

CLASSICAL COMMUNICATIONS

By JENNY ROLFE

THE WAYS OF A HORSE.

'We own nothing – God permits us to be caretakers during our lives - Let us become worthy caretakers'

The most important first step as a Classical trainer is to learn to communicate with the mind and nature of a horse. If we are willing to take time and patience to empathize with his nature, the results of our training will become more rewarding and harmonious. Our life-long journey as a Classical trainer will make us, not only more aware of our horses, but more conscious of our own responses and feelings.

Can you remember the last time you apologized for thoughtless words and actions?

Sadly, we all at some time hurt those around us but when we apologize and say, 'I'M SORRY, I really didn't mean to hurt you', then hopefully we will be forgiven and harmony can return to our relationship. As Classical trainers, we need to understand that the horse does NOT comprehend the words 'I AM SORRY!!' Our verbal apologies are meaningless to our equine friends. When we train our horses and constantly ask too much from them, we cannot use such words as they have no meaning for the horse. It is our responsibility to maintain a relationship of harmony where the horse can feel confident and we are worthy of his trust. The responsibility of leadership lies with us and this

creates an increased self-awareness of our actions and feelings. In our efforts to become the leader, which our horse is seeking, we have to be able to demonstrate self-control. Horses are blessed with incredible memories which can make training very easy for us. They will remember previous experiences and all they are taught, whether lessons from yesterday or years ago. Regretfully, this is also true for the horse who patiently tolerates abuse and mis-understanding. He will never forget being bullied or the person who inflicted this trauma upon him.

We need to encourage horses to work with us allowing them joy and pride in their training. There is no satisfaction in turning the spirit of a horse into a mindless robot in his work and it is our responsibility to create an environment of harmony where the personality of the horse can develop and grow. We need to look at the horse in his natural surroundings to begin to understand his nature and ways.

If you take time to study horses as a group, you can learn much of interest, as each member has a position or status within the herd. Some are more dominant and others take a less assertive role. At the head is the strong willed, experienced, elderly mare, who has a superior position of authority which she exerts on the other group members. The stallion of the herd also has to accept her supremacy and his major role is to alert the herd for potential threat or danger.

From their earliest days, the foals form relationships within the group and behaviour patterns begin to evolve. Skills learnt in play become the learning ground for their responses and interaction as more mature members of the herd. These early days are significant in the development of young horses and if we are fortunate enough to breed our own foals, the correct handling of these youngsters forms a foundation of trust for

future life. As the herd evolves, young foals grow stronger and begin to exert their skills with other group members. I have observed many brood mares who will tolerate cheeky behaviour from a young foal but if a yearling exerts similar pushy tactics, she will quickly reprimand him. Her ears will flash back and her stance will look threatening. She may even challenge the youngster with bared teeth, maybe giving a warning nip or bite. Horses quickly perceive tension, whether from their own species or humans and it only takes one herd member to stand alert looking at some new object on the horizon, for the whole group to stop grazing and become alert to potential danger. If the herd leader is calm and relaxed then the other horses will feel the same and this is a concept which is fundamental to our training. For us to become the respected herd leader we have to gain trust and take a calm attitude with us every day, to the stables.

When I am teaching a horse presenting problems I will spend a week or two just working from the ground to establish a leadership of calmness. Once the horse responds in a more relaxed way then more discipline can follow. A calm mind can accept instruction but an anxious horse may rebel as a result of his fear, and then be blamed for difficult behaviour. It is our responsibility to learn, to listen and understand his thoughts!!

The structure of life within the herd is fundamental to the well-being of the horse, so this can teach us the type of environment in which he may flourish. We need to acknowledge the natural environment for the horse so that we can improve his comfort in a domesticated situation.

I have spent considerable time watching the herds of horses and how quickly they respond with speed and sensitivity to noise, movement or body language.

We know by his nature that a horse has responses of fear and flight and in his natural environment he would be exposed to predators. The herd would be his security, looking to the leader for direction and safety.

Daily, a group will follow a pattern of grazing whether free to roam or in smaller paddocks. I can remember as a child watching the herds of ponies in the New Forest. At a set time each day I knew they would be in the same location as their grazing patterns followed a predictable route.

I have noticed a similar pattern with our brood mares in the fields when they have a routine of travel during the morning and appear to stop and relax on a high vantage point in the field, towards lunch time. The older mares then rest, whilst the younger foals play and frolic around, kicking their heels and letting off steam. The older mares seem totally unperturbed by all this and quietly ignore all the activity. Later in the day the herd saunters down the field towards the shelter where they can expect hay and food towards sun-set. Every day appears to have its own routine and new members to the herd learn to join in and evolve with these established habits. Herd interaction can be observed from the earliest days of a new born foal. He will introduce himself to other herd members using a lowered stance of his neck and much licking and chewing with his mouth. These are signs of submission and respect given to higher ranking members of his group...

When we teach a young novice horse we are seeking to guide him to relax in his back and stretch forward and down with his neck using a similar lowered neck position and the same relaxed mouth and jaw. This goal makes sense as physically it is allowing the horse to stretch the muscles of his back, but also, importantly, it means that the horse has an acceptance of this work and has submitted to our leadership.

Another observation with horses is an awareness of distance between them, as each herd member has their own private space where other members may only intrude if permitted.

