

Natural Horsemanship & Horse Care With Linda Parelli

By Lisa Ross-Williams

I'm Lisa Ross-Williams, host of the "If Your Horse Could Talk" radio show and I 'm honored to have the privilege to talk to Linda Parelli here at the 2002 Parelli Savvy Conference. If Your Horse Could Talk is a talk show which Promotes Natural Horse Care Through Knowledge.



First Linda, thanks so much for inviting me into your beautiful house and taking time out of your crazy schedule. I know you are very busy. Let's jump right into this.

What is the main goal of the Parelli Natural Horsemanship program?

Linda:

To raise the level of horsemanship around the world.

Lisa:

I think you're definitely doing that.

Linda:

It is starting to happen. I also want people to realize what horsemanship constitutes. Because for the most part, there is no measure. Unless you're competing, people have no idea what means you're good or how much you can do with horses unless you're a professional trainer. In fact, nobody really has any type of program - unless they're following some specific discipline or focus. I think what this does is give people a focus even if they have no competitive goals - for the recreational riders who are in it for fun and don't want to go into competition. There are lots of things they can learn to do with their horse; on the ground, liberty, and riding. Even having a goal of being

able to ride without a bridle is huge for a lot of people. But it's about 'who do you have to become' to be able to do that.

Lisa:

I think having fun is so important. I run into so many people who have horses and say they enjoy them, but when I see them together, it doesn't seem like fun for either horse or human.

Linda:

(Laughs) I was like that when I was riding dressage. I was obsessed about dressage and really being good. People would ask me why I did it and I'd say, "because it's fun", but whenever I'd see myself on video, it didn't look like fun. So I know exactly what you are talking about and really, when compared to the fun I have now with horses, it wasn't fun† but it was challenging.

Lisa:

This question is from Ed in Apache Junction, who is our special caller who calls into the show every week.

What's the first thing you'd tell a newcomer who is considering taking that first step into PNH?

Linda:

Take the first step and remember this is not a horse training program as much as it is a self-development program. Horses are fine and we need to know how to get our horses to want to be with us, to want to play with us rather than fall into all the arguments and difficulties that people tend to have. To me, it's don't go into this thinking, "well, this is about what I'm going to train my horse to do", but rather "how can I develop myself to where I can get horses to want to do all these spectacular things".

Lisa:

That's so true. I started PNH with a very difficult horse. In fact, two of your instructors advised me to get another horse; this one's a tough one. I was very emotional and would get angry, Rebel would then get angry and we'd both be standing there breathing hard. The program is so amazing because we both got emotional fitness along the way and just have a blast. Certainly I had to change because he was the type of horse you couldn't force or be unfair. If you tried, he'd fight rather than

retreat.

Linda:

A lot of horses do and they are the ones labeled difficult. Basically, they are saying, "Hey, I need somebody who has it a little more together here, more knowledgeable, more savvy, and fair." This is all part of being a good leader. That's certainly another way I think about our program, Equine Leadership Training.

Lisa:

What's the biggest mistake people make when first starting PNH?

Linda:

Mistake. I find it hard to think of students as making mistakes. You can only make mistakes when you know better. So when you're learning something, how can you be making a mistake? You're experimenting. I think a lot of people are afraid of making mistakes; afraid of hurting their horse. Let me tell you--horses are more forgiving than people are. Horses will get over it. They read your intention is good. I think if I had to say do or don't do- Don't waste your time. Don't even think it's going to be perfect at Level 3, but it's going to be fantastic. Just do what it says and move on. Don't be harder on yourself than we are because we're not looking for perfection. Keep at it every time you're with your horse, read up about it and keep moving forward.

Lisa:

Why aren't more dressage riders getting involved with the program? And do you plan to compete again?

