like this?" I asked.

"He's definitely worse since the accident. I used to be able to walk right up and halter him, no problem," Brandon filled me in.

"I think we'll need the cotton rope about now, don't you agree, Joyce?"

"Yep. I'll run and get it," Joyce said as she hurried up to the tack room. Joyce wanted a success here while she had me helping out.

I pushed Thunder back into the shed as Joyce returned with a thirty-foot length of half inch cotton rope.

"Put a clove hitch on the end with about three feet of rope hanging off the end," Joyce reminded me.

I deftly tied the clove on the end, proud of myself for remembering my Boy Scout days and that knot, especially in front of knot expert Joyce.

Thunder was still in the shed, and I deftly approached him with the pole and rope. He didn't seem disturbed when I rubbed the rope on his side, then over the other side and worked it back and forth. But I'd tied the knot too tight and it wouldn't come loose as I worked it on his withers. This didn't bother the horse, but I wasn't able to keep the progress, so I lifted it off his back and loosened up the knot. This time I was able to slip the knot off the end and, with a couple of tries, push enough rope to the offside so that a small pile of rope gathered on the ground. This allowed me to lower the pole and pull the excess rope toward me v-e-r-y s-l o-w-l-y. I did not want to alarm the horse for any reason and have him jet off again, especially with ropes and poles in this confining space.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeasy, Thunder," I repeated steadily. And this time, for some reason he believed me and stayed still enough for me to gather the rope, discard the pole, and begin sawing the cotton rope lightly on his neck. Great. Back and forth, up and

down his neck I sawed, all the while reassuring him in as calm a tone as I could muster. Believe me—my heart was in my throat. Then walking out to the end of the rope with both ends in my hand I gave a slight cluck and a tiny bit of pressure, and this super-charged wild horse walked calmly out of the shed behind me.

"You sure were right about him settling once a rope is on him. What a huge change," I commented, completely surprised. I led him over to the gate and gathered my halter/lead combo and arranged it so I wouldn't be fumbling around when the time came. Back into the shed we walked and then I turned us to face outside so he would feel less constricted. If he needed to leave, I wanted him to have an easy exit. There was an old steel bathtub in the corner that just shouted out danger. I began stroking his withers and neck and cooing my soothing song over and over as I rubbed the halter on his neck, then reached over his neck to bring the open end back to my side and tie it. He shook in fear but didn't leave. I offered the nose loop and he avoided it, turning his nose away toward the offside. We played this game for a very long minute before I found his nose and was able to tie off the end. Success and big relief.

I moved out in front and to the side as I wasn't too excited about being run over and he darted right out into the paddock, hit the end of the lead and ran a good half dozen high-speed circles around me. But he wasn't pulling away so I began winding him down like a snail and eventually got a hand on his side to comfort him and help him get stopped. Success!

Into the Indoor Arena

A short distance from Thunder's paddock was a small indoor arena connected to a business-like roundpen. This was a perfect place to continue his education. Brandon juggled a couple horses and Thunder and I entered the arena. My pupil was all wide-eyed as he took in the confines of this old building, but he wasn't one to settle easily at any time, so I expected that. The stroking and settling procedures that had served me so well with so many horses did little to settle this hyped-up horse. With his boundless

energy I decided to put him to work and try to use it constructively with the sixth exercise of my program, the one called *Ballet on the Ground*.

Driving Thunder in a circle and then asking him to face up and head out the opposite direction at least had him using his boundless stamina. After about a dozen changes and with dust heavily permeating the air, he seemed to relax a bit. I tied him to a heavy beam along the wall and the three of us exited to breathe some fresh air and allow the dust to settle.

"I'd like to get him saddled and then break for lunch. He can carry the saddle around for a while and get relaxed about it. Sound like a good plan?" I asked.

"I'm hungry," answered Brandon. "So yes, let's do that." Joyce nodded her approval.

Brandon had saddled Thunder a good many times, so I was happy to watch him take over that part. And the horse handled it fairly well. Both parties remained calm and once the cinch was secured, I stepped in. My favorite settling exercise is slapping the saddle with the lead as the horse moves quietly around in a circle. This is the final test I require of all horses before mounting—every single time! If a horse is goosey or has a propensity to buck, this exercise usually reveals the hole.

I began with a light tapping with the lead and almost instantly Thunder shot forward. This only told me that I would have to begin with much less pressure. After settling him down I started anew, this time stroking his neck with my left hand and patting the saddle with my right. Time after time I began light and built until he was bothered, then backed off and comforted him as we returned to home base. Within about ten minutes he was actually walking around me and coping with the lead hitting the saddle. This was a good place to leave him, so I led him outdoors into the roundpen and removed the halter. Time for lunch.

A Nice Long Break for Lunch

The warmth of the house was so welcome to the three of us and the good hot meal as well. We took our time about returning to Thunder, giving him plenty of time to chill. John had to give me

another lesson in cards, and a couple of coffees warmed us to the point of being ready to face the music again.

I'm a great believer in what I call *passive training*. Leaving a horse saddled, preferably able to move, is an example of this. Hanging plastic bags where horses live, above their food and water, is another example. Tarps on the ground in front of feeders or waterers help horses learn to tolerate life. In the meantime, we're doing other things as the horse is working through these challenges. So, Thunder was being trained while we were eating and warming up.

Finally, we could no longer avoid the work at hand. I had miles to cover before dark, so Brandon and I walked back to the roundpen. I hung back and encouraged Brandon to halter the horse, but Thunder wasn't too interested in that.

"Okay, Brandon, time to fish for a mustang," I announced as I handed him the pole and cotton rope.

He had earlier watched me closely and now he very deftly copied my actions. In no time he had the rope over Thunder's neck and was leading him. I helped secure the halter and again worked *Ballet on the Ground* and continued the process through the slapping of the lead on the saddle as he relaxed into that exercise. I prefer to use a snaffle bit for the actual riding, and Thunder accepted the bit well. I drove him off in each direction and wound him back down to a stop several times on each side before I was sufficiently satisfied that the horse was ready.

"You ready to ride this renegade, Brandon?"

Brandon nodded eagerly and I helped steady the horse for a half mounting and I wound the horse down to a stop several times in each direction with Brandon lying over the saddle. Then the moment of truth was upon us as Brandon mounted. The horse was nervous but didn't melt down and we immediately reassured him by asking his head to come to each side while standing. I then coached Brandon as he performed one-rein stops in each direction until it was reasonably smooth for all parties and then backed off and let him ride the horse.

Thunder was uncertain and very impulsive, starting and stopping abruptly.

"Push him right through those abrupt stops so he comes down slow and rational," I instructed.

Brandon caught on fast and began pushing the horse with his whole body and pelvis, getting into sync with the horse's rhythm.

"Now reach forward and knead those withers while hanging onto the reins. This will settle both of you," I said.

Before long the two were making smooth transitions up and down. This seemed like a good place to exit but not before leaving Brandon with specific instructions about subsequent rides and thorough groundwork.

I walked back to the bunk house and organized my gear, then reported to Joyce and John before bidding a farewell. But I just had to take one last peek at the team of two in the roundpen. They were moving smoothly with grace and confidence as I drove by and got turned around. I stopped the car and rolled down the window.

"Brandon, it's been a pleasure working with you," I said. "You have everything it takes to succeed with Thunder and if you can turn him into a confident riding horse, well, you'll be a whole lot closer to being the horseman your granddad is, because this is one challenging horse. Get through this one and you, my friend, are a horseman!"



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Tia Has Diamond in Her Eyes

"A horse is worth more than riches." – Spanish Proverb

The day had an ominous start. As I looked out of my bedroom window, I saw the fuzzy white form of my 20-year-old Anglo/Arab through the thick lodge pole forest. He would be my school horse today as I worked with a student flying in from Denver to arrive at my ranch early in the afternoon. But Lakota wasn't moving or—his usual preference—soaking up the sun on that cool October morning. Instead, he was standing in the position to relieve himself yet didn't seem to be getting that done either. Something wasn't right. Time to investigate.

Hurriedly, I dressed and bee-lined it out to find my horse all out of sorts. He was bloated, breathing heavily and distinctly in the position of trying to pass manure. This was one uncomfortable horse. "What timing," I thought, and then hurried back into the house to regroup and assess the situation.

I had reserved this weekend to work with a young lady from Denver who was seeking accreditation status to teach my ***7-Step Safety System***. Tia was flying in to work with me and Lakota for two full days and was probably driving to the airport at that very moment. I knew immediately that I'd have to find other horses to work with as well as get my horse back to the good health which had been the trademark of his entire life.

I made a mental list of horse folks in the area as I called the local vet and received instructions for treating colic. Getting Lakota moving was of utmost importance and of course a laxative

would be a good idea. So, I took him for a long walk, cell phone in hand.

Tammy's Herd

The first person who came to mind was my barber, Tammy Kent. Tammy kind of collected horses, dogs, cats, goats and most anything that showed up at her doorstep. She was a soft touch who simply loved animals. I could easily relate. Fortunately, she was home.

"Sure, I've got some horses your student can work with. In fact, I've got one in particular that could use some work. She's a six-year-old, dapple-grey Anglo/Arab with one ride on her. We've just been out of sync as far as getting her going under saddle. She's a real sweetheart, but a bit flighty. You know the quantum energy of an Arabian/thoroughbred cross, right?"

"Know all about it, Tammy. It's the same breeding as my old guy, Lakota Breeze. Excessive energy that needs plenty of direction. Hey, this sounds perfect. We'll see you this afternoon."

Tammy and I made arrangements to meet mid-afternoon. At least one immediate problem was solved as Lakota, and I walked on around the half-mile loop that led back to my place. He moved out better with every step and I felt a weight begin to lift off my shoulders as the cloudless fall day gradually warmed.

Tia Helton arrived at just the time she predicted, 1:30. She was a tall, dark-haired, athletic gal with an engaging smile and she shook my hand with genuine enthusiasm. We were immediately at ease with each other as I explained the situation. She nodded understandingly, changed her clothes, and off we headed to Tammy Kent's ranch with implements packed for an afternoon of horse training.

Tammy and her husband Wade were just heading down to the river to get Diamond when we arrived.

"We'll wait here and play with the lovely horse right here in the close paddock," I suggested as they drove off, stock trailer in tow. I grabbed one of my rope halters with a twelve-foot lead and Tia and I walked over to an attractive light gray mare who gazed at us invitingly across the fence.

"Have at it, Tia," I suggested. "Just start working the steps and I'll jump in with pointers as I need to. Understand that I want you to get as much out of these two days as possible, so don't be offended if I give you a good dose of constructive criticism. This is so much about you teaching the system down the road, so I'll try to mention the typical pitfalls that most students fall into. Okay?"

"That's why I'm here, Frank," she answered with a smile.

"I think by now you know I can handle just about anything," I said.

"So have at it then."

Tia had a wonderful sense of touch and immediately found the melting zones on that very fortunate gray mare that just delighted in the attention. She was putty in Tia's hands in seconds and I was impressed. Tia shared that same love of animals that so many of us innately possess deep in our souls; it showed loud and clear.

The clatter of the trailer and commotion of the new horse became progressively louder as Tammy and Wade turned the corner into the yard. We left gray-mare and approached the trailer to get a glimpse of Tia's student. Through the slats of the trailer, we could see a dark gray with heavy dappling, stomping around nervously and screaming at the top of her lungs. This was one very agitated horse with a whole lot of white in her eyes.

