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If you OWN a HORSE, You're a HORSE TRAINER!

By Tim Hayes

Did you know that every second you're with your horse you're training him either positively or negatively? Your horse knows this and proves it to you with his behavior.

Having a horse in your life can be very similar to being a parent (biological or step). Young horses that have not experienced negative interaction with humans can be fun and quite rewarding to start, teach and develop. Those that have been exposed to humans dispensing anger, frustration, force and pain become more difficult. Some refer to them as "project horses," (like a child requiring Special Education). As Dr. Robert Miller, DVM tells us: "shaping behavior is much easier than modifying it."

The flip side of this is "overcooking" your horse (once your steak is well done, it becomes impossible to change it back to medium-rare). If we spend most of our early training treating our horse like a pet, he may become ultra-confident and unafraid of anything in the human world

including humans. This creates a lack of respect for us as his leader and our horse becomes his own leader and very self-reliant. Then when we make a request (either on the ground or on

Vermont Natural Horsewoman Stephanie Lockhart "Summer Training."
Photo courtesy of Tim Hayes.



his back) it is our horse who decides whether to comply or resist.

Love without discipline equals disaster. If my horse does not respect me as his leader, then being with my horse, on the ground or on his back, becomes not only unpleasant but dangerous. By the same token if we relentlessly drill our horse striving for perfection, then just like children, they will gradually lose their desire to improve and even come to resent us for asking. Neither human nor horse likes to be micromanaged.

Buying a horse that has been positively started and trained with a few good years under his belt does not necessarily guarantee a resistance free relationship either. Just as young children become teenagers and

begin to question and challenge their parent's authority, horses in many ways become perpetual teenagers always looking for an opportunity to test or challenge us for the role of leader. Some-

times it seems that no matter what kind of horse we have, we're often putting up with some undesirable behavior. What do we do?

Natural Horsemanship teaches us to examine our relationship with our horse from his point of view.

All horses no matter what their age, breed or background have the same three primary needs. First they need to know they're safe from predators. Second, they need to feel comfortable physically, emotionally and mentally. This requires food, water, the option of movement or rest and not being alone. If they can't be with other horses then another prey animal like a donkey or a goat will do. It's so important for them to have companionship. Thirdly, and this is the key to all of the above situations we have been discussing, horses need to know who's the leader.

Horses are natural followers. They are actually quite content to let another horse be the leader. They know that by following and complying with everything their leader requests, they are literally putting their life in his or her care. Therefore they must trust and respect their leader 100%. If we want to be our horse's leader and have a truly harmonious relationship on his back and on the ground, then just like another horse, it is our responsibility to earn his trust and respect.

Horses establish leadership by playing dominance games with each other. The horse that controls the movement of another horse wins the game and becomes the leader. However leadership is never permanently guaranteed. The leader may be tested and challenged numerous times. It can occur the next day, the next year or whenever another horse thinks he can win (very much like teenagers).

Our horses do the same thing with us. No matter how wonderful and loving your relationship is, your horse will repeatedly test and challenge (sometimes in very subtle ways) to see if he can continue to trust and respect you to be his leader and put his life in your care. If he accepts you as his leader, when you ask him to ride away from the barn and out on the trail he will willingly follow your request even if he would prefer to stay behind with his buddies. He respects your leadership and knows he will be safe and cared for.

Natural Horsemanship teaches us how to play these dominance games. It's called *groundwork* and we can learn to both play them and win them with our horse. To truly be safe we must earn their trust and respect before we get on their back to ride. We also learn to expect even a wonderful and compliant horse to test our leadership commitment on any day at any time. No matter how insignificant the test might be, we must immediately respond and correct his behavior. If we don't, our horse believes we are telling him that we are willing to follow his idea or request. Gradually he will begin to take back the leadership position and this is how and why resistance shows up in our relationship.

Examples:

"I was riding my horse at a walk and he started to trot. I just kept trotting with him. I figured I was going to trot eventually so why bother to stop and start again. It was easier to just keep going."

"I was walking my horse back to the barn and he stopped to eat some grass. I waited and let him eat. I didn't think it was a big deal and I didn't want to get into a pulling match".

To our horse, everything we do and everything we don't do means something. Whether we know it or not, every time we're with our



Winter Training. Photo courtesy of Tim Hayes.

horse we're training him positively or negatively. The moment we become horse owners, we become horse trainers. Like becoming a successful parent and raising a wonderful child, we need all the right help we can get. We have to find out; if we're doing or not doing the right thing. Teachers, clinics, books, tapes and DVD's; we must obtain knowledge; we must get support - then we can truly feel safe and have fun. The horse knows everything we know and everything we don't know. We don't know what we don't know and the horse knows this. If we don't know and we're the problem, then we don't know we're the problem and we blame the horse. (Read this two times very slowly.)

Tom Dorrance said, "The horse is never wrong." Over the years the principles of Natural Horsemanship have taught me this is absolutely true 100% of the time. If we learn to understand and communicate with our horse in his language, he will become our greatest teacher. He will teach us how to be the leader. The one he needs and the one we would like to be. ©Tim Hayes 2013

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