

Issue #14, June 29, 2007

Clippity Clop by Sabrina C. Mashburn

Lessons in Equus, Part 2.

Last week, I had an experience that has changed the way I perceive relationships, both human and equine, forever. And the best part is that Oreo, my best friend and riding partner, was there to share the experience with me. Although I have always tried to put words in Oreo's mouth, so to speak, it was not until last Wednesday that I realized that he is constantly trying to talk to me - I just didn't understand.



Tim Hayes, a natural horseman based in East Hampton, met us at the barn and we went into the indoor ring to work on our communication from the ground up. I was terrified that Oreo was not going to pay attention to Tim, as it was pouring rain and he was breathing heavily and darting his eyes and ears around like a maniac from the moment we left the barn. Tim explained that, in a herd, when a threat is near the entire herd looks to the dominant horse. If the dominant horse keeps eating, the rest of the herd relaxes. But if the dominant horse seems tense, the whole herd goes into a panic. Tim also explained that the reason Oreo is always in flight mode is because he thinks he has to watch out for himself, since he has never had a strong, dependable leader - human or equine. The goal of my partnership with Oreo is not to calm him down, but to establish myself as his leader.

In order to establish this relationship, Tim demonstrated a few exercises he calls "horseplay," which are similar to games horses play with each other. The first series of games are all based on the concept that when horses play, they often try to make each other uncomfortable by biting, bumping or leaning on each other. The result of these games is that whichever horse moves first is immediately submissive to the horse who made him move. The most impressive game was one in which Tim taught me how to make Oreo pay attention. Oreo, who acts like he has an equine form of Attention Deficit Disorder, is often impossible to communicate with because he is constantly distracted by anything he can see, smell or hear.

Tim taught me that all you have to do to get your horse to listen to you is channel your inner mare. When a mare is trying to get her foals' attention, she glares at his hindquarters. If he still doesn't pay attention, she pins her ears and swings her nose near the same spot. And if he still doesn't listen, she repeats those steps and finishes off with a nip. This will make the foal swing around and listen to whatever his mother is trying to tell him. Oreo, of course, was not paying attention while Tim was explaining the game, which made him a perfect candidate. When Tim glared at Oreo's hip for the first time, Oreo pretended not to notice. Then Tim started swinging a soft cotton rope, slowly and rhythmically. Oreo flicked one ear and thought about moving. Then the rope gently grazed his hindquarters - and Oreo swung around, ears up, faced Tim and patiently waited for instructions. Once Tim had gone through a few more exercises, he had Oreo watching his every move. When it was time for Oreo and I to play some of the games together, I was delighted to find that Oreo listened to me just as well as he had listened to Tim!

After two hours of groundwork, we put Oreo back in his stall and went outside to discuss the meaning behind each exercise. In order to build a good relationship with your horse, "there has to be that level of trust and intimacy," Tim explained. "If your horse respects you, then riding becomes only part of the relationship. Horses don't care about riding, they want to be horses. Riding becomes the icing on the cake."

After Tim left, I saddled Oreo and joined in on a jumping lesson. Despite the rain, Oreo was more attentive to me than ever before. For once, there was no conflict, just communication. "We can really become better people with what horses can teach," Tim said. "Patience, tolerance, kindness - look horses, they have all three, naturally."

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