

THE THOUGHTFUL HORSEMAN

ARE YOU READY? YOUR HORSE IS!

October 2008
Issue 5



Change of the Seasons...

By Maria Siebrand

The days are noticeably shorter now. Instead of being the hottest month of the year, most of September was temperate and perfect for riding. There were even a few days that were unmistakably autumnal! The horses are busy growing winter coats and preparing for the cooler weather. The change of seasons triggers hormonal changes, and can magnify any metabolic issues, so be watchful for problems. The horses all seem a little more ravenous this time of year, and some harder keepers are dropping weight on the ration that kept them at a healthy body score through the spring and summer. A little extra forage may be in order, but be mindful not to let them gain too much weight!

This month's "Force equals Force" article focuses on what some folks refer to as True Horsemanship through Feel, or THFT. The name comes from the book bearing the same title authored by Bill Dorrance with the help of Leslie Desmond. Leslie was fortunate to have been mentored by Bill. Her unique and incredibly effective approach to handling and riding horses changed my perception of horsemanship forever. If you're looking

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for inspiration, mark your calendar and join me to audit her clinic in Aguanga at the end of October.

The Q&A column debuts this month, where I'll try to answer some of the questions that seem to come up on a regular basis. Got a question? Send it along for next month's issue!!

I'd like to thank Kristi Inzunza, who acted as newsletter editor for the first four issues, and who was instrumental in getting the doggone thing off the ground in the first place! Kristi was also a big help on my rounds over the summer, and I'm sure the horses will miss her kind and gentle way performing hoof soaks and providing other critical peripheral services.

Force equals Force **Why a softer approach creates a softer response.**

Part 4: A float in the rope, a float in the reins

By Maria Siebrand

Funny how things lumped under a single name can be so totally different....

If you've lurked around my website, blog, or around me in person for any length of time, you've heard me lament the title "natural horsemanship". I think it's a poor turn of phrase by any definition. But beyond that, the myriad trainers and programs it encompasses span a disparate potpourri of ideas and techniques. Seems like the only thing a lot of them have in common is the desire to relate to the horse without force.

To make the waters of "natural horsemanship" just a little murkier, "yielding from pressure" seems to have become synonymous with NH. In reality, that's not very far off the mark of traditional techniques, but the

RELEASE when the horse yields is what distinguishes NH. There are methods and trainers that use the "yield from pressure" concept quite well. In fact, if you teach a horse well, this concept will successfully train a lot of very nice horses from start to finish. There are also very structured programs that use the yield to pressure concept, but put entirely too much emphasis on movements and patterns (or the use of a patented stick or other tool to accomplish them). Some people (and their horses) manage quite well with these programs; others miss the point completely, and wind up with a horse that will go through each and every movement it was ever taught, in rapid-fire progression, when faced with a cue it's not familiar with. And woe is the devotee of some of these systems when they find themselves in a sticky situation (pun intended) without the stick!

Is there a better descriptive name for what I personally consider the epitome of good horsemanship? I wish there were. The closest term anyone is familiar with is "true horsemanship through feel", reflective of horsemanship in the vein of Bill Dorrance's book of the same name. Gads, what a clunky moniker THAT is, although it really does summarize the idea perfectly. When you think of "feel" in regards to horsemanship, think finesse and timing; I think that's the closest I can get to describing the concept.

For the purpose of this article, I'll refer to it as THTF. If you've never seen it in action, you don't have any idea what you're missing.

I think the essence of THTF is this: instead of training a horse to respond to specific cues, and instead of teaching the horse a series of movements or behaviors, this type of horsemanship teaches horse and horseman how to truly communicate non-verbally. A language evolves. It is a sublime partnership that results; it can look very much like telepathy, or two creatures joined as one. Both horse and horseman must first learn the alphabet, and then the words, and from there, with lots of practice, they can build complex tasks in an instant.

The alphabet is, for the human, setting up a deal with the horse: I will always give you this much personal space, or this much slack in the lead rope or rein. For the horse, the alphabet is learning the deal: if I keep a float in the rein, then the horse must understand his job is to honor that by doing whatever he can to maintain that float. So if I offer a tiny bit more, he should back

away to maintain the constant float; if I instead take a tiny bit of slack, he should step into it. Miraculously, this part is innate for the horse. Tap into it effectively, and watch the magic.