Linda:

Hmm... let me take the easy one first. I don't know if I'm going to compete again. First of all, I lost the will to compete against other people and horses, and self-competition became more compelling to me. I wanted to see how good I could get and I choose to make my horse and my trainer my judges. So going into competition, you're up against fad and fashion, you're up against a lot of opinions that don't necessarily line up with my ideas. The things that often get rewarded in dressage these days, we're trying to get them out of horses. All that tension--a lot of that we do quite differently and we ask, "What's the ideal in a horse?" In the end, the goal is the same. We want to look great with lightness, exuberance and being able to do high level maneuvers, have absolute harmony and make it look invisible, but we don't want to do it with a horse that's

emotionally frazzled because of it.

Lisa:

Why aren't more dressage riders taking up PNH?

Linda:

You'd have to ask them but I think I can make a pretty good guess. I think it's because in dressage, people get so obsessed with frame, the outline of the horse, how he's traveling, where his haunches should be, where his poll should be and all that kind of thing, which I'd call high level deportment. It's how you carry yourself in such a way that you're like a ballet dancer,- Well, because people get obsessed with the physical outline of the horse, we end up using all these gadgets on two and three year olds. To tie their heads down, lunge them in chambones and try to get their backs rounded so their hind legs come up underneath them, but when horses are forced and not emotionally involved, they have a lot of trouble with that. A lot of horses blow up. I don't like that physical force. When you look at our level 1 and 2 students, sometimes their horse's head is in the air, sometimes all over the place; †the horses hind legs are traveling out the back of him, there's no flexion through the body, but that's not what Level 1 is about. Level 1 is about respect and "let's stop arguing here". Level 2 is about emotional stability. Where you can give the horse some responsibility and say, "Hey, I'm not here to baby-sit your emotions, let me teach you how to get strong in yourself, so you can manage yourself." So in Level 1 and 2, we don't specifically cover how the horse should carry himself, but he changes because his mental and emotional state gets better. In Level 3 we start addressing flexion.

In dressage, flexion comes in really early and I do understand that for a horse to work correctly, he must be in the correct position, but if that means forcing the horse, I don't want to go there. We're always repairing blown-up horses that were so talented. We've got one now at this conference; they spent over \$100,000 on it and here he is at our place because he was going to be destroyed. And all it was is that they forced him into flexion before they got his mind and emotions right. I think because the first couple levels of our program looks quite opposite to dressage, people don't think it has any relevance and I could see that. But, I've had world champion Olympians ride and feel my horses and say, "Oh my god, I've never felt a horse so soft and responsive." This is incredible and is why the O'Connors of the world and Leon

Harrels and those kinds of people are getting attracted to what we do because they just think, "Imagine if we could have our horses doing all this by the time they're three or four years old and then just put the icing on them."

Lisa:

Susan from Surprise, Arizona says she sees many of the PNH students who have a great relationship with their horse, but are lacking in the riding department with no correct posture or alignment. When in the levels program is correct alignment and breathing addressed?

Linda:

Most of the way we've been developing this in our program is to give them tasks that improve their balance and sense of feel. It doesn't necessarily improve their deportment, but things like riding on a loose rein, riding with one rein, learning how to ride with your whole body and focus, how to bring your life up and down so you can influence your horse going fast or slow. Then in Level 2 we start getting people to ride more bareback. The great thing about bareback is you can't fake it. You can't hang onto your saddle horn, can't brace against your stirrups - you learn how to go with your horse. Then what happens is people start to get pretty good at that and get confident. We have people trotting and cantering, jumping bareback. -It's great. They really are over their confidence and balance issues, but it's still not deportment. Level 3 is where it really becomes critical because in order to get the horse to carry himself with vertical flexion, the human can't sit there and slouch and brace their back on a horse because neither is going to work. So in our program, we give them ideas about the riding styles, but we really only just found the way we want to teach it. I've discovered this through a combination of things, one of course is Pat. Another is being so obsessive myself that I want to learn how to be in absolute unison with my horse when he moves. So I'd watch him when I was on the ground playing with him, at liberty and watch his back and think "How can I make my butt do what his back is doing?" I'd spend hours and hours on passenger lessons and lots of people would comment that my dressage background must have helped. Actually, it was the hardest thing to get over because I was too rigid, too controlling and I didn't learn how to really feel the horse. I had to get rid of all that in order to get to natural. Then there's Carol Brett and Leslie Ann Taylor from Balanced Saddle System. I got to know them about three years ago and we discovered many interesting things then, but last year we

got together and talked in detail; it's all about the Feldenkrais Method, body awareness and balance. I spent five days with them in January and we did a lot of simulations that were just mind- blowing.