Tia and I glanced at each other with mutual concern. "This looks pretty interesting, Tia," I said. "You ready?"

Tia had a worried look about her, almost perplexed.

"Don't worry. I won't get you into anything dangerous. My promise. Really," I assured her.

Meeting Diamond

With a tremendous leap that about pulled great big Wade off his feet, Diamond came charging off the trailer, head sky-high, snorting fire and whinnying like a lost colt. Wade jerked down hard on the lead and Diamond's head shot even higher and more white showed in those already zoned-out eyes. But the jerk did get the horse's attention long enough for him to get control and move her into the small roundpen.

As Diamond ripped around the pen, Tammy gave us instructions and set up a couple of chairs for us. Then she hit the road for the rest of the day and allowed us free rein with her once-ridden Anglo/Arab. Diamond was a magnificently conformed horse of incredible athletic ability evidenced by her rollbacks and graceful changes of direction. It took a few minutes for this to sink in and begin to add up as to why had she been ridden only once in her life. I suspected that Tammy had left out a few details and surmised she had gotten into trouble and wasn't too excited about getting back on this super-charged horse. But that was all just fine because no one was about to get on Diamond without a clear invitation. And the invite would only come when the horse was right. Period.

My Story -- 7 Steps to Safety

Sixteen years earlier I'd gotten into trouble on a very athletic horse that had catapulted me right into the side of a solid wooden roundpen. The loud snap of my collarbone ensured that I would not be riding for a couple of months, so I had plenty of time to think things over. My solemn promise to myself was to create a safety system before mounting any horse ever again. And I did just that. In fact, I did it so well that several major horse magazines wrote it up and my career was launched.

Today I travel the world teaching the 7 Steps that help riders stay safe. It is the core of my teaching, and the demand continues to grow. *Build it and they will come*. Well, they just keep coming. And today Tia would not ride until both she and Diamond knew this sequence of exercises really well and the horse was 100% ready. That was my promise to Tia and myself.

Quantum Energy

I had the wonderful advantage with Diamond of understanding her breeding very, very well. My recovering horse, Lakota Breeze, had taught me volumes in the eighteen years we'd co-habited. As I'd said time after time, "Hot plus hot equals boiling" when referring to this combination of two high-strung breeds. In fact, only in the last several seasons had I

returned in the spring to a horse that didn't need "the fresh taken off," as my good friend Mike Brown referred to the first encounter in the spring. Yes, I did indeed understand this exact breeding well and it had been a gift in disguise many years ago before I had any idea what boiling energy was all about.

With horses of this nature there is often just too much energy to even begin to communicate. So, then it's about trying to use that energy constructively and get the horse focused on the handler. Monty Roberts and John Lyons have made careers in the art of roundpenning, and this is exactly what needed to take place to begin to connect with the very sketched-out Diamond.

"You've studied Monty, right?" I inquired of Tia.

"Yes. I think I have a pretty good understanding of what he calls '*Join Up*'."

"Well, have at it, girl. And just don't get too close to that hind-end. I don't think she's mean, just bursting with energy."

And so it was. Tia entered that roundpen with determination and optimism. And she did pretty well. After a series of turns to the outside with Tia very much the director, she dipped her shoulder and invited Diamond to join her. It took several attempts to actually get her hands on the wired-up horse, but within probably ten minutes she was using her instinctive animal talents to melt Diamond in the first step of my system, the one we call *bonding*.

Bonding with Diamond

Most every horse person believes they have that special bonded relationship with their horses. On some level this is probably true. But the depth of this bonding and trust-building that can be reached varies dramatically.

Years earlier I'd witnessed Linda Tellington Jones almost literally melt hyped-up some Arabians at the Race of Champions near Cameron, Montana. I watched in awe as these over-the-top Arabs let down in her healing hands. Their eyes began to glaze over in sheer pleasure as she stroked their ears and eyes, and the insides of their mouths and noses. That very day, in a mere two hours, my life changed as I began to apply and modify these

techniques to fit me, my approach, and my future program. And now, having taught thousands how to melt horses through touch, I've realized the value of this first step. Most important, Tia understood it as well. And she was good at it because her heart was in it.

In a very short while Tia had Diamond quite relaxed and trusting and enjoying her attentions. From there she asked for the head to drop and then be guided to the side, all of which Diamond complied with happily. This is the second step in my program called *take and give.* And while Diamond's tail wasn't completely relaxed, it wasn't clamped down tight either. This was another good sign since a tight tail usually signifies an uptight horse. But now the moment of truth was upon us as Tia prepared for movement. You see, the fourth step we call *the dance begins*, because this is where the movement begins.

The Dance Begins

As Tia positioned herself to drive Diamond forward, the pitch of high energy seemed almost to send an aura over that little roundpen. At the slightest provocation from Tia's driving-hand, Diamond shot irrationally forward—so hard, fast, and unexpectedly, that the lead pulled right through Tia's hand. As that twelve-foot lead chased her, Diamond ripped around the pen, out of control in a display of completely irrational behavior.

"Well, I guess we're getting a feel for her irrational side, huh, Tia?" I remarked.

"I'll bet she's been whipped-on, Frank."

"Sure, looks like it to me. Believe me, the rough cowboy attitude is alive and well in these parts. You'll have to do everything very slowly. I'm guessing your body language will get the job done. But you push too hard with your driving hand, and she'll go right over the top. So eeeeeeasy now, girl—I mean you, Tia," I said with a warm smile. "This is going to be quite a challenge for you. About perfect, I'd say." I had a very good feel for this challenging situation. In reality, this was exactly the horse we needed for Tia to learn and for me to teach. What a blessing the morning illness of Lakota had suddenly become.

After several too-fast go-arounds of the roundpen, Tia stopped. "I'm getting light-headed. I've got to eat something," she said.

"No problem. Let's head into town and get you something. Gotta have fuel to work, especially with this horse."

We put a bucket of water into the pen for Diamond and took a half hour break. It was a good chance to talk things over, debrief the last hour, and form a plan of action. A few nuts and some hydration brought Tia right back and she was ready and eager by the time we pulled back into Tammy's.

Tia Becomes Graceful

Tia now entered the roundpen prepared to work with this high-strung horse at a level of subtlety she'd most likely never had to employ. But still at the very slightest provocation, Diamond went right over the top. Even I hadn't seen such a hot horse in some time. This horse would whirl on two legs and just fly out the opposite direction when Tia so much as lifted her hand just a hair too fast. This was a hot, hot horse that had already been worked a good hour and a half and was still just way out there.

"Tia," I counseled. "Just try to use your body language to drive the horse. Don't twirl the lead at all. It's just too much for Diamond to handle. Get into the driving position and set it all up so there is only one simple option, to go forward quietly."

Tia pulled back for a few moments and just kind of thought about what I'd said. She was obviously used to having to push horses to get real impulsion. This was a horse of a different color for her. Then she moved into position with Diamond against the side of the roundpen and placed herself just off the horse's shoulder on the near side. With her left palm open and held up toward the horse's eye, she gave a soft cluck and patted her leg too hard. Again, Diamond shot forward irrationally, hit the end of the lead and pulled Tia forward abruptly, which only heightened Diamond's spirit even more and allowed her to pull the lead right out of Tia's hand yet again.

"Lemme show you what I mean," I said. "I've dealt with so many horses that I can offer the slightest level of go and hopefully get rational movement. She might be about at the end of her rope

for the day as well. And we sure want to leave it in a good place, you know?" Tia nodded and backed out of the pen as I took the lead. I set the horse up just as I had instructed her to do, and with my slightest kiss Diamond moved forward at a jumpy walk that verged on the edge of the trot. I allowed her to walk right out around me a good half dozen circles before snailing her down to a stop. With her head curved into the girth-area, I loved her up and worked my index finger into her mouth. She suddenly exhaled deeply, dropped her head, and licked her lips with gusto.

"Okay, come on in and do the same. Then we'll call it a day. She's had enough and it's getting cold."

The sun was now dipping behind clouds to the west, and the temperature was dropping fast. Tia emulated my subtle go-forward cue with her body and a slight kiss and Diamond performed like a champ. She walked around Tia quietly until she asked her to wind down to the stop. And there Diamond found that wonderful place yet again, back to the womb, safety, love, and comfort. Tia loved her up and gently removed the halter, and now Diamond had no interest in leaving Tia. They had both found this safe place to regroup and neither wanted it to end.

We turned Diamond out into the big paddock with a couple of miniature horses and then drove home, discussing the day's progress the entire ten miles back to Windrider Ranch. We both felt good about the day and were eager to return the next morning.

"I like that horse, Frank. She's really a sweetheart, has great athletic ability, and is simply a beautiful creature. I might just buy her as a project horse, you know," quipped Tia.

"Tomorrow will tell the whole story," I said. "If she's still bonkers and hasn't digested much from today, then I'd walk away. But if we do see some good changes and she is a more accepting and relaxed horse, well, then I think she'd be a fabulous project for you."

Tia rested as I took Lakota for a good long walk before dinner. He was improving and I found fresh manure in his paddock, so the panic button wasn't bright red anymore.

Sunday morning, late October in eastern Idaho spells out cold temperatures. Tia and I started the day by reviewing the video

she'd sent several weeks earlier. She was able to see her progress very clearly and we discussed in depth aspects of her presentation. She soaked it all up like a sponge and just couldn't wait to get her hands back on Diamond. But first I insisted on working a few remedial exercises with Tia to improve her timing, positioning, and body-language. We then grabbed some munchies, drinks, and my saddle and drove over to Tammy's place late in the morning.

Diamond was out grazing and cavorting with the minis when we arrived. Tia called out to her, and you'd have thought they were long lost friends. Diamond couldn't get over to greet us fast enough.

"I think you're going to be taking this one home Tia," I said as the two melted into each other. "You two have really connected."

Tia was speechless, as she felt the same emotion for this wonderful mare. At this point, apparently both their hearts had now entered into the equation.

"Listen, today get right into it," I said. "I mean it should only take a few minutes to get right back to where we were yesterday. Look what you've already got working."

The two of them were dancing around in no time. Tia's subtlety and Diamond's understanding of what she was asking were really working. It was truly beautiful to watch the two of them as the day warmed up.

When it came time to up the ante a bit with the fifth step, *desensitizing,* Diamond became noticeably more animated, but at a reasonable level. Within a half hour Tia was tossing the lead all over the horse, then working a plastic bag on the end of my extendable wand all over Diamond's body as she tolerated it, all the while moving rationally. And rational movement is the key in this important exercise.

Time for *Ballet on the Ground*

The final step in my sequence is a driving exercise that culminates in a change of direction as the horse performs first a turn on the forehand, facing up to the handler, and then is asked to rock back onto the haunches and head out in the opposite direction. It is amazingly effective to connect brain and feet as

energy is used constructively. This is relatively easy for the horse, but not so easy for humans to really master.

Tia asked the horse to move out and then, reaching up the lead, asked for the face-up. Everything went well until she asked Diamond to head out the opposite direction, and then all hell broke loose. Diamond's head shot into the air and her eyes whitened noticeably as she darted off to Tia's right.

"Wow. That was a very big deal for her. Try the other side," I suggested.

The other side was a whole lot smoother. Not perfect, but much better; clearly, we had a more relaxed horse going from the right to the left.

"Okay, now make the change again, Tia," I instructed, pushing her a bit. Again, Diamond resisted going out to the right. "Yep. I think I've got it figured out. She's got an eye changing problem," I announced with almost a sigh of relief that I'd uncovered the major phobia that had been hidden behind her impulsive, irrational behavior. "You see, she really is fearful of going from the left to the right side. There's a blind spot in there that really has her bothered. We get that one fixed and I do believe she'll calm right down."