We too, need to be aware of our own space and horses must not presume to move into this area unless we consent to it. In the herd if you see a mare pushing a foal around with her nose, she is showing her dominant status. We can relate this behaviour to our handling of the horse as when we lead him on a head collar, as we should never PULL to encourage him to walk forward. If you pull at the head of a horse he will mentally say 'NO' and there is an immediate conflict. The herd behaviour teaches us to PUSH the horse away, to assert our dominance. If the horse does not move forward we should encourage him with our voice and if necessary, reinforcing our intentions with a tap of the whip near the girth area. Horses will FOLLOW leaders; there is no future in trying to pull him, which will create more opposition.

If we allow our horse to move into our space, nuzzle us and push us backwards, he is exerting his dominance and if this behaviour is tolerated it will cause confusion. At all times we need to maintain our superior status whether in the stable, leading our horse or during training sessions. This does not mean that we use 'bullying' tactics but just that we understand the language of the horse and respect its significance. When we open the door of the stable with the early morning feed, our stallions are expected to walk back to allow us ample space to move into the stable and put down the feed bowl... If the horse is allowed to push into our space, we become submissive to him and he will begin to take on the dominant role. Once body language is understood, constant repetition will ensure that only good habits are acquired and mutual respect maintained.

We need to become sensitive to all the signals which are given to the horse as he constantly watches our movements even when we are unaware of this. A horse may nuzzle for titbits, rubbing his head against his master until he is nearly pushing him over!! This is not over friendly behaviour, this is dominant behaviour!! I have also experienced several horses who are allowed to 'walk off' before the rider has barely mounted and this it thought to be a 'forward thinking' horse. The important lesson for the horse to learn is to stand calmly with his Master and await further instruction. Therefore, when we proceed to mount the horse, he should stand quietly until he receives a further command to 'walk on'. This applies to any form of handling as the horse should be taught to stand still, for instance whilst he is being groomed.

I have tried several techniques to help the horse to relax and stand calmly and the most effective method has been the use of breathing techniques. If the horse appears agitated when he is asked to halt, either under saddle or in hand, just take a deep inward breath. Then slowly release the breath with a deep long sigh. The horse should respond quickly and copy this breathing, which will enable him to release stress and begin to relax. It also means he is listening, and will become more receptive to further instruction...

The Importance of Leadership --- We have to establish ourselves as the CALM herd leader through our daily habits and communications. This will mean an awareness of our body language and all the signals we give to the horse. We can never attain leadership until we become horse 'LISTENERS'.

Structure and Discipline

--- Structure and discipline are also important to the security of each horse and whenever I am presented with a new horse for training I always begin with loose work from the ground, so we can establish a relationship where I become the accepted herd leader. It is possible to use our body positioning and our breathing to control the pace of a horse or change his direction whilst loose in the school. We learn from this type of work much about his responses and nature and can also take time to watch his movement, giving us a positive way forward for future teaching under saddle.

REPEATED ACTIONS become habits,
 HABITS become second nature,
 SECOND NATURE becomes a way of thinking,
 A WAY OF THINKING becomes a 'WAY OF LIFE '

Once we appreciate the social needs of the horse we can take a look at his behaviour and understand where things may begin to go wrong. For instance what we label as vices may be the horse trying to tell us that he is anxious and lacking the leadership which he

seeks. It is our responsibility to cultivate a language of trust before any ridden work is commenced. If this relationship is already established, a greater empathy can be developed through training under saddle.

The horse will be content to work if he trusts and respects our leadership and this relationship should be nurtured throughout the days, weeks, months and years of training. After each training session with our horses, we reward with a soft tone of voice and by stroking the neck. I always dismount, loosen the girth and just let him stand calmly for a few moments. The tack is then removed and the horse is able to enjoy a relaxing roll in the sand. In terms of loosening and unwinding, this is a welcome, beneficial reward which will be much appreciated by the horse.

It is worth remembering in all our communications that LESS is often MORE. The light, gentle touch can bring about a significant response when sometimes stronger and more forceful handling can create a battle ground. When I watch a horse grazing calmly in a field suddenly bring his head up and take off at the gallop, I can imagine that probably a fly has annoyed or bitten him. He will also react as quickly if a bird darts out from the hedgerow or maybe a leaf blows across his path. If such insignificant actions can cause such a dramatic response, when we communicate with the horse LESS should definitely be MORE!!

We need to take a few steps back to re-capture our sensory skills and become more aware of the language of our horses. Only then can we be more conscious of the signals that we give to the horse both from the ground and in the saddle. OUR RELATIONSHIP DOES NOT BEGIN IN THE SADDLE -- BUT AT THE STABLE DOOR !!!!

We will continue, through future articles, to look at ways of training to increase harmony, so that our horses will not be working under threat or stress but by allowing their joy and pride to shine through.

Technically we will be striving for certain goals but the most fundamental will always be to keep the horse enjoying his work with acceptance and trust in our leadership.

If we allow OUR HORSES to become OUR TEACHERS, then we can, in turn learn to become true horsemen.

The Classical path is to think through the responses of our horses and make life as close to their natural environment as possible. We undertake a great responsibility as equine trainers, but in doing this we stand to gain the most precious reward as our horses give unstintingly of their loyalty and friendship.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jenny Rolfe has spent many years training horses of all breeds and also studying the behaviour of horses. Her search for further Classical training took her and her stallions to Lisbon, to train with the Chief Instructor of the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art.

In England Jenny specializes in small clinics (one-to-one if possible) and demonstrations using her two Andalusian stallions. She also has a small stud farm specializing in breeding top quality Andalusian horses with dressage potential. Her book 'RIDE FROM THE HEART' is to be published in 2006 by J A ALLEN in London UK.

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