It helped me to understand some of the things I wanted to be able to do; going toward dressage but not the old, stiff patterns. The result was phenomenal. The students we've been teaching this were asking, "Why didn't we get this before?" It's because we didn't have the system together. So instead of going off half-baked, we just didn't say anything beyond what we do about becoming part of the horse. But now we really have some tools and you'll see it tomorrow in the "Riding with Fluidity". So how is that for a round about answer? I can't go into a lot of detail, but it is based on the Feldenkrais method with what the Balanced Saddle System people are doing, plus Pat's methodology with really learning how to be one with the horse. Great Stuff!

Lisa:

Can you explain the progression of the equipment and when you know you've earned the right to go up to that next level?

Linda:

How do I put this simply? In our program we try to guide you step by step through the booklets; so if you've been following the booklets, there's a point in time when it says, "Now you are ready to start the snaffle." It is based on going through a series of check-off lists; Yep, I can do that, that, and this. The very short answer is your horse no longer argues with you and everything can be done at phase 1 or 2; if everything can be done at phase 1 or two in a hackamore, you're ready for a snaffle.

Lisa:

What are some of the signs you are not ready? I know some people probably get in a hurry; they want to get through those levels. They are still in that competition or ego mode and it's a race to try to get through the levels, which may result in them going into the snaffle before they're ready. They then start seeing the head tossing and fighting so that's a pretty good sign that you're not ready, right?

Linda:

Yes, then you say, "ok, I'll go back to the hackamore" because all that's telling you is you're using the reins too much and not using your body enough. We put all that into our program and tell people about that. Here's a good example:

I should have had Siren in the curb bit years ago, but because we were so busy and I was always in demos, lots of bridles stuff, I just didn't take him forward in his education. I started thinking now that I was doing more collection, maybe I should be looking at the curb bit to improve that; to have the right tool for the right job. At that point, the snaffle was too sloppy and my horse was saying, "I need more accuracy here." So one day, I was doing finesse stuff with Siren at a fairly high level and he started to have trouble with the snaffle. I examined myself and thought, "Am I being too heavy?" "What am I doing?" I talked to Pat about it and asked if he thought Siren was telling me to go to the next tool.? Pat said, "Well, he probably is and there's one way to find out. Do it. You'll know very quickly." baby talking me anymore."

I put him in a curb, but with a bosalito and for the first couple of rides I hardly used it. Just a bit here and there and mainly used the bosalito. The next time, I picked it up as if I'd been using it all the time and he went, "Thank you, you're not you're not baby talking me anymore."

Conversely, with Remer, we've graduated Level 3 now and really only about a month ago. I wondered if he was ready because I wanted to do more engagement things. I put a very small shank bit in his mouth; in Australia it's called a Spanish snaffle. It's like a D-ring that you can put your reins lower on the bottom of the D to get a little more leverage if you want. He hated it! From the moment I touched it, he just went, "I don't understand this." That was a great lesson for me because my ambition got ahead; but it was a great experience because I understood what he was saying. I waited about six weeks and had more time with him, thinking about where I was taking him, and prepared him better. The next time I used it, he was great.

Lisa:

There's a good one. Listen to what your horse is saying. That's why I named the show "If Your Horse Could Talk".

Linda:

It's perfect. It's all about learning how to read their communication.

Lisa:

Let's talk a little bit about natural care practices. I was so excited to hear you do quite a bit naturally, care wise. Can you tell us about this? You don't chemically deworm your horses, just as I don't. Can you explain why you decided not to and what you're doing

to keep parasites under control?