Tia was looking blankly at me. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Frank. Never heard of such a problem. Explain."

"Some horses just have a real hard time changing eyes. You see, they focus on one side with their eyes and brain. Then suddenly we ask for them to make the change to the other side. There is a moment called the blind spot, when they lose sight of us completely. Until they learn to handle this comfortably, it can be quite traumatic, even flip-out stuff. This very phobia gets a lot of unknowing riders into trouble. But I believe we can help her through this," I said. "Let me take over and watch very closely."

Helping a Troubled Horse Through Eye-Changing Issues

I walked into the roundpen and loved Diamond up to bring back that trust and relaxation. She enjoyed my attention and seemed to settle down a bit. Then I positioned her to face the side of the roundpen head-on, perpendicular. From there it was a matter of

pushing her with my open hand extended up toward her left eye and clucking. She resisted and tried to come back into me, but I persisted and she finally bolted off to the right impulsively, clearly bothered. I backed up and slapped my hand against my own leg to try to catch her right eye and pull her toward me, but she didn't want to have anything to do with me on that right side and immediately turned back to the left.

"You see what's going on here, Tia? She is blocking me out on the right. It's real scary for her. But I've got to persist until she can make that change and turn and face me and pick me up with both eyes. This is pretty complicated stuff that slips by most trainers. And it's relatively easy to accomplish out here in the open air. The real test is inside a stall with four solid walls. Unfortunately, we don't have a set-up like that here at Tammy's."

Time after time I pushed her from one side to the other, driving her with outside turns until she was finally able to come through and pick me up with both eyes and actually walk toward me after that change. It was traumatic for her, and she was very impulsive at first. But after about a dozen changes, she finally settled in and accepted this initially disturbing exercise.

"Okay, Tia, now you jump in and do the same. We want her to come through the turn and actually walk toward you, so you may have to position yourself to make it easy for her by moving into her field of vision," I explained. Tia seemed to catch onto this and within ten minutes Diamond was completely relaxed and was changing eyes comfortably from both sides.

"I think she's ready to ride, don't you, Frank?" Tia inquired.

"Let's get her saddled and do a little more desensitizing. I want to see her moving out reeeeeeal rationally as she handles you slapping the lead on the saddle assertively, with real gusto," I said. "Then I'll feel that she's ready."

Diamond handled the saddling better than I thought she would have. Good sign. But when Tia started driving her and slapping the saddle, it all fell apart again. This sent Diamond right over the top as she moved off in a herky-jerky, impulsive manner.

"Do you see how impulsive she is?" I asked. "That is what I call irrational behavior. Irrational gets us hurt. Rational keeps us safe. She must handle this calmly before she's ridden."

It was a difficult situation for Tia to perform and for me to explain. Her experience with handling the lead as the horse moved was just rusty enough to cause the horse discomfort. Sensing that it would be best for me to take over, I deftly made the suggestion and entered the roundpen. Again, I settled Diamond with deep kneading into her withers and broke her tongue loose with my index finger in the corner of her mouth. She settled noticeably and let out a long sigh.

"Good sign. When they get too bothered, they can't think but only react out of fear. So, then we have to bring them back to home-base, *bonding*. Now watch how I'll stay in here very close, even touching my shoulder to her side in support." I moved as I spoke. "I'll begin by just tapping the saddle lightly with my right hand while supporting her with my left on her neck," I explained.

Diamond was upset enough that even the slightest tapping was bothersome, so I retreated, rubbed the saddle, and stroked her neck all at the same time. And this she did handle. Then I slipped the index finger of my left hand into the corner of her mouth and began feathering her tongue as I lightly tapped the saddle. She raised her head but didn't move forward. I quit and rewarded her heartily. She enjoyed my enthusiastic praise. "Lavish praise will speed up the learning process by 60 percent. 60 percent!" I reiterated. "I like those odds."

I allowed Diamond to revel in our tiny success and then started anew. This time I was able to actually tap the saddle with the last eight inches of the lead in an overhand manner before she had to move off. Again, I praised her with gusto. It took about another fifteen minutes to help her accept the slapping of the lead on the saddle as just part of life. Only when she could finally walk around me quietly as I slapped the saddle hard, real hard, did I feel like she was ready to ride. And that was and is my final litmus test with every single horse before I mount up.

"Do you see how she has settled and is completely accepting this?" I asked Tia.

"It's so much about your timing, Frank. You're able to do it all so gracefully that she isn't scared or threatened one bit. Heck, when I do it I'm so jerky and inaccurate that it frightens her, doesn't it?" Tia answered her own question.

"Just takes time and practice. I guess after a few thousand horses a guy starts to get smooth at some of this. The only way you'll get handy with the rope is to just do it. And do it away from horses. Torture the fencepost and rail before you do it with the real thing. That way you'll be reasonably accurate when you do it with a horse, ya know?"

"Got it. Time to mount up?"

I was still just a hair nervous about Tia riding the horse, and I wasn't about to get on Diamond. I'd had some back spasms plaguing me for some time and couldn't risk getting jostled around. This was a very reactive horse that could move out from under a rider in a millisecond. "We'll just ease into this slowly and make sure she's just fine. We'll get you halfway into the saddle a couple of times on each side, with me supporting her on the ground. Then I'll lead her, with you halfway on, lying over the saddle. I don't want you swinging a leg on until she can handle the part-way stuff and stay completely calm," I explained.

And it worked exactly as I'd hoped it would. Diamond stayed relaxed as I led Tia around in each direction, culminating with several one-rein stops to each side. Then Tia mounted up and found the stirrup on the offside as I reassured Diamond from the ground. I stayed in close for several rotations in the pen and then let Tia take the reins. I stood back and watched with a wonderful sense of satisfaction. In another ten minutes Tia and Diamond were gliding around that pen like a seasoned couple who'd danced for years.

Three parties, all new to each other merely a day earlier had worked together to accomplish this very happy ending.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Ballad of the Owyhee

"Honor lies in the mane of a horse." – Herman Melville

In the summer of '98 I was invited to participate as a clinician in a fall Wild Horse Workshop in Antioch, California. A year earlier I'd become acquainted with a master horse gentler named John Sharp, and I strongly suggested that John be invited to this upcoming venue. I sensed that he would be a great addition to this group of experienced wild horse handlers. Well, that was an understatement. John and his bride, Joyce, not only showed up, but taught us all a wealth of knowledge. At that time John was a very young and spry 84 years of age. He didn't allow his years to slow him down one bit. In fact, John was gentling three horses to every one of the rest of the clinicians, indeed running circles around the rest of us. So, I quit using my antiquated techniques and gravitated to learning from the master fisherman.

Fishing for Mustangs

Fisherman? you ask.

John had developed a technique for gentling wild horses that began with using a bamboo pole to make first contact in a square pen, not a roundpen—adamantly not a roundpen. With studied moves John worked the pole all over the horse and then went fishing. Draping a length of cotton rope from the pole so it looked a lot like a fishing rod, John has caught more wild horses than I've caught rainbow trout… Well, not quite, but you get the picture.

By the final day of what was to become the first annual Wild Horse Workshop, most of us were beginning our gentling with a

12' bamboo pole. Today trainers worldwide, inmates in prison wild horse programs, and lay people are using John Sharp's horse training techniques very successfully.

These techniques are the most humane and expedient approach to the initial trust building with these fascinating creatures. In fact, at this point in my evolution with wild horses, my personal goal is to have each horse leading, backing, and tying calmly without ever breaking into a sweat; in most instances I am achieving just that, thanks to John and Joyce Sharp.

As the years and workshops went by, I was often asked when I would adopt one of these living legends, to which I usually answered, "Someday, when the right one comes along."

The Right One Does Finally Come Along

Fast forward to fall of 2001 in Toole, Utah, where I was attending a horse workshop. On the second or third day of the event I was presented with a horse that would benefit from my program. Each clinician there had their individual approach to gentling, some using roundpens, some actually creating human rounds pens, and some using square pens with poles and ropes. An attractive yearling sorrel gelding was driven into my pen. A stout horse with some obvious draft blood in his background, he was unusually calm, and with four white socks and a flaxen mane and tail, he had a strong, confident presence.

Beginning with the pole, he accepted its touch all over his body with hardly any resistance. Within minutes my hand replaced the pole, and I was scratching and rubbing him all over as he delighted in my attention. Then I tried a technique I'd only heard about, whistling into the horse's nose. Sure enough, his head cocked to the side in a sign of curiosity as I whistled directly right into his nostril. This was truly a special creature that grabbed my heart and he received an inordinate amount of my valuable time because of this connection. I decided then and there to make a project out of him and bring him along as fast and far as possible. By the time the auction started on Saturday morning, I had a very gentle horse that I knew would command a premium over the standard beginning bid. Otherwise, I would take him home, which

is what I did—and the saga of Owyhee has been one of the greatest challenges and journeys of my life and career with horses.

Now you'll note I said, "fast and far." Far is a good word; fast isn't. I've learned a very hard lesson with this horse from the Owyhee Range of north central Nevada.

My Biggest Challenge

This horse that I anticipated as being easy to start under saddle in fact turned out to be my biggest challenge. In hindsight, I have to wonder if perhaps I didn't push too hard and try to accomplish too much at the workshop. Intent on progressing him along as fast as possible, I proceeded with the pad and the saddle. He didn't want anything on his back, but my ego got caught up in proving something that, as I reflect on it, I'll never understand, save for the hard lesson. In any case Owyhee succeeded in ridding himself of the saddle and I didn't press him any farther at that point as time ran out on me and he made it abundantly clear that he just wasn't ready.

Some weeks later that fall, after being gelded, Owyhee arrived at my ranch in Idaho. He was the same confident, happy horse who loved attention and remained calm… until he was pushed, then he became a completely different animal, very hard to control and at times, frankly, downright dangerous. His wildness would take over as he kicked into flight mode with serious white in his eyes and a head waaaaaaaaaaay up high in the air. His body would tense up as his muscles tightened hard as a rock. Bringing him back to being the calm horse I thought I'd adopted wasn't an easy or a quick transition. It was an agonizingly slow process that I hadn't encountered in my twenty-year career, and I was simply at a loss to help him, but hoped time, along with my guidance, would.

With six feet of snow at my place in the winter, working horses isn't feasible, so Owyhee and Lakota, my older Anglo/Arab, went to winter camp for the next six months. I stayed in phone contact with the overseers who boarded about a hundred horses, so I knew both horses wintered well out with the herd and they were in good condition when I returned to retrieve them in the spring.

Pushing Owa into the roundpen, I anticipated having to pole gentle him after so long. I was right. He wasn't too keen on being caught, but five minutes with the pole turned him into butter. We loaded up and drove two hours back to Windrider Ranch, my place on the west side of the Tetons in Idaho.

Year Two

Once we were settled in, I was very anxious to bring Owyhee right along on this, his second year, but that just wasn't his plan. Even with utmost patience and using all the tricks I'd gained in working with dozens of other mustangs and domestics, we still weren't getting there. We had a great relationship, but he just would not tolerate certain things and I was stuck—not for one season, but for two. At one point I attempted to lay him down. I've used this technique to help overly headstrong horses that have intimidated too many humans and needed to come down a notch or two. Up to this point I'd never failed at laying down one single horse. They all made it and came out the other side far better. But not Owyhee. He would not let down his guard and relax and accept lying down. Again, I failed and was beginning to think that there might just be a screw loose with this horse that I so loved. I feared having a pasture ornament for the next twenty years. And another two years had gone by.

