



Riding & Natural Horsemanship Part 4

By Tim Hayes

In last month's article - the methods and tools of Natural Horsemanship used in riding (English or Western) - we discussed 3 primary elements required from both human and horse: Physical Harmony, Mutually Understandable Communication and A Cooperative Positive Relationship. Last month we looked at how to achieve physical harmony between horse and rider. We will now examine how to achieve mutually understandable communication.

COMMUNICATION

Once you are sitting perfectly balanced on your horse both you and he must have a way of communicating with each other. Humans use verbal communication with each other; horses use non-verbal communication with each other combining body language, touch and feel. A vast majority of riding problems comes from misunderstanding or lack of effective communication between horse and human.

Sometimes the horse is speaking his non-verbal language while the human is speaking his verbal language. More often the human is also attempting to communicate non-verbally with levels of physical force: kick'm to go, if they don't go kick harder. Although horses respond to this it usually causes any number of negative side effects including: resistance, anger, fear or dullness.

Horses are incapable of learning to communicate with verbal language be it English, German, French or Long Islandese. Humans however with our superior intelligence, reasoning and knowledge of equine psychology can study, observe and learn the meaning of the movements of the horses' body language. We can then physically replicate this behavior with our own body and ultimately communicate ("talk") with horses in a language we both understand. This is one of the primary purposes of "Groundwork" and the foundation of all Natural Horsemanship communication.

Mutual understandable communication between horse and rider should always begin on the ground. Horses "naturally" communicate with each other on the ground. Horses don't ride other horses. The Spanish School Of Riding in Vienna Austria thought by many to be the finest riding school in the world offers an 8-year program. Students gifted enough to be admitted are not allowed to ride their horse until they have first established themselves as the leader by communicating with their horse on the ground. The time allotted for this is 4 years!

Most of us are familiar with the positive touch and feel of equine communication. We know most horses love to be petted,

rubbed and scratched in the same way that they lick, scratch and mutually groom each other. This is positive horse language that communicates friendships, partnerships and parenting.

THE NEED TO SAY "NO"

However horses like humans also need to communicate negatively. They need to be able to say "no" or "don't do that" and set personal space boundaries with enough conviction and firmness to be effective. Humans do this with other humans by progressively increasing the volume of their voice. Sometimes it takes extreme firmness, this is called "yelling". With horses this type of communication is established by administering progressive levels of physical discomfort (referred to as "pressure") to another horse. Sometimes it takes extreme firmness, this is called biting or kicking.

In order to survive, horses, in addition to being able to out run predators, are born to instinctively move into or push back against physical pressure. In his natural environment if a horse is attacked by any predator with sharp teeth and claws and tries to escape by running or pulling away, the teeth and claws will rip his flesh increasing the likelihood of death. Therefore before they run, horses are born instinctively hard-wired to push against physical pressure in order to dislodge predators.

If not being attacked or in danger, any pressure felt physically or emotionally that is not a predatory threat simply becomes uncomfortable for the horse. Once a horse (a prey animal) knows he is safe from being eaten by a predator, comfort becomes his number one motivator.

Horses establish leadership and pecking order, get their way, control and dominate (not intimidate) other horses by applying levels of physical pressure (discomfort) to one another. They make the other horse uncomfortable until that horse submits. The horse that can control the movement of another horse is the more dominant horse. The most dominant horse (alpha) becomes the leader.



Tim establishing leadership with Austin by communicating naturally with tools and groundwork. (Photo courtesy T. Hayes)

This is established whether it's in a herd of 100 or a herd of 2 (you and your horse).

What can start as a warning - pinning back of the ears - can escalate to a bite or a kick. Initially, the initial pressure of pinned ears (emotional) and even the kick (physical) from horse #1 can be met and matched with a similar level of resistance from horse #2. But as both horses compete for superior pecking order status, the desire to seek comfort will eventually motivate the less dominant horse to move away from either the emotional or the physical pressure.

When replicating horse behavior humans do not need to actually bite or kick. They use tools such as rope halters, 12ft lead

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expectation or feeling in the horse that you are always a safe, calm place to be. If you want your horse to be your best buddy, develop predictable patterns of handling and riding that create a feeling of trust.

© 2008 Meredith Manor International Equestrian Centre. Instructor and trainer Ron Meredith has refined his "horse logical" methods for communicating with equines over 30 years as president of Meredith Manor International Equestrian Centre (Route 1, Box 66, Waverly, WV 26184; 1-304-679-3128; <http://www.meredithmanor.com>), an ACCET accredited equestrian educational institution.

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So they went to Florida anyway. What better place to treat him than in the warm sunshine. Away from the pressures of work on LI, the two were able to develop the beginnings of a much deeper relationship than most of us experience with our horses. However, there were two caveats: one: as Stacey drove South with her injured young horse the little black cloud followed. She got the call that Bally had been kicked by another horse, breaking his canon bone, and had to be humanely destroyed, and two: hurt young horses don't necessarily recognize that they are injured. Sierra had a completely different attitude about the recovery time in FL than did Stacey. "I'm 4! Let's work, let's play! Forget this wrapping, cold hosing, hand walking nonsense!" Leaping and jumping don't really come close to describing his juvenile behavior. He was SO UNRULY!

