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Spotlight on the Equine Touch

Respect Is A Two-Way Street

By Jock Ruddock

In our recent teaching tour of America we were introduced to a new phrase whenever a horse was deemed to have a behavioral problem: "It's a respect issue." I was first introduced to this statement in a car driving along with four of my students; I was telling them about a woman in PA who had approached me with a three-year-old problem she was having with her horse. No one seemed to be able to fix it and from the names she trundled out it was obvious she had been to the "who's who" of the equine training world.

Her horse was loving and friendly. They were bonded to each other; the horse she described as a wonderful companion and friend. The horse would greet her, walk with her, and would let her saddle him, but as soon as she sat in the saddle the horse very slowly would sit, then carefully lie down until she got off. Then he would stand up again. She had in fact never been able to ride the horse; the horse would not buck or kick or physically resist being tacked up, but every time she got on his back he would just lie down. He never showed any aggression or bad behavior or hurt her in any way whatsoever.



When approaching a horse, do so with respect not only for the horse but for the condition that he is presenting at the time.

I gave her my opinion and told her she had a horse that loved her but for some reason known only to him he did not want anyone on his back and was showing that fact to her in a very polite, passive way. It could be pain, it could be cellular memory, it could be emotional, or could be simply that he just did not want to be ridden. Does a horse, a creature of God just like us, not have the right to make that statement in a gentle positive manner?

Two of the students, a husband and wife team, were upset at my answer and told me in no uncertain terms that the horse was showing no respect for the owner, and must be taught to have respect. I debated the fact a little but found I was wasting my words; the simple fact is you cannot teach anyone to respect you; respect is something you must earn.

My mind often goes back to when I was a young policeman at Scotland Yard when I believed that the only way to get respect from the local villains was to be faster, harder, tougher. As a result I got respect but for these factors only - the reason they jumped when I said 'jump' was simply through fear. One night I was off duty when I came across a group of men stealing a car. Being young and foolish I walked into the middle of them, pulled out my Police ID (we don't carry guns in UK though the criminals do), and promptly told them they were all under arrest. I then stepped back and looked at my rather stupid predicament - here I was on my own, 2:00 in the morning with six tough-looking individuals laughing at the thought that wee Jock Ruddock had just told them they were all under arrest.

I could see the looks passing between them and knew I was seconds away from a good beating, so I started to talk. I told them they could all run away and I could catch perhaps one. I told them they could fight me and I could perhaps hurt one of them so badly before they got me that he would have to go to hospital and then the CID would trace him and all his friends. I also pointed out to them there was also a chance that they might accidentally kill me, that would mean life and was it worth it just to steal a car for a joy ride.

Five minutes later the seven of us walked into the Police station. The men I found out were all marine commandos who had missed the last bus home, were by now firm friends, and were quite unperturbed at being arrested. Why? Because I had shown them respect and they were returning it.

That is my attitude, and the Equine Touch attitude to the horse. I respect the fact that a horse may be in pain and in fact has the right to be in pain. When Ivana, myself or any of our practitioners approaches a horse, it must be with respect not only for the horse but for the condition that he is presenting to us at the time. If we do not respect the existence of pain then how can we truly address the horse with the integrity and intent that is required to help the horse in defeating it?

Just recently I met Bergy Bergeleen, who had just finished shoeing a horse that was in a lot of pain and muscle spasm in the forequarter. He asked me if I could address the soft tissue problems that were presenting themselves. I worked on the horse's muscles, released the spasm and handed him over to the owner - only to watch in amazement as the horse was immediately saddled, led to a round pen, and with the weekend cowboy of an owner on his back, put through a whole lot of spinning routines and other strenuous exercises so the owner could 'test' him out.

Where was the respect for that horse's pain? Where was the respect that the horse may have a serious injury? Where was the respect shown in understanding about the

soft tissue recovery time in the horse? When the owner returned, his comment was that the horse was still not 100 percent but was a little better - a pessimist who cared more about his enjoyment on the horse than he did about the horse itself. That man deserved no respect; he had control of his animal. The horse did what he wanted within the boundary of his pain, but the performance had no harmony and was not achieved by respect.

A few days later I had the opportunity to work with Bergy again, this time just prior to the Savvy Conference on Linda Parelli's thoroughbred Remmer. Linda's concern for Remmer who was lame was evident; she took a long time with us explaining the problem, when it started, what the effects were and the symptoms. After I had balanced him and Bergy trimmed and reshod him, we left him overnight. The following morning we checked the shoes and rebalanced him once again. Linda then came to us and asked if he could be ridden and if so whether he would be in pain. Very carefully and gently she warmed him up asking our opinions, noting how he had changed positively from the day before and how his stride had lengthened and the gate freed up. Even though she had a show in five days time with Remmer she was willing to cancel the show if her horse was in pain. She then allowed me to work on Remmer every morning and only gently exercised him. That, to me, was respect for the horse, and boy did she get it back.

In the UK and USA we live by an old law. You are innocent until proven guilty. Why do so many of us not apply that law to the horse? If a soccer player pulls a hamstring we respect the fact that he can't play. We do not push him back onto the field and, because he cannot run or do the tricks we want him to do, say he has no respect; we actually respect him more. Why do we not do the same for our horses? We put saddles on sore backs - the horse turns round to snap at you, he has a respect issue; he does not want to do the tricks or perform the way you want him to, he has a respect issue. Why can we all not take a little time out to respect the horse, check him out before we ask him to work, find out by gently palpating the body, especially in crucial areas, whether or not the horse is in pain; check the hooves first thing in the morning for heat, the back for sore spots; watch the horse on the ground, see how he moves, not just walk him out of a stall and sling a saddle on him; show some respect.

We, mankind, have placed ourselves in charge of the most beautiful and spiritual animals on this earth. Before we have the right to expect respect from them we should learn how to earn it first. Respect, for me, will always be a two way street. 🙏

About the author:

Jock Ruddock pioneered The Equine Touch, a retraining, rebalancing, and some would say healing modality for the horse. Jock and his veterinarian wife, Ivana Ruddock, have turned the Equine Touch into a discipline that is now recognized and applauded by all who see or use it, including veterinarians throughout Europe and the USA. For more information, visit www.theequinetouch.com.