

# Becoming a Better Person as You train Your Horse

By Robin Doughman

In my life I have worked with all kinds of horses, but now my main focus is Spanish Mustangs born in a natural environment. They know answers to more questions about horses than we know how to ask.

In Mongolia the equivalent of our mustangs are called Tarke, which means “spirit”. These horses have a profound effect on people. They lift the spirits, quiet the mind and sooth the soul. To know horses on their terms is to be transformed.

Effective horse training is not just about horsemanship; it’s about a way of life. The proper way to deal with horses is also the proper way to deal with people or any other animal. We must remember we are not working on our horses; we are working on ourselves. So to work well with a horse we must first work well with ourselves.

I must communicate with them in a way they understand. I must deal with them where they live. The human is challenged to think in the moment and live in the present, but that is where horses live all the time. Horses provide us with the opportunity to live in the present.

Horses don’t carry a watch, they don’t read a calendar. What’s happening for a horse is happening right now and that’s the most relevant thing in their lives.

Our relationship with horses is based on a prey predator reality. We are the predator, the horse is the prey. We say to ourselves we are peaceful; we

may meditate and we may be vegetarians.

We may never think about being predators – but that doesn’t matter because the horse thinks about it all the time.

Horses know when we know and they know when we don’t know. If I am not in charge, the horse will be in charge. Every time we walk into a corral all the horses will look at us and take a vote. Are we on top of the pecking order or on the bottom?

The horses should know we are in charge when we walk into the corral. You don’t want them testing you to find out. If you are nervous, they will be nervous; if you are afraid, they will be

aggressive.

In horse herds, almost always there will be an alpha mare running the show. The head mare never gets bitten. So if you get bitten, you are definitely not in charge and you need to do something about it. It should never take force.

Whenever working with a horse we need to fully understand the difference between discipline and punishment. Horses understand it better than we do. A horse doesn’t need correction but it does need direction. They don’t need punishment but do need discipline. A mustang will easily accept discipline but not punishment.

How a horse behaves is a direct result of us. They are a mirror to our behavior.

We are constantly giving our horses cues, even



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when we don't realize it. Horse communication is mostly silent. We have forgotten most of what we ever knew about body language, but horses understand it completely.

We may have no idea what we are saying to a horse, but they read us anyway, and we may be saying something we don't want to tell them. We need to be aware and open to what the horse is getting from us.

Giving direction to a horse is a consistent process of pressure and release. We put pressure on a horse to ask them for a response. Then provide the horse the opportunity to yield to direction.

With a positive response, release must be immediate. Without release, the pressure just becomes nagging. Nagging doesn't work with horses, and it doesn't work with people.

When teaching a new movement to a green horse, start with the lightest pressure. With each new session, begin again by giving the horse the opportunity to respond to the lightest pressure, or they won't understand what is wanted, which is to respond to the lightest touch.

Think of pressure at ten different levels. Level one is the lightest. Most amateurs begin at level five and stay there, wondering why the horse doesn't get better.

Before a horse does something, it gets ready to do it. Be focused and live in the present where the horse is, right when it's getting ready to do it. Be prepared and ready to respond, and watch for what is about to happen, not what just happened.

People ask how often I train my horse. I train my horse all the time. Realize you're either training or un-training. It's not a matter of training or not

training. It is training or un-training.

In the process of training, speed is an enemy. The slower we go the faster we arrive.

Our actions must instill confidence in our horse. Horses in nature are full of confidence. They must be confident to survive. Horses in the presence of humans can lose confidence, and it's our responsibility to show them a trust that will bring it back.

Whenever I make a breakthrough, whenever I open a new door, my horse is there waiting for me. I'm not trying to impress people. I'm trying to impress the horses. I want the horses to know I'm good.

True horsemanship comes through feel. The feel of horsemanship comes through your fingertips, your seat, your hands and feet, and – most importantly – your mind.

Be in a place with your horse where its mind, as well as yours, is quiet.

Developing a quiet mind isn't something you do only in meditation or when you get on a horse – it's something you do all the time and bring to your horse. The idea is to quiet the mind so you can see everything for what it is, what it really is, not what you perceive it to be.

Communication among horses is constant and clear, but rarely verbal. The message is revealed by a gesture as subtle as the flick of an ear or the tilt of a head. Communication through silence begins with quieting the mind.

When mental chatter slows, perception becomes clearer. One of the most important things a person can do for themselves is to quiet the mental chatter; then we can begin to access the inner

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wisdom that is always speaking to us, but we tend to ignore.

What horsemanship is about is commitment and re-commitment on a regular basis, moment by moment, day by day. When you need to know something about horses, ask the horse. It will always be honest. Horses will always tell you the truth. They know no other way.

They know who is not honest and who is. When you love a horse, it knows. Horses can teach us about the incredible value of kindness, forgiveness and love.

We all know there is something different and special about horses, but perhaps it's really that there is something different and special about us when we are with them. No one becomes involved with horses to make themselves a better human being or find greater meaning in life but sometimes that's exactly what happens. Time is a circle, not a straight line. Horses are a part of that circle.

*Robin Doughman gives private and group lessons, and presents clinics on horsemanship that increase safety and promote a deeper understanding of and communication with horses.*



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