Back home early that spring, the black cloud following, Stacey's dog had to be put down. But Sierra wanted to work! For her safety and Sierra's sake, Stacey decided to send him to Windsor, Connecticut to River Meadow Farm for a few months that summer. River Meadow is a therapeutic facility that rehabilitates horses. Sierra's mind was surging to do work, but his body was way out of control. He needed focus and controlled work. They worked him in the pool, swimming, and then on the treadmill. Hmm, sounds better than anything I've done recently...

Stacey went up every Monday, eventing vest and helmet in place. Just walking around the round pen was an accomplishment. Forget ISF training - we're starting from zero. Walk forward off my leg! Then she brought him home again. For years, Stacey's goals for Sierra, the IT horse of her dreams, had been completely changed. Perhaps the grand scheme had been preordained. Perhaps because of their limited time together their relationship was deepened to an extraordinary level.

In the fall of 2004 she finally had something to work with - his mind. The body began to fall into place. What had been an unruly, almost unmanageable 4 y.o. became a sweet, responsive 5 y.o. With the help of Raul de Leon and Eric Horgan, Sierra blossomed into a powerful, brilliant 6 y.o. and the world became their oyster. Clear skies ahead.

Everything progressed for the next few years or so, just as Stacey had dreamed. Sierra Grande, so named by a groom in order to differentiate him from another, much smaller Sierra, began to cultivate his true personality. He developed an affinity for stretching out in his turnouts, flat out, sleeping deeply, to give more than one barn manager a heart attack. He learned to fall asleep so soundly on crossties that he almost fell down once while being braided. He had to be shaken awake. The poor braider thought he had had a seizure. At shows he could run hot or cold. On his way to developing a bombproof show ring persona, he had a few "desensitizing" incidents to pave the path. Once, while at Country Farms, he was so disturbed by the hunter/jumper show next door that he sweat right through his bridle. The leather stretched and gave out. The bit fell out of his mouth as Stacey was schooling. Fun, huh? They scratched and fled.

The two did a lot of traveling up and down the east coast to clinics and shows. They liked to go to Vermont in the summer

and Florida in the winter. However, Sierra decided that the view offered to him from the trailer was insufficient, and learned how to open the side door of his trailer. 60 mph on I95, WHAM! the side door swings open and out pops Sierra's head. Thus, the low lock on Stacey's trailer.

In the winter of 2006 they had a wonderful training season in Florida with Eric. On the way back they stopped in Aiken, South Carolina for 2 weeks at a combined training facility. They galloped, really galloped, jumped, and played in the water complex - Sierra's favorite. On the last day there they were schooling in the dressage ring. Fierce winds were howling all around. Suddenly, the entire PVC pipe dressage ring lifted off of the ground - like a hoola-hoop- and swirled over their heads to spiral away. Sierra couldn't decide which end, front or back, should remain on the ground.

The pair began to have really clean tests and judges loved him. No more spooks. They went to regionals in 2006. In the summer of 2007 they were working with Fritz Fleischman and Anne Gribbons. They cliniced regularly with Eric Horgan. Sierra was super fit, bombproof. They had trust - harmony - oneness. Scores were accumulating. With Anne Gribbons they were touching on half-steps and canter pirouette. Anne had begun to comment on the horse's work ethic.

Then, in November 2007, Sierra suffered a life-threatening injury to his left front foot. He was admitted to Fairfield Equine, where he remained for one month. He had surgery the day before Thanksgiving. The next day he greeted Stacey with such deafening screaming that he brought the technicians to tears. He knocked her into the wall, and hugged her with his head and neck.

On December 17, 2007, he was humanely euthanized.

Sierra Grande gave Stacey the most profound glimpses any of us can expect to have of the inner workings of a horse's mind. He taught her patience, diligence and how to listen. But, most importantly, he taught her the power of the love of a horse.

Stacey and Sierra did more in their short time together than did most people in their lifetimes. Every day with him, good and bad, was a gift from the gods. He is missed.

— Dale Gifford

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lines, and other equipment to create the physical discomfort that controls the horse's movement. As long as the human administers levels of discomfort that are fair and progressive the horse totally understands the message as he would with another horse. Because of the difference in size, weight, power and strength humans are physically incapable of becoming as firm as another horse and therefore unable to physically harm or hurt the horse. (For a more in depth description of tools go to "The Tools Of Natural Horsemanship" in the Monthly Articles section at: www.hayesisforhorses.com)

For thousands of years the basis for all human domestication, training and riding of horses has been to teach the horse to move away from pressure caused by the human. However, since the human is a predator and the horse is hard wired to push into predatory pressure, a dramatic shift needs to first take place in the horse's mind. This has historically been accomplished with two very different methods of communication. One and the most popular is "Traditional," the other is "Natural."

Next month we will examine the difference between Traditional and Natural communication. We will see how what seems to be an insignificant difference in their methods can have a major impact both on the quality of response from horse to rider and on their overall relationship.

To find out about Clinics, Classes and Private Sessions with Tim call: 631-329-5840 or visit www.hayesisforhorses.com