Linda:

I've actually not been worming my horses since 1987. Siren, who's 20 now, was last dewormed when he was nine. With my six horses back in Australia, I didn't use any chemical dewormers. That doesn't mean I just stopped, because you have to address why the worms are there in the first place. I did quite a bit of research on it with a human nutritionist and told him there are a lot of problems horses tend to have on a regular basis and although my horses don't get most of them, I wanted to know what's going on. He told me to make him a list of these common problems and when he called back about three weeks later, he asked if horses have a lot of trouble with worms. I told him that yes, many horses had worm problems and that people are chemically deworming every six weeks or so, and then of course, the new daily wormers. Short story was the digestive system is not operating correctly and so the worms become part of breaking down what's going on in the intestinal track and they're there to help the process, not hinder it. Now the interesting thing is, when you have a really broken down digestive system, you get so infested with worms, it starts to damage the intestines. What we need to do is upgrade the whole intestinal track and then say, "Worms aren't necessarily the cause of all the problems, but maybe they are part of the symptoms from a bigger picture."

I was using his methods in Australia, but came out here. The next thing you know, we've got 50 to 100 horses and I couldn't do the program with all these horses. I could keep my small herd going, but hadn't managed horses on that big a scale. I started to see worm infestation problems and a whole host of other things; dry coats, colics on a frequent basis, shelly feet, strangles, and all the stuff people tend to have. I was really on the research trail trying to find out what was going on and what the horses were missing. When I was in Australia, someone gave me a book to read "Natural Horse Care" by Pat Coleby. I opened the book while lying in bed and thought, whew, this is interesting. When I got to the page that listed all the symptoms according to certain deficiencies in minerals, it was text book for what the horses were experiencing. One of the symptoms of copper deficiency are worm infestations, as well as things like wood chewing, fungal infections, cribbing, abscesses, dry coats, loss of hair color and many others. Textbook for what our horses were starting to exhibit on a larger and larger scale every year since living on this property. With some research on the

property, we found there was a massive copper deficiency.

We put the horses on Pat Coleby's system with a very basic mineral supplementation; not using chelates, but natural occurring minerals. Within three months our horses were transformed; coats changed, tails changed, feet changed and we stopped getting strangles. In the past, we had foals born with contracted tendons. Two foals crops now, we've had only one very slight case, 0 worm counts. If we do have any count at all, it's very low. So now, all of our ranch horses haven't been dewormed in two years and they've never been healthier. We have over 100 horses on the ranch with extremely low vet bills. Very exciting.

Lisa:

I heard through the grapevine that you might be coming out with some sort of mineral type product. Is this true?

Linda:

We always get asked, "How come your horses look so good?, You've been on the road for 12 weeks, traveling thousands of miles - your horses look amazing. What are you doing?" I tell them about the book, but they can't seem to find all the minerals. So there's a feed company that wants to put it together for us. Rumors are true. When it's going to happen, I don't know.

Lisa:

Let's chat about vaccinations. I know when students bring their horses to the ISC, you recommend that they have certain vaccinations. What about the people who choose not to vaccinate their horses?

Linda:

You just write us a letter. We're actually not afraid of our horses getting infected with things. We don't vaccinate our horses and we travel with them everywhere. We have about 1000 horses come through this place every year and our horses don't get sick because they have healthy immune systems. We've had situations before where people have brought their horses here and they contracted strangles; they might be the only horse on the ranch that gets it, but we get blamed. It's more about people protecting themselves and not giving us a hard time over it. But we do have people write letters saying they don't believe in vaccinations and don't want to do it and that's fine as long as we have your letter. It's not about us being worried about our horses - this is you

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protecting yourself.

Lisa:

Does PNH offer any type of a scholarship program for some of the backyard horse owners who are on a really tight budget who may not be able to afford to come up there? Do you have a scholarship program in place?