The words, then, combine with the "alphabet" to create the language: in essence, we emulate the body language of the horse, which speaks volumes in herd dynamics. So, for example, my position (behind the shoulder, blocking it slightly, and in front of the hip, facing), body language (stepping towards, or even just directing energy towards the flank -- please spare me the rope twirling!), and focus (spot on the ground where his hind feet are NOW), combined with the amount of float I offer (some slack taken away, drawing the head towards me), tell the horse I wish to have him yield his hindquarters away from me. What he hears, though -- what I've effectively just "said" to him -- is that I wish to take the space where his hindquarters are, without driving him away.

And so we build the language. It is less yielding to pressure than it is a dance: your partner's position constantly adjusting to compliment yours.

So who teaches this kind of horsemanship? Many of the better NH clinicians; Buck Brannaman is one. Leslie Desmond teaches exactly this type of horsemanship. They are few and far between, but they are out there. My best advice is to expose yourself to as many as you can, and watch closely to how the horses respond. The more alert and engaged, the more the horse appears to be truly *thinking*, instead of *reacting*, the closer to THTF.

Barefoot Spotlight: Sport

By Maria Siebrand

Meet Sport, a 6 year old Paint Horse gelding. Sport's shoes came off at the beginning of May. His toes were so long, they were practically in the next zip code!

Sport has been completely sound and comfortable throughout his transition. We fitted him with boots and pads when we pulled his shoes, but he has not needed them at all. He is growing quite a bit of bar, probably because he has some thrush issues; the feeder in his pasture gets pretty deep in manure, which makes frog hygiene difficult. For the same reason, he still has just a bit more heel than I would like to see. Keeping him



comfortable with a tad more heel height will benefit him more at this point than lowering his heels too quickly. The coronary band injury that Sport had on his right front when we first pulled his shoes in May is growing out nicely. I'll be careful, though, to keep that quarter scooped and beveled to curtail a crack as it gets a little closer to the ground.



Just four months after his shoes were pulled, Sport's breakover has moved back considerably, and his hoof capsule has become noticeably rounder!

Nutrition Update...

By Maria Siebrand

Recently, in an effort to understand equine nutrition in even greater depth, I signed up for an intensive course on the subject taught by Dr. Eleanor Kellon. What I've learned thus far has changed my own feeding program already. In the coming weeks, I will be uploading a new, improved equine nutrition section to thoughtfulhorseman.com. I will also begin offering individual diet analyses.

Alternatively, you can take the course (or any of a number of other equine nutrition courses) yourself! Visit Dr. Kellon's site at www.drkellon.com.

Dr. Kellon's credentials are stellar, and her NRC Plus course was recently reviewed and approved by the American Association of Veterinary State Boards Registry of Approved Continuing Education as qualifying for 90 hours of continuing education credits. In addition, it qualifies for both USDF University credit, and also for Equinology credit.

Product Review:

Busy Horse Feeders from www.BusyHorse.com

By Maria Siebrand

Last month we talked about ways to slow your horse's consumption of his daily forage ration. This month, I'd like to highlight one of the products I've found useful for this purpose.

Busy Horse hay bags are constructed of poly webbing forming 1.5" or 2" squares through which the horse must pull hay. The design slows consumption, reduces waste, and keeps the hay off of the ground, reducing sand ingestion, while keeping the horse entertained. They can easily be hung on a fence or wall at head height, or even anchored in a ground level feeder for a more natural grazing position. Available in three sizes, in black or dark green, the bags are washable and durable.

The largest Busy Horse size, which measures 36" X 29", with 2" squares and holds about 2 flakes of hay, goes for \$44.95 on the BusyHorse.com website. Shipping is fast and reasonably priced.

If you have the luxury of being available to split your horse's ration at feeding time, probably the most



Pictured above: The Busy Horse Snacker size

effective approach is to purchase multiple smaller size Busy Horse hay bags, and space them around the horse's pen.

Thoughtful Horseman Q & A

Send your questions for upcoming newsletter issues to maria@thoughtfulhorseman.com

Q: Would my horse's hooves benefit from a topical hoof conditioner?

A: Topical hoof conditioners have little effect on the quality of the hoof wall. Often, when a horse is first deshod, the hoof wall is shelly, thin, dry, and generally poor in quality. By simply pulling the shoes and applying a good, physiologically correct trim, we restore perfusion into the vast network of blood vessels in the foot. This restored blood flow has a profound effect on hoof wall quality, and most horses show a dramatic improvement in as little as 4 weeks.

Another much more effective treatment for improving hoof health and resilience is a biotin supplement. Look for one with a minimum of 20mg biotin, and a 3:1 zinc:copper ratio.

Q: Why don't you recommend commercially available remedies for treating thrush?

