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Volume 8 Issue 3

Spotlight On The Equine Touch

The Horse Whisperers of Aotearoa

By Jock Ruddock



Photo 1



Photo 2

Many of us remember the enchanted story of the beautiful lost village set in the highlands of Scotland that was locked in time. When Ivana and I set out on our travels last weekend with Maori Television to film a program called 'The Horse Listener' about our work on horses little did we expect to find our own Brigadoon nestled in the Mangapohatu Mountains in central North Island New Zealand, Aotearoa.

The first inkling that we were in for a unique natural horse experience came only an hour or so after we left Rotorua and headed up into the mountains on a loose gravel road into the tribal lands of the Tuhoe Maoris. Rounding a corner we suddenly came upon a stallion grazing contentedly at the side of the road, not phased in the slightest at the TV vans pulled up alongside him, just accepting us as a natural part of the 'environment'.

These roadside wanderers, alone or in small groups (Photo 1) grazing in clearings in the bush or drinking in the clear mountain streams, became more frequent as we drew nearer to and ultimately arrived at the small village nestled in the valley that was the center of this amazing horse community, Ruatahuna.

One general store, one gas station, and a few houses. The store was the hub of the town; the owners cooked great food; the pumps had not had petrol in them for ten years.

Over the past seven years Ivana and I had been preaching 'Horses and Humans in Harmony' and in turn had been preached to about 'Natural Horsemanship', however it

was not until this moment that we actually saw it in action: Horses wandering in the streets, children riding bareback on the roads, two tiny ones sitting back to back laughing (Photo 2) as their horse trotted and clambered over the uneven ground. A hunter passing along the road, rifle strapped to his back, perfectly balanced on his horse, was looking at us just as curiously as we were looking at him.

A few minutes later we realized the reason for the curious looks when we were invited to a meeting with the elders of the community to discuss the film project, which without their input and interaction could not happen, to find that we were the only pakehas (Europeans) there. We were introduced to the committee headed by Tangiora Rangiuia (Tangi) a striking lady whose imposing dark eyes appeared to have the gift of searching deep inside us as though trying to find out what Ivana and I were all about and what we wanted, rather than listening to the words of Ruth, our producer.

We were soon joined by and introduced to the leading horseman in the area, Lenny Te Kaawa, whose presence was almost like that of a master sensei in a dojo. Lenny sat at the back, out of the circle, saying nothing, just listening to and assessing what Ruth was saying about the project. Ultimately the success of the project was going to hinge on the participation of Lenny, and knowing the pride of such a man and feeling his presence, I decided to interrupt, and dropped the bombshell. "Neither Ivana nor I ride, or train horses! We are not here to criticize, comment or teach anything to do with your horsemanship skills. Already what I have seen with your kids blows away anything I have ever witnessed with the so called masters in America and Europe. We are here for two purposes only: to see if there is a place in your horse community for the Equine Touch, and hopefully to learn some gift that we may take out to the rest of the world to help improve the quality of life of their horses. We would like to make this weekend an exchange between people who care about horses."



Photo 3



Photo 4

Somehow the ice was broken; the confession that Ivana and I did not ride evoked exchanges of eyes, reminding me of the Japanese 'reading of silence' and only then did Lenny join the circle. It turned out that Lenny, as well as being a horse trainer, the local minister, and policeman, was also a shepherd who spent sometimes more than ten hours every day in the saddle moving sheep and cattle around the valley.

Introductions over, we were taken to assess and work on an injured paint; they wanted to see ET in action. The horse had been badly kicked in the hock 8 weeks before and the joint was still badly swollen, the entire muscles of the left hind wasted and atrophied, the horse unable to maintain any weight on the leg. In the mountains there are no vets so Ivana did her best to assess the horse which without the benefit of X-rays could only be an educated guess, the worst assessment being a fracture of the tarsus or the splint bones. A few onlookers had turned up along with Lenny and Tangiora, though conversing with us out of politeness they remained suspicious, standing well back, removing any chance of interaction between us or giving the appearance of condoning our work.

The reaction to ET from the paint was excellent: relaxation, jaw self-adjustments, soft eyes, sighs, shaking, and then a snorting session as its back relaxed allowing it to get rid of copious amounts of gunky fluid through its nostrils. After the work was completed we tried to elicit opinions and conversation, but the cultural and suspicion barriers had not yet come down.

The crew had arranged to film Lenny the following morning as he started off on his day's work shifting a herd of cattle down the valley. There were wide eyed looks among them as Lenny pointed out that he rose at 3.30am, prepared himself, then attended to his prayers, had breakfast, and would start saddling at about 4.30am.

