

Natural Horsemanship; A Piece of the Whole Horse Puzzle



By

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This gray, full of spirit, seems to dance with this human as she communicates her wishes from the ground. There are no whips and chains to make him obedient. Instead because of natural communication and respect, this might gray follows her cues and navigates obstacles of logs, jumps and hills.



The small blonde, knowing this horse is inviting her onto his bare back, swings on, asks him to turn his head to remove the hand-tied halter. Does he turn and run away because there are no physical bonds to hold him? No. Instead he appreciates the trust placed on him and follows her seemingly invisible cues, obviously loving this play time.

Imagine having a horse that is truly your partner. A horse who responds willingly to your slightest request, who finds comfort being with you rather than other horses, and who cooperates with you to accomplish everyday tasks. Imagine standing next to your trailer and asking your horse to load at liberty. **This is natural horsemanship.**

By appreciating that communication, understanding and mutual respect are more powerful than mechanical force and fear, you can open a whole new world with your horse. By following some basic natural horsemanship principles and getting involved with a training program, you'll be on your way to a relationship you've dreamed of with your equine partner.

Key Natural Horsemanship Principles

- **Groundwork is essential and comes before riding.** The communication and respect you gain on the ground translates directly to saddle work.

- **Be upfront with what you are doing.** Never try to be sneaky when dealing with your horse. They always know and then lose trust in you. Don't hide halters behind your back, bribe them with food, or tell them something won't hurt when it will. A good leader can be trusted.
- **Lack of cooperation may be a sign of physical pain.** If a horse is reluctant to pick up a certain lead, flex laterally, or even pick up his feet, rule out and correct any physical pain before blaming the horse for disobedience.
- **Emotional fitness is your responsibility.** Learn to control your emotions, especially anger. When humans "lose it", we lower ourselves in our horse's eye. This comes with time and is harder for some than others. You can be assertive without being aggressive.
- **Don't use mechanical force for control or punishment.** Tools should be minimal and afford discomfort rather than pain. Fear will overcome pain when a horse is scared. Remember, the brakes are not in a horse's mouth but in his head.
- **It's the release that teaches, not the pressure used.** Accept and reward small tries then build on that. Immediate release helps the horse understand how to be light.
- **Use less pressure than you think you'll need.** Give your horse the benefit of the doubt and you'll be amazed how light he can really be.
- **Make the right things easy and the wrong thing difficult, but do allow them to make mistakes.** Set it up so the horse figures out the answer on his own. Micro-managing just results in a frustrated horse and a tired handler.
- **Don't make them stand still.** Understanding a horse is a prey animal that survives by running from threats, it's not productive to 'make him stand still' when he's bothered. Allow him to move but make it on your terms by asking him to circle, go or sideways. Eventually he becomes his idea.



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- **Do what other horses do.** Take time and just watch horses interact. What can you learn by watching your herd horse leader?
- **Every interaction with your horse is important.** Natural horsemanship isn't just using the techniques when you are training your horse, but a mindset every time you're around your equine partner.
- **Make it fun, not work.** Use your imagination to incorporate obstacles and turn on some music and dance. Your horse will appreciate it and because you are provocative to him, he's less inclined to become bored and tune you out.
- **Spend time just being with your horse.** Set aside time to just sit with them while they're eating or stroke them while they're napping. Anything that doesn't include an agenda.



- **Put principles to purpose.** Once something has been learned find a task or job to put it to use. Horses get bored very easy if they see not point to the lessons. For example, use a sidepass to open gates while mounted or back your horse through the gate when returning from a ride.



How to get started

First, understand that anyone with the desire can accomplish amazing things with their horse; you don't need to be a "horse whisperer" or have decades of experience under your belt. All it takes is an open heart & mind along with the dedication to learn and grow with your horse.

There are numerous natural horsemanship programs and clinicians to choose from and most have their own merits. It is often beneficial to pick one to get a basic foundation and then seek out other natural horseman/woman who may have something to teach you.

Popular natural horsemanship programs

- **Parelli Natural Horsemanship.** A step by step development program for both horse and human. Offers books, videos, worldwide instructors, clinics, support network and instructor certification programs. www.parelli.com
- **Buck Brannaman.** Buck offers sound horsemanship without a lot of fancy packaging. Learning resources include books, videos, and clinics. www.brannaman.com
- **John Lyons.** Well-known program which includes books, videos, world-wide instructors, clinics, and instructor certification programs. www.johnlyons.com
- **Ray Hunt.** A horseman in the truest sense who offers clinics throughout the world. Best to have a foundation before attending a clinic. www.rayhunt.com
- **Mark Rashid.** A little different outlook on the "Alpha" horse concept. Offers clinics, books, and videos. www.markrashid.com
- **GaWaNi Pony Boy.** A Native American perspective on horsemanship. Offers clinics, demos, private evaluation, books and videos. www.ponyboy.com

- **Dan Sumerel.** A former race car driver turned horseman. Offers books, videos and clinics throughout the US. www.sumereltraining.com

Everyday more and more horse guardians are turning to a more natural approach to horse care and horsemanship is an integral part of this whole horse concept. Not only does it equate to a happier and more willing horse, it promotes a much safer and fulfilling relationship for all involved.

About the Author: Based in Arizona, Lisa Ross-Williams is a natural horse care consultant, freelance writer, clinician, and host of the If Your Horse Could Talk show which promotes natural horse care through knowledge. She has dedicated herself to extensive research, hands-on experience and attending many clinics, seminars and courses including natural horsemanship, hoof care, dentistry, bodywork, homeopathy, iridology, essential oils and nutrition. She has completed the Basic Veterinary Homeopathy course through the British Institute of Homeopathy, holds an associate degree in Environmental Plant Science and is currently studying to be a certified Equine Iridologist. Her herd of six have been her best teachers www.naturalhorsetalk.com