A: Commercial thrush preparations are ineffective for two reasons. The first is that they don't penetrate well. Thrush is caused by a variety of both anaerobic bacteria and fungus (and should not be confused with candidiasis in humans, which is exclusively fungal, and caused by an entirely different fungus), and likes to live deep in the central sulcus and under layers and flaps in the frog. Topical preparations simply don't reach all of the infected material. Secondly, most of the commercially available thrush treatments are incredibly toxic, and kill living tissue along with infection. All that does is create more necrotic material for the bacteria and fungus to feed upon. Hundreds of barefoot hoof care professionals around the globe have worked long and hard to identify better treatments for thrush; these are the treatments I now use and recommend.

Progressive Equine Health and Management: The New Frontier

By Maria Siebrand

In my quest to always provide the very best ideas to benefit our domestic horses, I am always researching, studying, and compiling information. It started years ago with a different approach to horsemanship. In short order, I was starting to question traditional hoof care. As I learned more about equine behavior and hoof health, I began to understand the impact of nutrition on both. Horsekeeping practices in general were a natural adjunct. As it turns out, I was not the only one making this journey. In fact, the past decade has witnessed a growing number of horse owners and equine professionals exploring some very different ideas to keep our domestics healthy and happy. Fortunately, the scientific community has not turned a deaf ear, and research is starting to follow suit.

There's a tendency among horse owners to put a lot of faith in feed companies, the local vet, or pretty much anyone who's been around horses longer than they have when it comes to what's best for their beloved horses. Unfortunately, even with recent product offerings promising low starch in response to the newest research, the big name feed companies are still far behind the curve. Most of our equine vets are generalists dealing with the entire gamut of equine health; it's hard to imagine anyone keeping up on the latest information on every front. And the large majority of equine professionals -- be they trainers, shoers, etc. -- have little time to explore new ideas, and tend, like everything equine, to lean towards the traditional approach. Good grief -- no wonder we've been doing everything exactly the same way for so long -- it's like the blind leading the blind out there!

The discrepancy between the latest research and the usual recommendations is at this time probably greater than ever. Equine nutrition is just one facet: our traditional horsekeeping practices in general are coming up against a lot of scrutiny (for example, check out Professor Christopher Pollitt's research on the Brumbies in Australia at <http://www.wildhorseresearch.com>), and under this microscope, what we're learning contraindicates the way it's been done for hundreds -- even thousands -- of years. Add to that the rapid advent

of the world wide web, which has made cutting edge information accessible to anyone with an internet connection: the relentless march of globalization is bringing research from every corner of the globe into our living rooms. For the first time, owners can educate themselves, and draw their own conclusions. We are empowered!

I want to be very clear here and state that I am not advocating ignoring the professional opinions of veterinarians. But as a horse owner, you have the right to do your own research, to ask intelligent questions, and to make informed and educated decisions based upon all of the information available.

As we open our eyes to better choices for our horses, we meet with sneers and head shakes and scoffers. Not just from our peers at the local boarding facility, but from the professionals we used to trust. The pressure to stay in lockstep with the majority can be frustrating, and can easily make you wonder if you're really doing the right thing. But just imagine how things will change for our domestic horses when those of us willing to buck the mainstream continue to forge ahead, and the results become undeniable!

I used to say that my goal in regard to my barefoot hoof care practice was nothing short of a hoof care revolution. That's still an accurate statement. But now I believe the real future is a revolution in equine management across the board. Every step we take to improve the way our horses live is a step in that direction.

So how does it feel to be revolutionary?

"More and more scientists...are beginning to believe that animals do have emotions and that their feelings may be more intense and unfiltered than our own. Emotion arises from the old brain, the limbic system, which birds and reptiles as well as...humans and other mammals share."

-Stacey O'Brien, from her book, "Wesley the Owl"

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About Maria...

My name is Maria Siebrand. A lifelong student of the horse, and a serious information junky, I reside in San Diego, California. With a background in the life science and software industry, publishing electronic submissions to the FDA, among other things, I have a bit of a bent for research. When my corporate career derailed after my third layoff in as many years, I realized it was time to turn my energy back to horses full time.

Ever dissatisfied with the stodgy traditionalist thinking still dominating equine training, veterinary care, and hoof care, I couldn't help but dig deep to find

better alternatives for the horses I knew and loved. The information – the knowledge – is out there, and it seems to be gradually percolating up through the stubborn layers of “but we've always done it this way”. If I can help it perk just a bit faster, I will have served my beloved horses well.

I offer barefoot hoof care services, foundation training and horsemanship lessons in the greater San Diego area.

Interested? Please contact me at 619-865-9614 or maria@thoughtfulhorseman.com

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