Ivana and I as the 'talent' were not required for the early morning shoot and were allowed to lie in until 6.30 at our cabin alongside Lake Waikaremoana before driving over the mountains back to Ruatahuna to work on our first horse.

There we were introduced to Moeparangi Te Kaawa (Moe), Lenny's 17-year-old daughter whom he had proudly told me he put on a horse before she could walk, as it taught children good balance when they came to do so. Already an accomplished horsewoman, 'Moe' had started her own stallion, Johnny, (whom I was scheduled to work on) when she was only 15, and had started and trained countless others. I was later informed by several elder horse men that already 'Moe' was respected along with Lenny in the horse community as a 'Horse Whisperer'.

Ivana in the meantime was starting to make contact with the local ladies headed by Tangiora, and found that they both had an interest in using herbs for remedial purposes, and very soon an in depth discussion was in progress regarding the use of local herbs for remedial purposes for both humans and horses. With no vets available in the mountains it was obvious that the locals were using some handed down systems for helping their horses maintain soundness. Unfortunately the time spent

with them was too brief for Ivana's inquiring mind, so she has already booked a holiday there next January in the hope that she can learn more about their knowledge in the usage of local herbs.

As with most stallions I work on, especially ones with a recent injury (Johnny had severe fresh wire cuts on both rear legs), I made my approach with a degree of fear and respect for what he could do to a pale skinned stranger wearing a big white Stetson. 'Amazed' is perhaps my best description of this session - no sooner had I put my mark on him and bonded when I found myself with one of the most gentle and well behaved horses I have ever worked on. I just had to look him in the eye, tell him what I wanted, and there it was, left foot, right foot, lower head, whatever, a truly safe horse who was so in harmony with humans that even when two horses at liberty went charging up the road in front of us he did not even bat an eyelid. A marvelous compliment to an amazing young horse woman.



Photo 5



Photo 6

By this time Lenny was returning from his cattle drive (Photo 3) so we accompanied him home to watch him unsaddle and check out the condition of his horse's back after having carried him for the best part of ten hours. Once again, amazement - no fancy saddle, no fancy pneumatic saddle pads, rather an old blanket on top of a foam blanket, no shims - the horse snobs would have rolled their eyes at what came off the horse's back. However it was the horse's back that Ivana and I were interested in. There was no way this horse could not show negative effects. I suppose egotistically I was waiting for the horse to show pain so that in front of Lenny I could amaze him by removing it with ET. The horse did not even twitch, flinch or buckle! I was at a loss for words, Ivana was at a loss for words, I walked over to our car, took out my brand new Equine Ethology lead rope and Cherokee halter, and presented it to him.

Lenny then 'pampered' his no name horse by getting out his garden watering can, and using it to give his horse a shower and rub-down before turning him loose (Photo 4). Putting away his stock saddle, Lenny explained that he has a remuda of 'he thinks' seven or eight horses. He will use one for a week and then turn it loose for a couple of months then bring it back in for another work session allowing it plenty of rest and recovery time between sessions.

We then watched Lenny's shepherd partner, Tom, unsaddling. Tom used a basic Wintec Western saddle on top of a standard pad and a quilted waterproof covering. Once again I was hoping for a reaction as I prodded and poked. Again nothing, ten hours under saddle and not even a yawn! In these few minutes these two shepherds had blown away all the guff I had ever heard in the hype and promotion of different saddles of saddle pads and taken me back to what Len Brown said to me in Texas, 'It's not about whether the saddle fits or not, it's about whether it works that is important'.

Ivana took a break to work on a six-week-old foal who Tom had found in the bush alongside her mother who had been dead for a month. The foal had quickly learned to eat grass to survive, and though not in the healthiest of conditions with a three finger width hernia, was quite happy to wander in around the film crew and allow Ivana to ET her as she assessed her possibilities of survival (Photo 5).

That afternoon saw us at the local swimming hole with youngsters from 7 up to 17 bringing their horses in for Ivana to teach them carrot stretching to limber up their necks and to assess whether or not they had a problem in that area. The only problem was many of the horses had never seen a carrot before and so some of the 'Tamarikis' (kids) ended up eating what was meant for the horses. Eventually one little boy managed to get his horse to perform all the exercises, his serious face turning into the biggest grin ever as his horse was the first to reach down between its legs and capture the prize.