Linda:

We have one being put in place. It should be in place for next year. I can't tell you exactly when. Stay tuned.

Lisa:

Does PNH support any horse rescue or youth organizations?

Linda:

We support a lot in so many different ways. We're involved with several horse rescue operations and often donate to them, giving them the education programs, and instructors have donated their time to go and help. Youth organizations - we've been doing more and more with 4-H. There's a 4H group that wants to totally take on Parelli instruction and that's just near us, so we're sending instructors to keep that whole program going. We also give a major discount to 4H students to where they save something like \$100 on our kits.

Lisa:

I sure wish this stuff had been around when I was a kid. Although, I did do much of the same thing without knowing, because I was a kid just trying to have fun.

Linda:

Most of us were, but then it gets knocked out of you.

Lisa:

Can you imagine? Well, I guess you're already seeing this.

Linda:

Yes, there are actually clubs in Australia that call themselves Parelli Pony Clubs. They've gone our route because they're sick of having to fight with people who don't agree. So rather than trying to fit in, they just started their own.

Lisa:

What is your definition of a true horseman?

Linda:

Wow. He's just about a horse; thinks like a horse, is a horse, just walks funny.

Lisa:

How many true horsemen do you know?

Linda:

Not very many and I know them mainly through Pat; Tom Dorrance, Ray Hunt.

There are people who are extraordinary with horses in many different ways, but for all-around ; on the ground, being able to handle difficult horses, you name it. That's the way I think of it. Certainly there are people who are just phenomenal experts in circus, or cutting, like Leon Harrel and some of the dressage masters; it's just brilliant.

But I think of a horseman as all around; colts, difficult horses, everything, and in fact on that note, I had a student at the ranch ask me who I thought was the best rider, rider not horseman. I said Pat and he went "Oh". I think he was thinking everyone but Pat. I told him I don't really look at anyone else, because Pats my model. If I start looking at other people and going, "Well, they're a pretty good rider or they do that really good", then to me my goals are not high enough if I'm watching anyone below Pat. Also my definition of a good rider is somebody who can ride everything and we're talking broncs, a colt on his first ride, and horses at different stages of their foundation; he can ride Grand Prix dressage horses, cutting horses, reining maneuvers. So to me that's a great rider. Because you can be so adaptable, so flexible, and be able to generate all those things within a horse. But that's a rider, not a horseman.

So I think of a horseman in the same way but now let's talk behaviorally, different disciplines, and different stages; mentally, emotionally, and physically. I think the horsemen I quoted don't have their horses all coddled up in stalls and blanketed. Some people think that's good care and Pat would say, "I would rather see a horse be mentally and emotionally taken care of rather than just physically"; all too often it's just the opposite. Lots of physical care but the mental and emotional part is out the window. Naturally, you want all three; mental, emotional, and physical, and spiritual, really.

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Lisa:

If there were one thing and only one thing you could tell every horse owner out there, what would it be?

Linda:

Get as much savvy as possible. Your horse will appreciate it.

About the Author: *Lisa Ross-Williams is a natural horse care consultant, clinician and host of the "If Your Horse Could Talk" webcast available at www.naturalhorsetalk.com. She is a seasoned writer and former Senior Editor of Equine Wellness Magazine. Along with her husband, Kenny, they share their small Arizona ranch with their beloved animals.*

Lisa has dedicated herself to extensive research, as well as an exploration of hands-on experiences which included clinics, seminars and courses covering natural horsemanship, hoof care, dentistry, bodywork, homeopathy, iridology, essential oils and nutrition. Since then, she has earned her degree in Environmental Plant Science and has completed the Basic Homeopathy Veterinary course through the British Institute of Homeopathy.

Known to colleagues and friends as one who "walks her talk," Lisa has positively influenced thousands of horse owners and grateful horses, sharing her knowledge of natural and holistic horse care..



• Nutrition
• Hoof Care
• Horsemanship
• Bodywork
• Homeopathy
• Equine Dentistry
and much more. . .

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