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THE SECRET TO GREAT RIDING IS ALWAYS FOUND IN THE RELATIONSHIP YOU HAVE WITH YOUR HORSE

By Tim Hayes

Most problems people have in horseback riding, whether English or Western, are not with their riding; they're with the quality of the relationship they have with their horse. In order for any relationship to work – horse or human - there must always be mutual love, trust and respect.

One way to improve your equine relationship is with the methods of Natural Horsemanship. Natural Horsemanship begins by teaching us horse psychology. This gives us the knowledge of how and why the horse thinks and feels about everything in his world. This provides us with the understanding and the explanations as to why our horse sometimes resists our requests. Without this knowledge we don't know if our horse is resisting because of fear, disrespect, misunderstanding or pain. How can we help our horse if we don't know what he's trying to tell us?

How a horse thinks and feels is always expressed physically in his body language e.g. ear pinning, kicking, biting, licking and chewing, bucking etc. Body language is how horses communicate with other horses and if we are going to truly communicate with horses, we must learn and use their language.

Learning his language we immediately know what our horse is saying to us with his physical behavior. Then we can appropriately respond whether we're on the ground or on his back. When we respond appropriately our horse realizes we understand what he's trying to tell us. Then he begins to trust us, respect us and eventually look to us as his leader.

Without this knowledge of what and why our horse thinks and feels, the only way we can interpret our horses' behavior is by guessing, assuming, or asking our friends. Often this can be frustrating, providing many different answers that are very often confusing or wrong. Without offering the right response, we are unable to effectively communicate, correct and thus eliminate the undesirable behavior of our horse.

The goal of all equine relationships is a positive, willing partnership with the horse happily accepting his human as his leader. *Traditional*

horsemanship usually focuses on riding with physical communication between human and horse. *Natural* horsemanship teaches how to communicate with the horse mentally, emotionally as well as physically, first on the ground (which is more natural and understandable



"Great Relationships with one's horse always begin on the ground"
Stephanie Lockhart - St. Gallen Switzerland.
Photo - Tim Hayes collection 2014

to the horse) and then on his back. If my horse isn't responding to me with willingness and respect on the ground then I need to ask myself is he truly responding to me when we ride or is he deciding to accommodate me just to get it over with?

Have you ever ridden very well in a show and then, as you led your horse back to the barn, been pulled around as he keeps diving for grass? Have you ridden your horse on a trail or in a ring when he suddenly spooks or becomes anxious and nothing you do seems to calm him down to his or your satisfaction? Knowing that you and your horse love each other, have you ever wondered why he/she can be so difficult at times? The vast majority of the men and women I work with come to my clinics and classes with these and many other similar questions.

There are thousands of excellent professionals who teach horseback riding in every possible discipline: Jumping, Dressage, Trail Riding, Polo, Barrel Racing and Reining. However what is so often missing is the necessary mental and emotional understanding necessary for a quality relationship, which is always achieved most effectively when begun on the ground. Create a relationship of mutual love, trust, respect and understanding before you sit on his back. When you get your relationship right with your horse, he'll always give you his best performance because he's already given you his heart.

Sometimes instead of asking, "how is my riding?" a better question to ask is, "how is my relationship?" When it comes to horses these are my priorities: *Do I feel safe?, am I having fun?, does my horse respond to me as his leader?,* and then, *am I achieving my goals?* If not, I asked myself, "what do I need to do to have me and my horse become safer, calmer, more confident, more respectful and more fun to ride?" The answer to this question I believe is not about working on my riding; it's about working on the quality of my relationship with my horse.

My clinics, classes and private sessions cover 10 basic topics of Natural Horsemanship and finish with a program for the future.

The 10 topics covered in my clinics whether English or Western are: **1.** Principals of Natural Horsemanship - including horse time vs. human time and horse fear vs. human fear **2.** Communicating with your horse in his own (body) language. **3.** Safety - the only technique that needs to be perfect 100% of the time. **4.** Groundwork (Horseplay) that establishes love, trust and respect. **5.** Gentleness vs. Firmness - which one, how much and when? **6.** Natural saddling skills. **7.** Transferring natural communication with your horse from the ground to his back. **8.** The natural principles and methods of go/whoa/turn/stop/back **9.** Natural Riding skills: Focus, Feel, Timing and Balance **10.** How to execute an emergency stop.

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