The ice was broken here too; the kids and the community were starting to accept us. Moe and Lenny were becoming more and more interested in ET and were now opening up to us, and Tangiora supplied me with some of the history of the Tuho horses,

explaining that they had originally been brought to the valley by the settlers 250 years earlier to build the roads and work in the forest. The original horses were Clydesdales and Shires used to pull logs and clear the trails and build roads, as well as various riding mounts used by the workers for personal use. Some of these horses escaped and some were just turned loose; eventually they started to breed and form their own herds, ultimately breaking up into three or four recognized bunches from which the horsemen of the community drew their original stock.

The valley itself, an hour-and-a-half drive over rough roads to any town or city, survived in isolation; very rarely if ever was a horse brought in from the outside world, or one of theirs taken out, though we were offered our pick if we wanted one. When I asked how much for a beautiful palomino, they said, "Nothing. We've got plenty."

The beliefs and skills were passed down from generation to generation without influence from outsiders. While a few of them had been to see some 'Cowboy Horse Whisperers' they did not really think much of them, but rated Ray Hunt as the best horseman they had seen. They knew no promoted techniques yet all their horses did whatever they asked of them without fancy ropes, halters or training aids, and other than accidental injuries were on the whole pretty sound.

These factors of their relationship with the horse stood out among all others for us:

- They bring their horses from nature into servitude (Nature breeds, and the people appropriately enlist what is naturally available and capable).
- When their horses' time for retirement comes along, there is no sending them to the lion park or to the canning factory; they are simply returned to nature to grow old in nature. They may go on for years as there are no predators in NZ.
- They deworm regularly with herbs, and the horses are cared for and looked after as old friends until the day they are no longer there.

That night Ivana and I and the whole crew were invited to sleep on the Marae, the sacred ground and ceremonial lodge of the tribe (Photo 6). This meant another barrier was broken and in truth can be considered nothing less than an honor for us two pakehas within the Tuhoe community.



Photo 7

On the last morning of filming we again noticed the changes in the attitude towards us and the Equine Touch when we returned to visit the first horse we had worked on. The owner, who had trimmed the feet as Ivana suggested, was vocally enthusiastic about the changes in his horse and wanted to know what he could do to continue the healing process, talking away quite happily in front of the cameras.

The next session in the middle of the village saw a crowd of young horsemen, including the young hunter (Puki) we had seen on the first day, bring their horses down to be worked on. Although the hunter felt there was nothing wrong with his horse, he was open and understanding when we showed him that one of his mounts - which two days before had been carrying two deer and a pig as well as himself - had sciatica and was suffering from a contracted castration scar. Both of these were relieved with ET. Puki was extremely interested when Ivana showed him the imbalance on his horse's hoof due to the influence of the castration scar, and showed him how to return it to medial lateral balance now that the problem had been addressed. His other horse he also thought was OK, until Ivana pointed out that the teeth on one side had hooks, which was the reason the rider was finding it difficult to turn the horse in one direction. This also was having a compensation effect upon the sacrum. Puki, an architect student, translated Ivana's information into his own understanding and it immediately was as though the lights switched on.

The last barrier then came unexpectedly crashing down when Ruth called me over, and I saw Lenny - who had refused for the past three days to talk in front of the camera - being fitted with a microphone. I was asked to stand in front of him, and with a dignity that I have only ever seen from the true Maori elder, he presented me with a ceremonial 'Teko Teko', a beautiful stick or wand carved by nature which had been in his family for many years (Photo 7). Lenny explained to me it was a gift of respect, an extension of his family and people, an invitation to be part of the Maori culture and an exchange from his people for the gift that Ivana and I had given them by coming to their community and working with the horses. He told us that years ago

his grandfather and father had talked to the horses the way I did, but that the art had been lost. (Tears, go away.)

The gift of the 'Teko Teko' and the possession of it signified that the people recognized me as a Tohunga, a medicine man, a teacher. (Tears, go away!) In my life I have had several honors, but none as emotional or as meaningful to me as this bestowed upon me by this dignified horseman. Ivana was so proud, a touching moment to be remembered throughout our lives. As one other Maori artisan said, "We had talked the talk, and walked the walk and we had earned their respect."

With an invite to return echoing in our hearts, Ivana and I will be heading back next January to Ruatahuna not only to teach the people Equine Touch but to learn from them, to enjoy their culture, and perhaps, who knows - even going riding with the Horse Whisperers of the Mangapohatu Mountains. 🐾🐾

About the author:

Jock Ruddock, who pioneered The Equine Touch, 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. The Equine Touch, a rebalancing, retraining, and some would say healing modality for the horse, is the first non-diagnostic, non-invasive, energy and connective soft-tissue discipline in the world to be awarded national accreditation status in the United Kingdom. Visit www.theequinetouch.com.