My brain played so many games with me as I tried to figure out this horse that I really wanted to help reach the other side. But there was a hard reality seeping slowly into my psyche. He might not make it.

His fourth year I became more creative and had him eating his meals as I stood over him on bales of hay. Then I began leaning on him. Then lying on him. Then sitting on him as he calmly ate. Finally, I had a friend lead me as I bellied him, but Owa was nervous and just couldn't move along smoothly. He was hesitant and impulsive and unsure, no matter how much I supported him.

It was so frustrating to work so hard with him day after day and not make the progress that I had achieved relatively quickly with hundreds of other horses, including mustangs. I had been successful with them within hours, but with Owyhee it was taking

years and he still wasn't there. What had I bitten off here? But I stayed the course and kept creating new challenges that finally led to mounting him late in the summer. But he still wasn't right and after several very hesitant circles in my pen, he exploded and I came off. I did get right back on and finished on a decent note, but as I lay in bed that evening completely perplexed, I decided I needed a second opinion. I just wasn't thinking and seeing this very clearly at all.

A Second Opinion

I located a young trainer in Idaho Falls who sounded experienced with difficult horses, and was a bit younger and braver, so I delivered Owyhee to Steve Farnes a week later. After about two weeks I gave Steve a call. Nope, he hadn't ridden him yet. Another couple of weeks and yes, he'd ridden my horse, but was also bucked off. I guess by now I didn't feel completely stupid about my inclinations. Steve had the horse for six weeks and when I went to pick Owa up in the middle of October of '05, Steve actually rode the horse for me to watch, first in a small dusty stall, then out. But he wouldn't even consider going into the roundpen with Owa. Oh, no. That was where he'd melted down for Steve before. He rode him around the various outside pens and runs and yes, I was impressed. He was riding the horse—but he couldn't get off of him fast enough. Both parties were clearly nervous.

Steve and I discussed his tuning up Owa in the spring and said our farewells for the winter. As I delivered Owa to winter camp, I again bid farewell to my wild horse until spring.

Spring 2006

I picked up my boys in early June. They'd both wintered well again and Owa had filled out even more. While he was a little stand-offish at first, we reconnected with a good *bonding* session, and he quickly became my best buddy again—on the ground. The next month or so I worked on just about anything I could think of to heighten his confidence and help him relax. I ponied him on rides around my place, making sure to spend time overhead and on each side, touching him in the poll area, and all over his back, while desensitizing his sides with my foot. This was difficult for

him at first, but with time and patience, he progressed to acceptance. I drove him over poles on the ground at liberty and on the lead. I built a labyrinth and walked and backed him through it. We did tarp therapy in a big way, both standing and walking across tarps and carrying one enveloped around him. I set up jumps in my arena and drove him over them as he delighted in gathering himself and just leaping with real gusto. He loved all the challenges when well presented.

Papaya, Mango, Tortillas and my Garden, too!

Fairly early in the summer I brought home a promising looking papaya from my favorite market. It took almost a week to ripen, and then eating it with a squeeze of lime and a touch of salt, well, that's really living in my book. As I walked outside to toss the papaya skin into my compost, I had a strange and kind of naughty thought, would Owa be interested in this papaya skin? Why not? He didn't even pause to check it out. If his Dad presents it, he eats it. This was the funniest thing I'd ever seen, as that bright orange papaya slowly disappeared down his throat. He was completely absorbed, eyes glazed over, slobbering away.

And so it went from there. You name it; this character of a horse that had melted my heart would just gobble down almost anything. And it kind of became a game with me. In my mind I was constantly asking myself, what won't he eat? Over time I presented him with mango skins, avocado skins, tortillas (preferably corn), cooked fish skin, rice, cheese, yogurt, pasta, and left-over salad. He was a regular disposal, and my compost heap was rapidly shrinking.

Later in the summer at one of my campsites in Yellowstone, I found a small nylon bag that a previous camper had left behind. As I rifled through the bag, I found a good variety of tasty treats to offer Owa. He took care of the baby carrots in short order. Then I presented him with a whole wheat tortilla, and he found that downright scrumptious. There was a highly odiferous piece of something at the bottom of the bag that turned out to be a hunk of sharp cheddar. No way, I thought to myself. But I was wrong. He

attacked that cheese as only a gourmet would, with gusto, and then continued to lick his lips long after the cheese was gone.

Gardening with Owyhee

I have five pastures in which I rotate my two horses regularly. I want them to graze it down, poop it up and move to the next pasture and start all over again. And that is how it works. This is called holistic grazing/farming.

In one particular pasture I have a couple of small gardens. One is strictly raspberries; the other is vegetables. Peas took up the middle on a trellis that year. They were growing better than ever and reaching for the sky, even over my head. There was spinach on one side with a colorful lettuce mix—red leaf, arugula, bright yellow, black-seeded Simpson, and several other medium green-leaved varieties on the other side of my award-winning peas. Darkly veined Swiss chard, carrots, onions, and cilantro rounded out my fabulous garden. And that garden was the pride of my summer. I love the act of gardening, along with the benefits of eating what I've grown in good clean soil. Maybe Owa knew that, because when I allowed the boys to graze that pasture down, I caught Owa near the garden and saw some missing tops, both vegetable and raspberries. Remember… he eats everything.

I'll fix him, I thought, as I prepared a mix of canola oil and cayenne pepper. With a basting brush I painted the leaves of the raspberries, peas, spinach, and lettuce just before dark.

I had a restless night and feared for the worst. But no. I'd taken care of it. No self-respecting horse would touch anything with cayenne on it. At first morning light I was out there with a hint of trepidation deep in my stomach. And sure enough, my garden was gone. GONE. Everything was trimmed down, way down. My award-winning peas that I'd nursed along since May were now trimmed down well below my knees. The carrots' tops were neatly nibbled down to ground level with a number of suspect holes where Owa had pulled them up and was justly rewarded with the sweet orange of this vegetable that all horses adore. The chard was only nibbled, but the spinach was nipped to the quick. The lettuce mix was trimmed level with the dirt. Owa must have had one of

the great evenings of his life. I knew at least my garden would grow back, but I was ready to take no more chances. And while I was disturbed with Owyhee, I could only blame myself and vowed to keep him away from such temptations.

Yeah, right! He is always in trouble or right on the verge of it and I would have to be overly vigilant to insure no more surprises. Yet just looking at this character always puts a huge smile on my face, and I could never be upset with him for long.

Refinishing Antique Furniture

In the fall a year earlier I'd inherited an interesting piece of antique furniture from a neighbor who moved to town. It was a lovely old dresser covered with layers of paint, the final coat a gaudy turquoise. But this piece was just ornate enough to arouse my curiosity and as I began stripping it, found rich birds-eye maple gracing the exterior of the two top drawers. The top was deeply stained from spills and cigarette butts left to burn into oblivion. Because the stripping fumes were so unpleasant and even toxic, I moved it outside my garage and worked on it in the cool of late afternoon. Adjacent to the old dresser there was an entire table fully cluttered with steel wool, sandpaper, bowls of stripping liquid, turpentine, and a dozen tools. Enter Mr. Curiosity.

I rotated Owa into the driveway pasture, and then the phone rang. I hurried into the house and was tied up for a good quarter hour. As my call was reaching a logical end I heard a loud crash. I hurried outside. Sure, enough Owa had decided to take over. Thankfully he hadn't touched the actual stripper. His early warning system must have kicked into gear about that substance, but he did what he could to help me with this project and had almost everything lying on the ground around the dresser. Tools of all shapes and sizes, crumpled newspapers, used and unused steel wool, and sandpaper littered the area as he stood by so proud of his fine work. I mean he smiled as I walked out all in a tizzy to find him just as eager to keep the party going and help me. Thankfully we dodged a bullet with this episode, and I led him back into his favorite pasture safe and sound.

You must understand that I've had horses for years, but never seen anything like this, not even close. Most horses like carrots, apples, hay, and grain, but thoroughly inspect every single offering before indulging. First the investigation, then the consumption. Horses have an unbelievably acute sense of smell and are not easily fooled. Nature made them this way. But Owyhee's sense of curiosity and adventure, as well as his insatiable appetite, seem to over-ride this sensibility that protects most horses.

Trainer Olson Comes to Visit Owa

In the middle of the summer my friends Jim and Jan Olson escaped the grueling heat of Florida and came for a visit. I'd known the Olsons from Colorado where Jim and I worked together in the mid-90s. Jim is an infinitely patient and calm man, a temperament which works especially well with horses. I was really eager for Jim to assess Owa. After informing trainer Olson of my very challenging plight with Owyhee, I told him, "Have at it. Just approach Owa like any other horse and just do your thing." And he did. It was a beautiful thing to watch one of my old friends, wise in horse knowledge, connect with my wild horse, whom I'd grown to so love.

Jim quickly saw the kindred spirit of this complex creature and could easily understand my dilemma. Owa was such an incredible character, so full of life and curiosity and totally adorable, yet painfully so.

But Jim encountered the same roadblocks I did. When Owa didn't like or trust something, that head went sky-high, white filled his eyes, and he tensed up like a steel rod. The predictable explosion was terrifying to both of us, so we always backed off and helped Owa regroup and relax.

Each trainer develops his own approach to communication and Jim had some good ideas and techniques to experiment with. I was all eyes and ears, because I love to learn and trusted this friend of a dozen years.

Jim began with a deep session of bonding with Owa. They simply breathed together as Jim placed his hands reassuringly on

Owa's withers and shoulder. Later Jim long-lined Owa, first in the roundpen, then in the arena. From there he decided to teach Owa to drag objects, beginning with a lunge line. This was scary for the horse, but with Jim's support, Owa worked through it quickly. Then Jim tied a small stick to the end of the lunge line. Again, we were concerned, but after ramping it up gradually, Owa ultimately accepted dragging a heavy log! From there the three of us went deep into my forest and had Owa drag several fallen trees out of the woods. While he was quite suspicious at first as each tree followed behind him, he dragged them right up a steep hill. This was all part of our confidence building exercises in anticipation of the next step—riding.

Finally, we both thought it was time to mount up. With Jim on the ground supporting Owa and me in the saddle, we walked circles in my small roundpen. But again, that head was way too high, there was too much white in the eyes, and he was nervous, tight-mouthed, and not breathing regularly. I got off and we regrouped. Perhaps he'd trust me more on the ground with Jim in the saddle. Nope. Same situation. He just couldn't seem to let down, relax, and accept.

"He's really tight, Frank. He's way too nervous for us to relax enough to help him," Jim commented after getting off. "I just don't know what else we can do," he added, shaking his head in frustration.

The really hard part for me was genuinely loving this horse and so wanting him to make it but not knowing where to go from here. That night I awoke suddenly with an epiphany: build a very small rectangle, a chute type deal. This way he couldn't really get a jump on me as it would be just too small for him to run or even buck, or so I hoped. So that very next morning I built a pen, probably eight by ten feet, right amidst the lodge poles that dominate my property. I found the perfect trees and size and by the time Jim and Jan returned that afternoon, it was built and ready to go.

