



Between the Reins

Forum for the Narrow-Minded and Opinionated

This newsletter is an all-volunteer effort designed to reflect the horsemanship approach taught by Harry Whitney. While Harry will offer his thoughts and ideas, he does not take personal responsibility for the interpretations of the contributed student writings. The goal of this publication is to provide students with additional insights into the principles for creating meaningful relationships with our horses.

Around the Pen with Harry

The following excerpts were transcribed from audio taped discussions at Mendin' Fences Farm in TN in May of 2010. These are provided as highlights and reminders of the concepts Harry presents to his students. A thanks to Rita R. for providing the tape, to Lasell B. for assisting with proofreading, and Linda B. for transcription.

Discussion: Students' tendency to go into the pen with the intention of doing certain activities and how we move that along versus Harry going in and seeing what is going on with the horse and responding to that state.

Harry: And that's where I say you have to work the worry out of there. You can't leave it in there. Sometimes you have to bring some worry to the picture to get them to realize that this is important. ... I heard Ray Hunt coaching on a student and he pointed out to everyone else there that her horse was concerned with the fact that she asked him to stop and something [in a discussion at one of Harry's clinics] came up about that and I've tried to get people to see that he meant it in the way of a "worry concern". But the way we used to see the word "concern" used -- that it was of the utmost importance to the horse -- that he was concerned with that matter. It doesn't mean he was worried about it. But there was nothing else to be thinking about at that moment. And that's what I like. That when I went to ask for something, my horse let go of all these other things that were in the way and was able to take care of that [request from me]. But I don't want it happening because he was worried. To get him that concerned about it, you might need to bring in some concern of the working kind of concern to get that to have enough importance.

[We were talking earlier about] some people making a shift in what they were doing and so often that is based on the importance it has to them. What does it take to get most people to think something is important? When it becomes borderline unsafe or somehow life threatening, it's suddenly important enough for them. They're ready to take notice.

Well, now and then, I do something with one of these horses and it brings up this concern level enough that he is so focused --- it's important. Well, now I've got to prove to him that life's good here. I'm not mad, you're not gonna get in trouble. How good it can be. Then you start to ask him to move or walk past you or walk away from you, whatever it is. And yet they can mentally stay with you but not be worried. But focused on the task at hand.

(Discussion moved to comments about one of the horses at the clinic that lacked confidence and how we need to address that issue before firming up as we might with a horse who is exhibiting a lack of attention.)

H: But if you don't get some of that worry out of the way, then you're just adding more to it, so it's a balance in there ... seeing if it's the worry that's driving them to want to be upset. [If it is,] then you need to get some of the worry out of there and get some confidence. But if it's just a lack of focus that's causing all this, then you'd better get some focus first.

(Discussion regarding the different response from a horse with confidence not being overly concerned when someone firms up and a horse that had Harry telling the student to rush in and pet her horse to let him know that he wasn't in trouble when he acted concerned. To this, another student observed that she felt her horse sometimes had concerns about whether he got the "answer" right, now I can relax versus when her horse was not quite as certain about doing something correctly and how he worried.)

H: That's right. There has to be just as big a clarity between us and the horse when it's right as when it's off-track.

Continued Next Column

Upcoming Clinics

2011

Ben Lomond, CA – Feb 4 - 7

Burson, CA – Feb 10 - 13

Jackson, CA – Feb 16 - 20

Salome, AZ Weeks beginning:
2/28, 3/7, 3/21, 3/28, 4/11, 4/18

Rogersville, TN Weeks beginning:
5/23, 5/30, 6/6, 6/20, 6/27

See website for updates.



(Discussion: Sometimes, we don't know ourselves what the "right answer" is so we present uncertainty ourselves.)

H: ... If a horse is approaching an electric fence, the fence is there, they can see it and yet if they walk into it, it's a pretty big deal. But it brings clarity ... right now. So, if I know, clearly, where the boundary is and the horse is getting close, I can put a small little wiggle and I say, "Remember the boundary's here and he steps into it -- 'Boom' -- just like the electric fence zapped him. Brings clarity.

It didn't come out of the blue. I said, "You're forgetting the fence is there, buddy. 'Boom'. You stepped into it, look what happens.

(Discussion: This clarity is a great relief to the horse but this requires judgment that we are trying to acquire so we hesitate or won't go from the .5 to a 9 on the scale and then back again to a 5. Discussion moved to how we wait versus Harry providing the clarity by reminding of the boundaries.)

H: The electric fence doesn't sit there to determine "Is the horse is leaning against me, well, I think ... well, I'm kinda getting bowed out here ... I think I'll send a shock down the line now."

Pen Continued

(Discussion: More about our own uncertainty about what the boundaries actually are.)

