

Praise for 'Relationship Riding' techniques

By Barbra-Ann King

The definition of Relationship Riding is bringing ancient equine teachings to a modern world while challenging conventional methods. A long time ago, during the 11th to 13th centuries, warriors on horseback hit the battlefields, holding a shield in one hand and a sword in the other. Most rode bareback and bridleless. Together, horse and rider confronted the enemy, charging and stopping, moving right and left, backing up, rearing and performing some amazing moves to conquer the enemy. All communication between horse and rider was done through the body, heart, and soul. These moves are still performed today by the famous Lipizzaner stallions, but under different circumstances.

Horses haven't changed over the centuries, but humans certainly have. If it was possible to face life threatening situations back then on top of horses with no harsh devices to control them, why would we not be able to do so today? We aren't going to battle with our horses (although some of you may feel as if you are some days!), we are choosing to have them in our lives as companions for recreation.

The horses who were ridden to battle did not have extensive training, and none of them "obeyed" their riders based on negative reinforcement. There was a much deeper "training" method going on that allowed the horse to respond out of willingness and clear communication.

STEP ONE: UNDERSTANDING THE PHILOSOPHY

Relationship Riding offers a philosophy that challenges conventional training and riding of today. A lot of research and experience back up this technique: the horses themselves offered their knowledge and expertise, patiently allowing me to experience and develop Relationship Riding based on what makes sense to them, in a natural and non-defiant way.

There are thousands of years of knowledge cantering our fields, graciously offering information for the benefit of all. It's up to us to listen and learn from them. Relationship Riding is not about training horses, because we don't need to train them. Horses always follow their equine leaders, challenging him or her occasionally. If our horses can see us as an equine leader with the same qualities, they will also follow us, not only physically, but with their heart and soul. So, the secret to Relationship Riding is learning how to be an equine leader for our horses. Once we have established that, our horses will want to follow us, and be with us because they will know that is where they are the safest.

But, it is not up to us to decide. We cannot elect ourselves as leaders. Our horses have that prerogative. Once you have proven yourself as a good leader and are chosen by the horses to be that leader, all your training problems will slowly disappear. That's a promise I make to you, and I have 20 years of experience working with horses who were labelled sour, stupid, bad, dangerous, unrideable, unstoppable, and the list goes on. So, how do we become an equine leader?

STEP TWO: EQUINE LEADERSHIP VS. DOMINANT LEADERSHIP

Relationship Riding is based on a simple premise: no pain, fear and/or discomfort for the horse — not physically, mentally or emotionally. Although we have evolved and come a long way since the days when horses were severely beaten and "broken", fear, pain, and/or discomfort do not have to be physical to cause a lack of trust.

A popular, "gentle" horse training movement suggests we make the wrong answer difficult and the right answer easy, also known as negative reinforcement. What if we were to teach our children using this method? Imagine asking a child to do something, using a language he doesn't understand. When the child hesitates because he doesn't understand, you "up the pressure", "make yourself more present" and ask once more. Again, the child is clueless and unable to comply, and once again, you turn the pressure on a little higher. As this process goes on and on, the child will start fearing you and guessing, hoping to get the answer quickly. Finally, if the right answer comes, you back off and say "good boy." What did that child



This is Athena, an Azteca mare in training. Barbra-Ann uses a dressage whip to pet her while she asks her to move forward. Barbra-Ann also makes sure Athena does not move into her space while she respects hers. Athena's head and body are nicely rounded in as she calmly moves on a circle. In order for her to trust Barbra-Ann, it is extremely important that she doesn't get stressed or worried when Barbra-Ann works with her.

learn? He learned that you can be one very frightening person that cannot be trusted, even if you used absolutely no physical punishment.

Why do we think it would be any different with horses? Personally, I will not get on a horse who fears me, or doesn't trust me. Maybe that's how I managed very few injuries over the many years I have been riding. There are many training techniques available to the public and it can be quite confusing, for both horse and human, to make sense of it all. It doesn't have to be complicated. It actually boils down to only two methods of training. Whether you are using a traditional, classical, western, or natural horsemanship approach, the technique is either dominant/controlling or non-dominant/non-controlling. The first method uses pain, fear and/or discomfort either physically, mentally and/or emotionally (negative reinforcement) in order to accomplish what is on the agenda that day. In the second method, horses willingly do for us what we ask because they don't worry about pain, fear and/or discomfort. They know they can walk away from a situation whenever it gets too confusing and scary (work at liberty, using positive reinforcement).

The human trusts that the horse will not walk away if the human is a good equine leader. Results obtained through domination often make horses respond quickly because they "give in" or become submissive. These methods do not build strong relationships and lasting results. Do not confuse a subservient horse as being one who enjoys a relationship with you. Results obtained through willingness force the human to forget about his ego and controlling habits and engage in an authentic relationship, with himself as well as with his horse. This is the foundation for a strong relationship based on authenticity, trust, respect and love. The results last for as long as the trust is not broken, like in any other relationship.

THE NEXT STEP

Here is something you can try in order to start establishing leadership with your horse: DO NOT let your horse eat when you are with him. This may sound too easy and simple to work, but it sends a very clear message to the horse. From the moment you put the halter and lead rope on him, he is not to plunge for food. Do what it takes to prevent this, as long as it does not involve pulling/yanking on the head. Stomp your foot, slap your leg, snap your fingers or jump in the air, whatever it takes to get your horse's attention focused on you.

This establishes leadership on the ground, thus



PHOTO BY JOHN HALL

Barbra-Ann King with Angelica.

continuing to the saddle. The reason why this is so important is based on the fact that the equine leader always eats first. If your horse is eating or attempting to do so, he is only checking to see who the leader is between you and him. This is a very important concept that must be established right off the bat. Go for a walk with your horse, making sure you are holding the lead rope two feet from the snap in order to respect his space, and make sure his ears are behind your shoulders so that you have the "lead" position. Develop your awareness as you walk, feel your horse following you, and don't let him eat.

The first two steps outlined in this article will put you on the path to rediscovering equines, in all their beautiful splendor, as well as rediscovering your authentic self. No matter where this journey takes you, I hope it is filled with eye-opening adventures to enhance your life. I truly believe horses make us better human beings. 🐾

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