The very next morning, before utilizing my new creation, Jim round-penned Owa to take the edge off and demonstrate his approach to this valuable exercise. But Owa never did relax, drop

his head, lick his lips, and finally capitulate. While Jim was somewhat disappointed, I wasn't surprised one bit. He just couldn't trust at that level. But Owa had expended plenty of energy and by the end was following Jim like a lost dog. I figured it was a good time to move into the newly constructed pen.

Into a Very Small Pen

I eased the snaffle into his mouth and took him into our new very small enclosure. After some circles and wind-downs to a stop on the ground, I mounted up. He was nervous, rigid, and suspicious, so all I did at first was simply ask for his head in each direction with plenty of soothing words and almost constant stroking to keep us both calm. Then I asked very gently for forward movement. He shot into the corner and stopped, rigid as a board.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeasy, man. Eaaaaaaaaaaaasy, man," I cooed steadily while stoking that neck and withers. I was nervous as a cat, but a good actor and pretended to be just as calm as can be as I pulled his head to the side and bumped his hind end over. He abruptly shifted his hips to the right and shot over to the diagonal corner and again stopped abruptly. Constant stroking and reassurance –and then finally I heard a sigh, and his head dropped just a hair. Right then and there I believed I might just succeed.

Jim saw the change as well. "I think he just made a huge stride," he said. "His eyes are softer. His ears are forward most the time, looking for your next cue. He seems a whole lot happier, Frank. It's just time now," commented a wise Jim Olson with strong tone of assurance.

I rode for another ten minutes or so and left Owa in a very good place. After unsaddling, I loved him up big time. I so wanted this to work!

The next four or five sessions in the little rectangle were fruitful. I did progressively more as we both relaxed and trusted each other at a higher level. I concentrated at first on very simple tasks. With his head to the side part way, I asked him to simply step his hind quarters over in each direction. I helped him work through his impulsive starts forward until with the slightest suggestion, he could move forward in a calm and rational manner.

Simply standing and softly giving his head in each direction was an accomplishment at this stage. And we did lots of figure-8s as he changed eyes and directions over and over and became progressively more trusting and relaxed in the process.

In the final two sessions I introduced my wand with the plastic bag on the end as well as a length of heavy cotton rope. Now we had done plastic bag and rope treatment on the ground, off and on for several years, so he was by no means terrified. But from the saddle, this was a very big test for the Owyhee. And he made it with flying colors! Before it was over I was waving that bag with gusto as Owa moved calmly around the pen. He also accepted the heavy cotton rope draped behind his back legs and rump as he walked confidently around our make-shift area that mysteriously seemed to grow larger along with his budding confidence.

Jim and I designed one end of this little pen to move. So as Owa became more trustworthy and relaxed, the pen miraculously grew to allow less confinement as Jim slowly enlarged the small area. And it worked!

Over our final breakfast, Jim and I brainstormed additional ideas and challenges that I could present to Owa. The only limit was my imagination and a clearer picture emerged as this horse, which had to this date been my greatest challenge, very clearly said to me in his unspoken manner, "Bring it on." And I did.

Owa the Pack Horse

My big thrill at my ranch in Idaho is riding into Yellowstone National Park. And my dream at that time was to be riding Lakota into the wilds of Yellowstone as the trusty Owa carried the gear. Not only is this a wonderful way to travel in style, but it does wonders for a horse's demeanor. Schlepping camping and cooking gear with plenty of smells and sounds is a growth experience not to be underestimated. So, my next hurdle was teaching Owa to carry my panniers, first empty, then with progressively more gear and weight. From first carrying a blue tarp, we progressed to the canvas panniers. Yes, he was quite impulsive at first, starting and stopping abruptly. But I pushed him through the sticky places and supported him endlessly, and within a few days we were touring

the neighborhood as he carried the pack saddle and bags filled with all kinds of objects from my garage. Leading Owa as I rode Lakota, we'd visit neighbors and stop and eat grass and just have a merry old time of it.

And he was a champ. Something had changed dramatically. He had suddenly conquered a great deal of his fear, and his confidence was just exploding to the good. Time for a real pack trip.

A Week in the Park

Toward the end of August, I found the time to take my boys camping. Or better said, my boys took me camping in Yellowstone for a week. Owa carried all the gear and was an absolute champ. Seemingly he'd been just waiting for this moment his whole life. The horse was just so happy to have a job and be a contributing member of our trio. At our first campsite, once unpacked, I allowed Owa to run free. He must have run circles through the vast meadow grasses off and on for a good hour as Lakota grazed quietly, picketed to a log. Lakota had done this dozens of times, so knew the routine well and was a great mentor for the young wild one. My heart sang beautiful songs as I watched my young son exude sheer exuberance for life itself. He'd come over to visit me as I set up my tent or prepared a meal or quietly read in the shade. His curiosity and *joie de vie* were astounding.

Riding out of our second camp site we had a morning of adventure that included a river crossing. Owa had obediently carried the pack saddle over a good-sized creek on the way in, but crossing this river on his own proved to be a real challenge. Lakota and I eased down the bank onto a firm beach of dark sand at the water's edge. But Owa was nervous about the water, mud, and puddles and raced back and forth along the bank of the river, worried about his friends leaving him. However, we didn't leave for long.

Lakota and I walked about halfway across the fifty-yard ford and stopped. Lakota drank deeply from the cool waters that rushed past his knees. He struck the water playfully with his front legs, anxious to move on. All the while Owa had been just flying

along the edge of the river, whinnying with worry. Once we were back to his side of the river, we did a couple of circles until Owa was following us and again we headed for the river. This time with only a little hesitation, Owa stayed with us. About two-thirds of the way across, I stopped Lakota. Again, he drank half a dozen deep gulps and now Owa did the same. Suddenly Owa began playing with the swift current. Pawing with his front feet, he splashed water all over us with absolute glee and a hint of impishness in his eyes. The horse was just so proud of himself. At his level he was living life at its fullest. His best two friends in the world were here enjoying this glorious moment with him, and he reveled in it BIG TIME!

We crossed the river, and then rode up the valley several miles, encountering wooden bridges, small creeks, campsites, and steep rock-strewn trails. Then we found just what I'd been searching for, berries. Late August is berry season in the park. If you know where to look, there are abundant raspberries, salmon berries, service berries, chokecherries, and even tart gooseberries. I tied Lakota as Owa and I grazed. On the way home when we encountered the wooden bridge that Owa had so deftly avoided earlier, he crossed it all on his own. Right then and there I knew he had entered a whole new plateau in his evolution.

Our final campsite for the week was about an hour's walk and typically a moose infested journey, and that did worry me. A terrified horse running full tilt with a load of gear isn't my idea of fun, and I'd witnessed some serious meltdowns in years past. But we lucked out. Nary a moose. We did encounter a family of young grouse that exploded noisily into the air. Owa took notice, of course, but did not spook and that surprised me. He was developing a wonderful, assured calmness that was permeating his whole being.

We had three wonderful days scheduled at this final campsite—that is, until I awoke on the second morning. Relief on a camp trip only comes in the morning when both horses are accounted for. Well, at about 7:00 a.m. when I peeked out of my tent, there was not a horse to be found. I typically kept just one tied as the other grazed. This is easiest on the land. Tied, picketed,

high-lined, and even hobbled horses are very destructive to the land. And generally, horses don't leave each other. So, with one horse tied the other seldom ventures very far. But Owa was reveling in adventure, and Lakota was concerned about Owa's independence and prolonged absences. As Lakota nervously circled during the wee hours, somehow the knot untied itself and off the two went on yet another adventure, but this one was unplanned.

Wolves A-plenty

Wolves were re-introduced some dozen years ago into Yellowstone. No one could anticipate how quickly they would propagate. Suffice to say the wolves thrived as they honed their hunting skills on the abundant game. That very morning, I had heard a pack delightfully howling their songs that signify a successful hunt. With one horse on a lead that could hang up on anything and one horse very naïve, my heart was in my throat. Horses are absolutely fair game for wolves.

While there has never been a recorded attack on a human, I wasn't so sure about my horses and feared the worse.

The ranger station was five miles away and going there for help made the most sense since that's where we'd parked and walked in from. I also wanted to confer with the knowledgeable rangers who had no doubt encountered this situation prior to my embarrassing moment. So off I went, worried, flustered, and very nervous. That nervous energy carried me those five miles at a good pace. Rounding a bend as I dropped into a creek bottom, I suddenly heard a commotion in front of me and caught a glimpse of two dark objects through the heavy cover. Hearing a very odd sound, suddenly a jet-black cub scampered up a perfectly straight lodge-pole about twenty yards to my right as mom stood up to assess me. The cub was safe. That was her first concern. Now she had to deal with me, and she did so quite assertively. Making deep groaning sounds, she had my attention as she stood on her two hind legs and peered intently at me. I waved my arms and shouted at her, but she held her ground and even took some steps toward me. She was right in the trail, so I side-stepped away from

her, giving her plenty of room and eased by. She kept a very close eye on me as I walked off.

The ranger station was only another mile or so and I was there in no time. I immediately announced my plight to the ranger on duty, a new, less-experienced young man who was busy enrolling campers and doing paperwork, so I was on hold. Several minutes later the head ranger drove up, and we had a brief conversation.

"Have to pick up their tracks," Dave Ross informed me. "They do have shoes on, right?"

"They're not shod."

"That'll make it tougher tracking. But they'll show up—at least these roaming horses always seem to," replied the unruffled ranger.

"I'm a little worried about the wolves. One horse has a halter and lead that he's dragging. The lead could easily get caught and he'd be wolf bait in seconds. And the wolves were yipping it up and howling like they were on a fresh kill early this morning, only a couple hours ago," I added with a worried tone.

"I've never heard of that, but you are right. Horses could be on a wolf's menu. I do think a horse would put up a real good fight, though. But then if the one on the lead did get entangled… Hmmmmmm," Dave murmured as he drifted into deeper thought. Then he came to. "Well, I've got to oversee getting this hay delivery unloaded. Then we'll deal with this."

Dave Ross was a very cool head. Being a park ranger in peak season meant dealing with the unforeseeable all day long; he knew all about putting out fires, since that was what his job entailed. And his relaxed attitude helped me chill out. So, I took off my shoes and aired my feet and waited. About fifteen minutes passed before a hiker yelled out, "Hey, there are two loose horses down here." And I was relieved beyond belief. My boys were okay.

I jumped on Lakota's back and we started the five miles to camp. But a couple hundred yards of sharp, twenty-one-year-old backbone was enough torture for me to decide to walk the rest of the way. At 12:30

p.m. the three of us reached camp just as we'd left it. With ten miles under my belt by the middle of the day, I had no intention of doing much that afternoon aside from reading and a nap or two.

The next day after a couple hours of fishing, we loaded up and walked out. Now Lakota can walk, really walk. When he wants to get somewhere, like home, he almost has a gaited walk and we just fly. Could Owa keep up? You bet. In fact, I watched our time and distance very closely and we made better than 4 mph, which is a really fast pace at a walk.

I'd always suspected Owa had some gaited horse in his breeding. Now, after just flying out of there, it was all making sense.

That First Ride Out: The Moment of Truth, a.k.a. Pee Wee's Big Adventure

Owyhee was ready for his first ride out. But I had to be very careful. This had to be done right. That first ride can be a huge confidence booster, or it can be sheer disaster.

One of my neighbors mentioned that he had a lady friend who rode competently and would be glad to ride out with me for that first adventure. Mike and Judy had breakfast with me and then we got right to the horses. I watched Judy closely and she had a quiet but direct way with Lakota, and I was almost instantly relieved to have that base well covered.

