

# Horse W

The communication between a horse and its rider is one of the key elements of a successful relationship between both. Indeed, when it comes to "cutting" a cow from a thundering herd, chasing down a polo ball at breakneck speed, or developing the discipline necessary to perform the ballet of dressage, horse and rider need to know exactly what the other is thinking. Misunderstandings could literally be fatal.

Such clear communication, however, takes time for both horse and rider to learn. Luckily, a growing number of experienced "horse whisperers" -- men and women who have developed a special knack for getting their point across to their mounts -- are sharing their secrets with riders, through everything from books and videos to conferences and workshops.

It is not necessary to go back very far in time before we find that, for much of the second millennium, the Horse was often regarded as a mystical animal. Certain horses, came to be regarded as Gods! The ability of a man to harness that power to his will rose above the level of the ordinary man in pre-industrial times. And to those who lacked the skills, and were in awe of the ability to control such power, the horseman could all too easily be believed to have mystical knowledge.

For many, 'mystical knowledge' suggested use of the arts of sorcery and witchcraft, and it is not surprising that some particularly skillful trainers were burned as witches.

As a method of training, horse whispering is founded on one of the oldest forms of scientific interpretation: observation. The earliest whisperers spent so much time watching horses in the wild that they were able to discern a kind of horse language in the particularities of horse communication. Yet for a long time their methods were kept secret. The trainer would take the horse, and it would be wild, and he'd take it in the barn and when he'd come out it would be a nice horse. They never knew what he did, so they called it Horse Whispering.

In reality, horse whispering is based on a simple premise, body language. Like dogs, horses are social animals that aim to please. However, because of the often strenuous and inhumane methods that some trainers use to get results, the animal's innate desire for companionship is often masked, causing the horse to turn into a problem horse.

Whispering uses the horse's natural tenden-



# Whisperers

ties toward socialization to restore the animal's trust. Mimicking methods of discipline that horses use in the wild, the trainer uses his physical stance to either drive the horse away from him or allow it to come and connect with him. In physical terms this usually takes place in a round pen, where the trainer uses his arm movements and sometimes a rope to get the horse moving around him in a circle. The method is called gentle, because little to no physical contact is used. Instead, eye contact is heavily relied upon. The horse can read your eye... [it] can see a soft eye or a hard eye.

When the trainer takes an aggressive stance towards the horse, the animal will instinctively flee, feeling that it is being sent away from the herd for something it has done wrong. The horse continues to avoid the trainer until it decides to repent, and asks forgiveness by lowering its head, slowing its pace, and performing a number of other body movements that indicate its submission to the trainer. The trainer has now taken on the position as Alpha Mare in the horse's herd. Once the trainer notices that the horse has accepted its role, he changes his stance, becomes less aggressive, often by changing eye position, or even turning his shoulder to the horse. At this point, the horse's reaction can be dramatic. Ideally, the horse stops moving, turns towards the trainer, even walks to him. This moment is often referred to as joining up, hooking on, or coming in. Whichever term the trainer chooses to use, the effect is the same, a strong bond of trust and devotion that provides a foundation for further training.

While horse whispering is based on a set of founding guidelines, training must be flexible to meet the needs of the individual horse. One has to keep in mind that each horse is different and accordingly not all methods can be used on all horses. The horse determines what we do next. Horses are a lot like people. Their central nervous system is very similar to ours, which is why we bond with them so easily. ■