H: Well, there's where I would only hope that I'm addressing how the horse is thinking and feeling but in that is the fact that a horse can't separate what he's thinking and feeling from what he's doing. So, you set some clear physical boundaries that don't allow his thoughts to wander. And so, when Sarah is talking about me blocking that Arab until he checked in with me there, I was physically blocking him. I was blocking a physical action that went with a thought. Why was he trying to go out to the left? Because he was thinking out to the left. He was trying to get to where his thoughts were. I said, "That thought will not work out." So, he said, "If I can't go left, I'll go right." And I said, "That won't work out." Pretty soon, he said, "Well, there's nothing working out". So he checked to see what in the world I wanted because nothing else was working. BUT, I got a **mental** change through taking care of the physical expression of where his thoughts were. So, setting those physical boundaries creates a mental boundary.

A Helpful Hand from Harry – contributed by Ross Jacobs

I first met Harry when I was a young boy. Even then he was an old man. He's still an old man, but along the way he has accumulated a wealth of knowledge about horses and animal behaviour in general.

In those days Harry seemed fixated on horses and their training. I couldn't understand what was the point. Horses just seemed to occupy a lot of space and time to me. But it was his thing and who was I to pass judgment on the strange preoccupations of Americans.

In recent years, my interests in training and behaviour have been elsewhere. I had long had the ambition to teach fish to walk on dry land. Imagine the possibilities of being able to pick up a fish for dinner as you walk down the street. I would revolutionize the fishing industry and fish farming. It was a genius idea!

I spent several years researching the subject and knew I had set myself a huge task since nobody had ever done it before. Some of the greatest men in history had tried and failed: Socrates, Galileo, Newton, Einstein and that guy that invented tube socks.

But I knew it must be possible. After all, there have been sketchy reports in the archives of men walking on water, so why couldn't a fish walk on land?

I had talked to Harry about my problem. He wasn't very clear on how I could teach the fish to leave the comfort of the pool and walk among us. But he did say that if it was to ever happen I had to help the fish make the decision themselves to walk on land. It needed to be their idea. Harry pointed out that every attempt to teach the fish to ambulate across the ground involved imposing the concept on the fish by the trainers. He noted most people just plopped the fish on the ground and prodded them to stop floundering around, stand proud and walk. Careful research over many years had revealed that this approach resulted in 100% failure rate. Not a statistic to show this approach had a lot of promise.

Harry suggested to me that the fish needed a reason to choose to leave the pool and walk on land. Making them do it by force would only put the fish between a rock and hard place in their mind. This would do nothing to make the fish feel better about walking around on land and would result in some degree of resistance on their part. If I wanted the fish to "try" to walk, I had to help them decide it was their idea.

Again Harry was not very forthcoming about how I would achieve this. But he did say that I needed to break down the training into two separate projects rather than try to achieve everything in one go. He thought it would be best to start with encouraging the fish to get out of the water and when that was working well then turn my attention to teaching them to walk. This seemed like a good idea to me – keep it simple.

Harry's notion of making the water a less comfortable place than land for a fish kept echoing in my head as I contemplated the problem. I just needed to find a motivation for the fish to think the water was not a comfortable home anymore.

The neighbours were away on holidays, so I figured their swimming pool would not be needed for a few weeks. I emptied their pool of chlorinated water and arranged for a tanker load of seawater be delivered. Next I went down to the local mariner in Sydney harbour and found some fisherman willing to help me. A couple of days later a 3-metre grey nurse shark was delivered to the neighbour's pool. I called her Maisy. I was very happy with my choice because she was big enough to scare the fish, the fisherman and me. I was sure that the shark was going to be enough motivation for any fish to jump out of the pool.

As gently as I could I lowered the first fish into the water. At first neither the fish nor Maisy knew they had a new roomie. But after a few minutes of swimming around the chase was on. I know it may seem unfair that the fish was swimming outside of its weight class, but the little bugger was swift and managed to dart out of the Maisy's range several times. I really felt the experiment was going well and it would only be a matter of moments before the fish decided to leap out of the water and land on the pool deck. Suddenly there was a great thrashing in the water and a balloon of bubbles obscured my view of what was going on. But a few seconds later I saw Maisy swimming contentedly out of the churned up cloud of water. Hmmm. I think I made a mental note: Maisy 1, Fish 0

As disappointed as I felt I appreciated that it was just the first attempt and every trainer has his or her setbacks. The next fish did not go so well either. But the third fish really gave it their all and I felt was close to jumping out of the water several times. However, 7,021 fish later I still had not had one success.

I spoke to Harry about the problem and he gave me a lecture about training being only possible if you work with the nature of an animal. I don't really know what he was talking about, but he went on and on with some guff about training is not about making an animal do something that is not in his nature to do on his own. This is when I finally understood that Harry is a horse trainer and he doesn't know the first thing about fish! He may be a very good horse trainer, but what good is that to anybody? I came to the conclusion that Harry was not the man to help me when it came to training fish. But I did keep him in mind for my next project - training a Koala to play the banjo.

By the way, if anyone can offer a good home to a slightly over weight, pre-loved shark who answers to the name Maisy, please get in contact with me.

When Ross is not indulging his wild imagination, he is a longtime student of Harry's who lives and trains horses and people in Australia with his wife, Michele Jedlecki. He has also written a very popular book, *Of Old Men and Horses: A Gift of Horsemanship*. His straightforward blog is a treat not to be missed. Find it at: www.goodhorsemanship.com.au