There is only one first ride. It can be a non-event or a rodeo. I prefer the former but am imminently prepared for the latter. Did I have my bases covered with this horse that I'd grown so attached to?

As Judy tacked up Lakota, I prepared Owa for his first big adventure with me on his back. We'd done endless rides out, me on Lakota with Owa running beside us in absolute rapture. I'd take these two guys out and have the thrill of my life every time we rode. Imagine hide and seek, with Owa running flat stick up to us, and stopping and twisting and kicking his legs into the air with sheer delight and exuberance. Magic.

But today was very different. None of that twisting and kicking up. Oh no, just a nice quiet ride through the winding

roads behind my place, then maybe out into the fields below my little piece of heaven that sat facing the most photographed mountains in the world, the Tetons.

I did my groundwork with Owa, disengaging his hind end really well, a little flag work, and then I backed him with gusto and got on. He was calm and gave his head freely in each direction, flexed vertically and off we walked down the driveway, at a very nice clip. 100 yards down the drive we did a couple of one-rein stops in my parking area. I felt under me a very compliant, but eager student. He needed a job now.

So once Judy and Lakota caught up, again I pointed Owa down the drive and next, up the lane to the right past the Wall of Trees, the name I have for this perfectly straight line of lodge pole pine just at the edge of the road. We were just flying along! This horse had a walk that was simply ground-eating. Something gaited in there. But we were smoking along way out in front of Lakota who walks out well by his own right. At the corner it was time for a one-rein stop into the tall, delicious, late summer forage, and I allowed Owa to take a mouthful of luscious seed-head. He was completely absorbed and happy and so was I. Judy and my son Lakota arrived and off we went down a two-track with aspens and lodge poles and heavy undergrowth that harbors ruffed grouse, raccoons, skunks, and foxes under a thick overhead canopy of mid-summer greens and browns. Glorious.

The horse was awesome. He was forward and confident and eager and curious all at the same time. Point him at anything and with just a little reassurance, he was there. It was beyond magic. Up a steep, rock-strewn hill that Lakota would pick his way through delicately, Owa just ate that grade right up, ignoring the uncomfortable rocks beneath his uneducated feet. Breathing hard. Working hard. Getting really winded. Really out of shape. Owa was probably a combination of quarter, draft, and gaited horse; his breeding wasn't even close to Lakota's more high-strung Anglo/Arab energy.

We followed the road around for a good distance, and then coming around a corner saw some commotion up ahead at a

friend's place. A gathering of people, dogs, bikes, four-wheelers and cars. Hmmmmmmmmm.

"How is Owa going to handle this?" I asked myself. "He'll let me know," I assured myself as we closed in on this motley bunch that had by now seen us riding up on them. Cameras snapped away.

"Frank's on his wild one that even he can't seem to tame. By golly, he's on Owyhee," they spoke among themselves. These were some of my neighbors who had come to know and love this horse over the last few years. What a feeling as we rode right up to them just as quietly as if old Owa had been doing this a hundred years! Dogs everywhere. Four wheelers starting next to us, cars driving up. It was a complete circus and Owa just took it all in as Mr. Cool. I could not believe it. What a proud Papa I was!

Into the Fields of Barley

We bid farewell and then followed the road back the land adjacent to my place, a ride the boys and I had taken dozens of times during the summer. The glaciers were kind to this little area in which I lived, with gently sloping hills and rolling country everywhere you looked. The footing was fabulous and there were no groundhog or gopher holes to worry about. With rolling fields of grasses and cultivated barley as far as the eye could see, some of it chest high on me, it reached well up over the bellies of the horses. Owa was just lit up and so excited to be doing this. His energy was boundless but controlled. When I felt this excitement of the first ride build a little too high, we would head straight uphill again, burning off that boundless mustang energy.

We stood in the tall grass, framed by the Tetons in the background for a good long time as the horses feasted without even dropping their heads. There was a peaceful, contented energy about all of us. Judy and Lakota were well matched and perfect babysitters for this first ride. After a few minutes I pointed Owa up a moderate hill through this wonderful bed of mid-summer abundance that reached his shoulders. In the background rose the Tetons and it seemed a wonderfully fitting time for a

photo. Thankfully Judy complied and so I have a memento of that, Owyhee's first ride.

We then rode over to an old rundown homestead a half mile to the west and followed a two-track for another half mile or so. From there we turned into the aspens, toward home. Fingers of heavy cover threaded into the rich fields of this bountiful land. The lodge pole pine, aspen, Hawthorne berry, chokecherry, and snowberries that the grouse so loved gave us plenty to work with. We wound through this maze of life as I used my whole body to communicate my desires, encouragement, and assurance all the way home.

When we got back, I gave him a whole lot of loving. I really praised him and stroked his wet back with my fingernails, working deeply into his muscles. You see, we had a deal now. We'd just come so far so fast and without fanfare. And he had known all along. So, we talked it over as I loved on him from deep within my soul. This was a huge accomplishment for me, personally, and professionally. And it was, as well, a huge accomplishment for Owyhee.

That success under my belt in mid-August, I was walking on air but also knew that Owa would have to be brought along very consciously. One mistake. One sudden surprise. One bolt, leaving me in the air momentarily, then on the ground, could set us back, way back. But we had to progress. My mind played games as I came up with endless ideas and set goals, some well thought out, and some arising out of sudden and sheer inspiration.

At this point in my career, I had started dozens of horses but finished few. I understood the initial gentling as well as anyone, or so I thought. But where to go from here?

Living in a not terribly horsey area, I lacked competent riding partners. I needed a seasoned horse and rider and frankly, in my neighborhood, that just didn't exist. So, I decided to create just that, since in fact I did have the seasoned horse, twenty-one-year-old Lakota Breeze, my horse of nineteen years.

Two of my closest neighbors had expressed interest in learning to ride. Could I teach them well enough to accompany Owa and me on some training rides? This was a bit of a dicey situation that

set my nerves on edge, but something deep inside pushed me in that direction.

Lakota Baby-sits Mike and Russ

Starting with groundwork, I coached these two middle-aged men through the basics. Lakota understood the program exceptionally well. As these guys communicated their wishes awkwardly, Lakota readily complied and was often several steps ahead of them. You see, by now Lakota had evolved into a trusted lesson horse and had proved himself earlier in the summer, minding his p's and q's with two young girls in the security of my roundpen. I was confident he could handle this challenge, and he did so with flying colors.

Russ had just turned fifty and was a good athlete, very nimble, alert, and inquisitive. He was also a bit of a speed demon with his snow machine and even pushed the limit in a golf cart. So I had to squelch that tendency since Lakota, even at his age, still loved to run. That combination of thoroughbred and Arabian blood just never seemed to dissipate.

Mike was in his mid-60's and less eager to go fast. Mounting wasn't easy for Mike, yet Lakota exhibited amazing patience, as he could have ducked out in a millisecond and left Mike on the ground. But Lakota seemed to grasp the concept, and I firmly believe he was ready for Owa to join our fun rides. He had morphed into one heck of a lesson horse.

By the end of August, Owa, with Lakota and his green riders, and I had close to a dozen rides under our belts, all close to home. Owa had performed like a champ, and I was ready to present him with his next challenge, a day trip into Yellowstone.

A Walk in the Park and Llamas Too!

Mike was ready for this adventure, so watching the weather, we trailered the thirty miles into my backyard that happens to be my favorite place on the planet.

The backcountry of Yellowstone is wild and remote. Anything can happen. There are black and grizzly bears alike. Moose, elk, and deer can suddenly startle a horse into flight-mode. A moose is

a terrifying sight for a horse. The configuration of this awkward animal seems to send most horses right into overload. And this did worry me. It is almost a predictable encounter in Yellowstone, and I simply had no idea how Owa would react. Even Lakota still panicked at the sight or whiff of a moose, after close to twenty years.

Llamas are commonly used as pack animals in Yellowstone. If a horse is not exposed to these exotic creatures, they too can send a horse into overload. And finally, until a horse has been exposed to backpackers, this too can be traumatic. Once the hiker speaks, then the horse understands what this very odd, moving shape is. The point is, there are a plethora of surprises that could easily be encountered and of course there was a tinge of predictable nervousness in my psyche.

From the parking lot we walked about a quarter mile into the woods before mounting up. I wanted to take the edge off Owa and religiously did my groundwork. And then we were off… like a shot. Owa was so excited to be on the payroll earning his keep as he gaited along at his four-mph single-foot walk. I mean he was just smoking along. Time after time we had to stop and wait for Mike and Lakota to catch up. The wild creatures that I knew were lurking at the edge of the woods stayed out of sight and we reached the first ford over a good-sized creek in short-order. Owa had no interest in leading the way, so Mike pointed Lakota toward the other side and Owa hesitantly followed. With the water just below my stirrups and almost touching his belly, we stopped for a cool drink in the middle. As Lakota quietly drank, Owa indulged himself with a loud, messy sound that put a smile on our faces.

"He's a slurper, Frank," Mike remarked with a wink.

"I'm so proud of this horse. He's just having a ball. I think he's been waiting for this moment for a long time. He just wasn't ready mentally and maybe I wasn't either," I reflected. Then Owa confidently started pawing the water playfully. What a joyful horse, this one!

We rode another half mile through tall meadow grasses into a group of lodge pole pines, unsaddled, tied off Lakota, and allowed Owa to graze freely. After assembling fishing gear, we headed

over to the river as Owa ventured to the perimeter of the trees and sampled the finest grasses in the world. When he explored out too far, Lakota would coax him back with a firm whinny in his paternal way.

I set Mike up for this challenging fishing and hurried upstream to chase wily brown and brook trout for myself. Three hours whizzed right by in no time and later, in the waning afternoon sun we regrouped with the horses to tack up and ride the five miles back to civilization. And that is when the real fun began. Owa and Lakota sensed the homeward leg of the trip and their excitement bounced off each other until Owa was unmanageable. I circled him down to a stop and dismounted. He was just too high to ride, so we walked next to Mike and Lakota as far as the creek we'd come across earlier in the day. I mounted Owa, predicting he would settle for the crossing and I was right. While he was still pretty charged up about going home, the energy now was manageable. That fast walk forced the seasoned Lakota to kick it into gear, and we were back at the ranger station in no time. Success!

Our Solo Sleep-over

My goals with Owyhee were constantly changing, depending on his progress. With this last trip under our belt, I set my sights on a multi-day trip back into my haunt, leaving big brother Lakota at the ranch. A week later it was reality.

I provisioned for the four-day trip and organized all the gear the previous night. With a tent, sleeping bag, cooking and fishing gear, and minimal clothing, we loaded up in the morning in early September for our next adventure. Owa was a champ. He accepted the large saddle bags and off we went toward our first campsite about six miles away in the interior of the park. I noted the time and distance and again, was amazed at his remarkably fast pace, as the ground just flew by. Occasionally he would get side-tracked and stop or wander off the trail as his mind seemed to pull him away from his task. But with a little encouragement and a circle or two, we would be underway again.

We camped at the same site of the earlier trip with Lakota. I wanted familiar territory for him, and he seemed to ease right into the routine of being tied on a lead all of the time. I kept him on a twenty-foot-thick cotton lead and while he did get into trouble from time to time, for the most part he figured it right out and stay untangled. I'd been down the same road with Lakota almost twenty years earlier and had a good idea of what to expect. The sun was setting early as we were easing into fall, and I was in bed asleep with Owa tied to an old fallen tree with ample grass for him to graze to his heart's content. We'd had an unusually wet summer, so the fall grasses were more than lush. With a half-moon and a warm night, I checked my boy in the wee hours. He was doing well, though did seem pleased to greet me, as always.

The following morning broke cool and crisp and after a good breakfast, Owa and I went exploring. We eased into the river at the wide ford crossing. Owa slurped deeply from the cold, fast-moving river, and then tramped across and up the bank on the other side. His energy was palpable with his eager ears and pace on fast forward. He just reeked of a sense of adventure and trust in me.

Knowing full-well that I needed to take the edge off, I aimed us for the hills. There was a long gradual uphill grade that led to a series of stepped hills that in turn climbed into higher mountains. The footing was excellent with the odd rock here and there. But as we climbed, the areas of scree and small boulders became more pronounced. Owa and I weaved uphill through these craggy areas, trying to avoid the really rough footing. His energy seemed boundless and I quickly realized that I wasn't going to wear him out anytime soon.

I knew this country well after thirty-two years of summer and fall trips. It is a special part of my world, filled with rivers and creeks, waterfalls and endless meadows. I knew the trails and decided on heading in a direction I hadn't explored in sometime. I also knew there were numerous small creek-crossings with mud on either side. And I had no idea how Owa would handle these challenges but decided it was a good day to find out.

We traversed back down through the rolling hills, weaving through the rocky areas until we intersected the trail that I had in mind. Owa was all business and once on the trail just floated along, ears forward, ready for anything—that is, until we encountered that first creek. While we had crossed some larger creeks and rivers, this new challenge was different for him. He put on the brakes and just didn't want to have anything to do with that first small creek that rushed down off the hillside lined with slick mud on both sides. It was a steep embankment down into the water and try as I did to coax him, he kept finding ways to evade the narrow trail into the water. Finally, I dismounted and untied my twelve-foot lead. I scampered across and urged him down into the water, but he had a real issue with the steep bank and rushing water. The creek was only eight feet wide but might as well have been a hundred. I found my way back across and had a good session, relaxing him and regrouping. Failure was not an option. We had to overcome this obstacle since we had many more crossings in front of us that day.

Once settled and more relaxed, I started anew and asked for much less. I simply needed an effort by Owa to approach the water down through a steep, narrow, well-worn path. Back and forth he moved along the bank, avoiding the entrance into the water. But patience did eventually prevail as he gave me that first try. I loved him up with gusto and the next steps followed as he very slowly placed one hesitant foot after another down the steep bank. The mud was slick and the water rushing by fast. He sniffed and pawed and stalled and then finally took that first step into the mud at the edge, then another, and another until he was right smack dab in the middle of the creek, which was exactly where I wanted him. If he could learn to relax and hang there for a few moments, then the next creek might not be such a big deal. And it worked. He settled down, lowered his head and drank from the cool water as the lemon turned into lemonade. *Voilà*! I felt a huge success for both of us.

I mounted Owa on the other side and off we went. He just seemed full of pride—that is, until we arrived at the next creek. More of the same, but this time it took half the time, and I didn't

have to dismount. And so it went. We rode up onto one small creek after another, and while each presented a challenge, each became less so. After four or five miles of winding trail and steep hills, we stopped for a breather. I found a fine, cool meadow of tall, untouched fall timothy and dismounted. I lay down in the shade and allowed my son to graze the sumptuous grasses. I dozed off for a moment but awoke to a loud snort as Owa focused uphill, his attention very pointed. I heard some small scree sliding downhill through one of the rockslides and knew full-well that a good-sized animal had just kicked up the disturbance.

"Eeeeeeeeeasy, man. Eeeeeeeeeeasy now," I cooed over and over as I stroked Owa's neck in assurance. But he was on it 100 percent. He knew something was above us and was very concerned. The sun was shining directly at us from exactly where the noise had come from, so focusing in that direction was difficult. I fished in my saddle bag for my monocular and scanned the mountain. Just at the edge of the heavy, dark forest I caught a quick glimpse of a large dark brown object moving into the sanctum of the woods. It was fleeting and gone in an instant. Owa watched this exact spot as well and then visibly chilled once the perpetrator disappeared. It had to have been either a grizzly or a moose. My instinct favored the former and right then and there I decided it was time to head back to camp, the opposite direction of the large, dark brown mammal that had captured our attention.

The trip back to our camp was a completely different experience. Owa didn't even hesitate at the numerous creek crossings. He entered each one confident and sure-footed. At the ford of the big river, he literally charged into the deep water. Hikers on the other side took pictures as we approached. I just couldn't have been more proud of my mustang!

We stayed at this first campsite for two nights. I fished a good part of each day as Owa held down camp. We explored different areas each day and he progressed at an amazing pace.

The morning of the third day brought new adventure. Our next site was about three miles to the north. The trail wound through rich meadows and thick forests and again, any number of critters could be encountered. We left camp in the cool of the

morning as I had one special place to revisit—a hot springs at the base of a glorious waterfall. But the trail up to the springs wasn't an easy one. It was steep and boulder strewn, and I wasn't sure how well Owa would accept this next challenge.

En route we encountered the same gang of hikers we'd seen on the river the first day. They were coming down from the springs and assured me complete privacy in the hot-pot. One middle-aged lady was really taken with Owa.

"Mind if I stroke him a bit?" she asked me.

"Go right ahead. He loves people and doesn't know a stranger," I assured her.

She moved slowly up to Owa and extended her hand. But oddly, he seemed nervous. I really couldn't understand this behavior, especially when he suddenly whirled 180 degrees and we were instantly thirty feet away facing the opposite direction. How I stayed on I'll never know. I must have had a very deep seat as I hardly even lost balance.

"Wow. I sure didn't see that coming. Sorry about that. I guess he really wasn't quite ready," I explained in sheer surprise.

We bid farewell and smoked on up the trail, again crossing a half dozen creeks en route to the falls and springs. I pondered the event that had just passed and was completely perplexed at Owa's behavior. In hindsight I believe her eye contact had been way too severe and focused on him, and he felt threatened. It sure took me by surprise and gave new meaning to his agility and speed. After all, he was a wild animal.

Owa scampered up the trail like a veteran and just gobbled up the hills with his boundless energy. At the end of the trail I tied him off to a stout tree.

"Now I'm going to be gone for awhile, big dog. You behave yourself. I'll be back in a little while," I assured my son.

I picked my way down a steep embankment to the creek and then up to the well-formed pool that lay in a haze of steam that wafted off the warm water. The day was still cool and the water just felt wonderful and welcoming as I eased into it. As my bones absorbed the heat deeply, I again reveled in the

partnership that was becoming more solid by the minute. I was truly living my dream.

After my very satisfying bath I scrambled back up the steep trail to find Owa just patiently waiting for me as if he didn't have a care in the world. He hadn't stressed out one bit and acted as if he'd been doing this type of thing his entire life. We picked our way back down the steep trail and went on to the camp we'd stayed with Lakota earlier in the summer. It was familiar territory and once unpacked, Owa settled right into his breakfast of rich grass as he worked off a dragline attached to a substantial lodge pole lying on the ground. He was getting good at this routine and worked his circle of confinement like an old pro.

I set up camp, ate a quick late breakfast, then eased into the shade with my book. A nap was in my near future and after only a few pages I drifted into a wonderfully satisfying snooze. Later, as the day stretched on, I caught a small brown trout, just perfect eating size. Wrapped in tin foil with lemon and ginger, some spices, and a side of taboulleh with fresh mint picked right from creek-side, well, I was at the top of my game.

The next morning had a foreboding feeling. It was cloudy and way too warm; it felt like a pending storm. I was a bit worn out with a low energy level and after reading for awhile, decided I was ready to head home. Truth be known, I'd reached a place in my book and knew the ending. I'd read the book years earlier. Everything added up to packing up and riding the seven miles back to the ranger station. I'll admit that I also relished the idea of being in my own bed that evening. And Owa also seemed ready. He had performed like a champ. I just couldn't ask for more. We had accomplished exactly what I'd set out to do. With a sense of great satisfaction, we cruised right out, again at a ground-eating pace of about four miles per hour at the walk.

Closing in on the ranger station, we both suddenly saw a very large dark figure cross the trail directly in front of us, and not very far off, perhaps sixty yards. Owa stopped in his tracks, head high, ears pricked forward on extreme alert mode. I immediately dismounted. Bears and horses seem to get along just fine. Moose are a different story.

"Eeeeeeeasy, big fella," I cooed, stroking his neck deeply. "Just a moose." But he wasn't buying it one bit. He was stiff as a board, intently watching the exact spot he'd last seen Mr. Moose. I broke his mouth loose, wiggling my index finger over his tongue and he finally sighed deeply and we proceeded by my leading him. He looked real hard for that huge, almost black creature with huge horse-gouging horns as we went by. But he handled it, didn't flip out. That spoke volumes to me.

Owyhee's walk was closer to five mph the rest of the walk out. We literally flew to the ranger station. He was walking on air. Heck, we'd camped for a bunch of days, explored new areas, crossed endless rivers and streams, and survived a moose encounter. He was ready to go home and see his brother Lakota and tell him all about his big adventure. He'd earned it!



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Lakota's Last Big Ride

"I've spent most of my life riding horses. The rest I've just wasted." – Anonymous

By the ripe age of twenty-three Lakota and I had ventured into Yellowstone National Park dozens of times. This proximity to the park is no mistake. I planned it that way because of my love of the area and the fishing it provides. Fly fishing for trout and my love and interaction with horses compete for my attention. When I combine the two, the satisfaction is beyond description.

Lakota had slowed down considerably over the summer. His age was finally taking its toll. Sensing we might not have many more of these trips, I relished yet one more venture with my son of twenty-one years. Knowing full-well that this one may be the last, it was bitter-sweet.

Rising before the sun peaked over the Tetons, I gave Lakota a good feed. He would need extra energy for this adventure. He loaded eagerly into the trailer and tolerated the bumpy ride through the national forest to the Yellowstone entrance. With a compact fishing rod strapped to my back, food for both of us, and basic survival gear for the day, off we ventured, for probably the hundredth time, into the wilds of the park that has become my home, my peace.

Lakota was energized with ears forward, alert, eager, and ready to react to the surprise moose, bear or grouse flushing just next to the trail. The fall colors were peaking with brilliant yellows of the changing aspens and endless reds, rusts, and oranges of the smaller foliage. Healthy berry bushes, bearing copious amounts of

fruit, added to the color. I leaned out, grabbing a handful of mature serviceberries, as we walked by.

After one long uphill pull, we eased down into the vast expanse of meadows lush with fall grasses. The pungent odors typical of rotting autumn grasses greeted us both. I pulled that familiar fecund smell deeply into my lungs. It had been a year. After crossing a small creek, we entered the meadows that, for me, offer the most magnificent riding on the planet. The footing is predictable and the color of the grass indicates the moisture beneath. The light-colored grasses are dry ground; the dark, rich greens, just the opposite and perhaps dangerously so. But today the pattern of bright grasses led to our destination, an island of lodge pole pines way out in this vast expanse. It has not changed in thousands of years because man never tampered with this land that Roosevelt protected in the early 1900s. Thank you, Theodore!

The walk became more animated until it was a trot that shortly drifted into a bounding canter as we weaved through the winding pattern of dry fall grasses. Lakota's ears stayed forward, in mirrored appreciation of being in that very moment. We both lived for this and had done so for twenty-one years. We were both as alive as we knew how to be at that moment. Lakota knew the routine well as he led me to the exact tree that was to be his security for the next four or five hours, tied with just enough line to graze and stay out of trouble. I removed my lightweight endurance saddle, assembled my fishing gear, and bade my best friend farewell as the next leg of my adventure began.

Do I fish there because it is easy? No. Here lurk the most sophisticated trout on the planet, Ph.D. material these fish! So, fooling them into taking one of my offerings is quite a challenge. This involves scampering around like an Indian, hands and knees stuff, as I sneak into position. Sometimes I win the game and sometimes I don't. My feelings are never hurt as I have great respect for these fish. For me it is all about the challenge of the fishing. And every single fish is returned unharmed into the gin-clear waters in which they thrive.

I worked hard that day. The wind gusted heavily at times, making casting nearly impossible. But I did prevail, catching half a

dozen good fish before the run ended abruptly, like a light switching off. I turned back, eyeing the clump of trees harboring my beloved horse as I walked through dry fields with the brittle grasses crunching underfoot. The odd slough meandered through the meadows, often alive with birds en route south for the winter. With the wind in my face, I came across a whole gang of busy ducks of several different species, some with heads deep in the water, grabbing tasty morsels off the bottom. At first, they were quite curious, then cautious, then they were exploding into the air, their quacking alarm shattering the silence. I meant them no harm, just *bon voyage.*

I saw my son, Lakota, from a distance. "Hey, buddy, you alright? One more stretch to fish, then we'll head home, my friend," I assured him. His ears perked up in patient understanding of his dad who had done these endless times. I was sure he told his buddies and his little brother Owyhee, "My dad's a fisherman and I put up with him."

Stealthily, I went into one of my honey-holes and eased a fly downstream into the throat of the run. Wham! I hooked up again to a ripper that I landed in short order because the sweet spot was just downstream. Having gently released the fish, I recast and again allowed the offering to drift down to where Mr Bigfish resides. As I scampered up the bank, carefully picking my footing, I heard a very distinct slurp, so I lifted up and was tight to that fish I'd hoped for all day long.

Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzing. My reel burned as the fish ripped line, tearing into the security of depth, diving deeply, searching for safety, relief. Keeping just enough tension to make Mr. Bigfish work, I backed him out of that security and into the shallows downstream and then onto a beach of dark sand. There he lay, a truly magnificent specimen, gorged full of grasshoppers, so full he was almost grotesque. I kissed this one on his side just before easing him back into his world.

With deep satisfaction, I walked back to our island of trees and greeted my friend with a long stroke on his neck and with words of appreciation for the endless patience he has for his afflicted papa. Lakota delighted in the oats I'd brought for him as I'd

prepared for the trip out. His eagerness was palpable as he munched away, knowing what was to follow. In fact, he didn't even finish his meal, but looked at me as if to say, "Come on, Dad, let's get on with it." And we did.

I mounted a horse that suddenly didn't remember he was twenty-three. He deftly knocked twenty years off his age and morphed into this eager kid from two decades prior. His head high, his ears forward, he was collected and unbelievably springy as we loped through the fields, me holding him back, as otherwise I would have been on a complete runaway. That exuberant, oat-induced energy lasted a third of the trip, and then his age prevailed. It was a tired horse who loaded into the trailer for the return journey.

As we drove into Windrider Ranch an hour later, Owyhee came rushing through the fields to greet his big brother, whinnying his delight. Home again… home again.



Epilogue

Thank you for accompanying me as these true interactions with horses unfolded. In so many instances I had to wing it and just do what felt right. I'm quite certain, in hindsight, there were probably some better approaches that eluded me at the time. I simply did my very best with the well-being of the horse at the forefront.

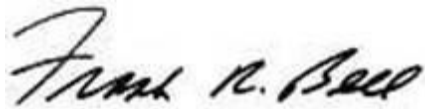
A wonderful movement that began as "The Quiet Revolution" is starting to really hum as the vibration sweeps the planet. The Dorrance Brothers, Ray Hunt, and a cadre of other evolved humans are literally taking this to the masses. Evolved trainers are moving to the forefront, and owners' awareness is increasing exponentially. We're learning how to recognize and treat pain with the help of a proliferation of healers and a host of new, benign products that favor the comfort of the horse. Natural trim is available and accepted everywhere. The Revolution is alive and thriving.

I envision a day when we all look back and see this evolvement and know we were part of it, every single one of us at some level, as horses and humans continue to enrich each other's lives. My vision is called

"Evolved Equine" as the very finest of trainers, healers, and products become readily available throughout the world.

May we all continue to learn and grow as we benefit the creatures we so love. Be patient with yourselves and be patient with your horses.

From my heart to yours,





Acknowledgments

I've had the finest of teachers on my journey. Each came along just as I needed them. I sincerely thank the many people who gave to me so unselfishly.

Troubled and not so troubled horses found me just as I needed them as well. They taught me a patience and love that I didn't know was inside me.

I'm forever indebted.

About the Author



Frank Bell was given the gift of touch as a child — first with dogs, and once he found horses, Frank never looked back, becoming one of the most respected masters in what's now recognized as the most significant revolution in horse training in hundreds of years.

Frank cut his teeth at Indian Creek Ranch in Montana, becoming enlightened to the teachings of the masters- Tom Dorrance, Ray Hunt, and Buck Brannaman. He later honed his skills with charged up Arabians at the Rocky Mountain Training center in Larkspur, Colorado.

Frank's 7-Step Safety System has helped thousands of horses and owners worldwide bridge the communication gap between fear and trust. *Gentle Solutions* is the book behind the method — the same seven steps he's taught in clinics around the world.

He's been featured on national television, in newspapers and horse magazines, and appeared live on Fox TV in New York just before *The Horse Whisperer* hit theaters in 1998. A three-part series on his safety system in *Western Horseman* carried him onto the international stage by the early 2000s.

My Wild Ride: Memoirs of a Horse Whisperer takes readers along on Frank's adventures — training and traveling to South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and beyond. *The Horses That Touched My Heart* gathers thirty-five of the encounters that shaped him — the polo filly that broke his collarbone, the "impossible" horses everyone else gave up on, and Lakota Breeze, his partner and closest friend for twenty-two years.

"My mission," Frank says, "is to help horses and humans on all levels become more grounded in a world that is ever more rapidly heading in the opposite direction."

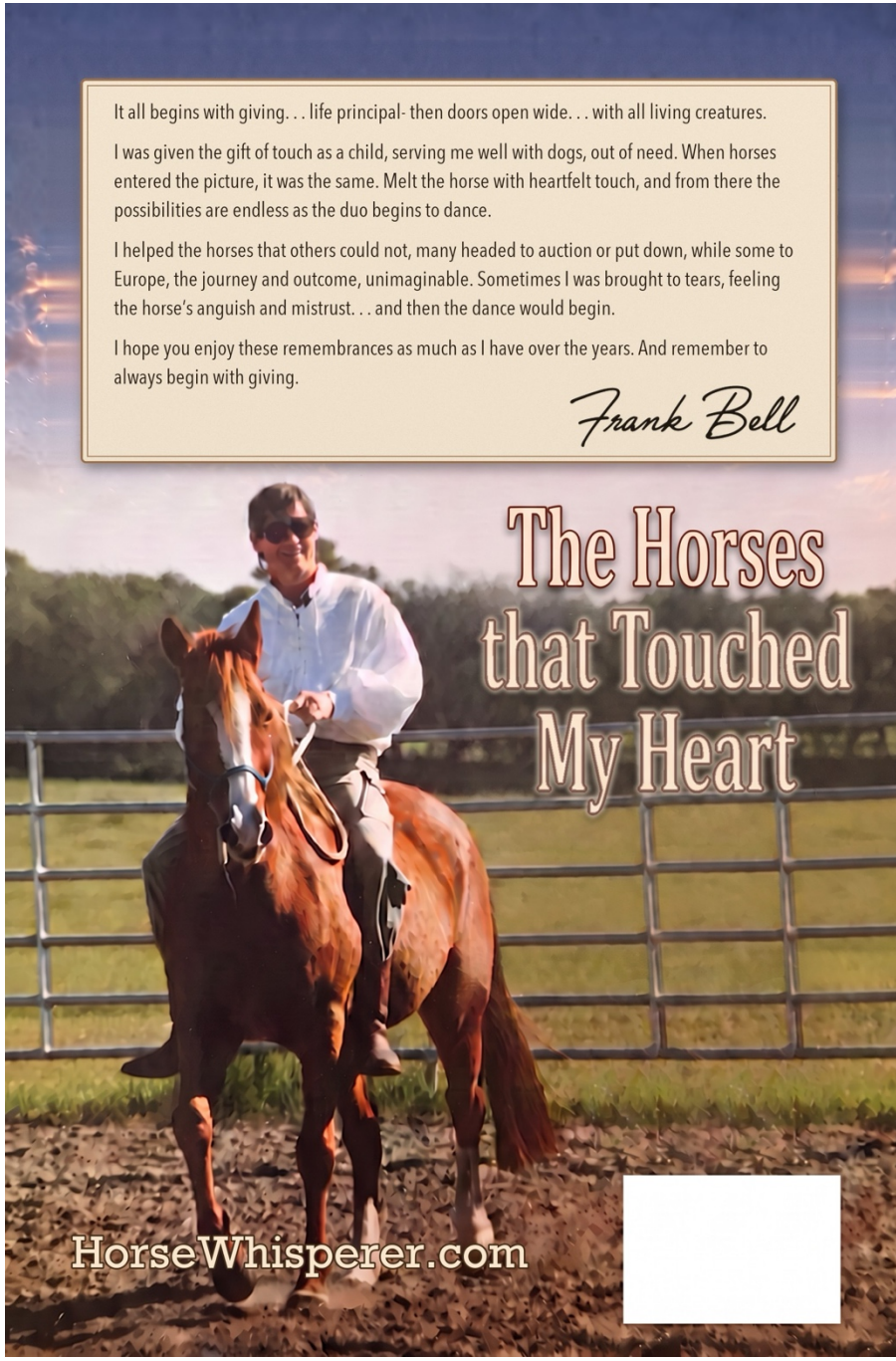
Today, Frank is retired in Loreto, Mexico, where he splits his time between his coffee shop, Caballo Blanco, swimming in the Sea of Cortez, and communing with the whales — while the Gentle Solutions Revolution™ continues at HorseWhisperer.com.

Also by Frank Bell

My Wild Ride: Memoirs of a Horse Whisperer
A globe-trotting memoir of the journey that took Frank from the rivers of Montana to clinics around the world.

Gentle Solutions: Frank Bell's Seven Steps to a Safer Horse
The complete, step-by-step guide to the 7-Step Safety System™, co-written with natural horsemanship trainer Sylvia Scott.

Available on Amazon in paperback, Kindle & audiobook
Learn about the 7 Steps Videos at
HorseWhisperer.com
youtube.com/@horsewhisperer5258


It all begins with giving. . . life principal- then doors open wide. . . with all living creatures.
I was given the gift of touch as a child, serving me well with dogs, out of need. When horses entered the picture, it was the same. Melt the horse with heartfelt touch, and from there the possibilities are endless as the duo begins to dance.
I helped the horses that others could not, many headed to auction or put down, while some to Europe, the journey and outcome, unimaginable. Sometimes I was brought to tears, feeling the horse's anguish and mistrust. . . and then the dance would begin.
I hope you enjoy these remembrances as much as I have over the years. And remember to always begin with giving.
Frank Bell
The Horses that Touched My Heart
HorseWhisperer.com