

What's the Big Deal about Natural Horsemanship?

Horses are a very forgiving species of animals that have tolerated humans in their lives for thousands of years. Much of that time they have been simply forced to comply with humans and fit in the human world which does not match their wants and needs. Frequently, they are taught in such a way that they are merely robotic servants that sometimes do well for humans and sometimes don't at all. Horses can do so much more for humans if they are trained in such a way that they trust their rider and are dealt with in a consistent and logical way that makes sense to them.

There are way too many horses in the world that are considered crazy, wild, or bad animals when all that they really need to become wonderful is a different way of handling them. Many people with horses get discouraged or scared and give up on horses altogether because they don't have good experiences with these 1000 pound animals in the traditional training context. Others keep plugging away but realize that things are not as good as they would like. Happily, there is a better way of dealing with horses, often called Natural Horsemanship.

The term Natural Horsemanship comes from using the nature of horses as the foundation for training. Instead of trying to make horses conform to human standards of behavior which makes no sense to horses, Natural Horsemanship recognizes that horses are prey animals, that they naturally live in groups instead of isolated, that they are flight-first, think later animals, and that they learn best by the release of pressure instead of force.

Understanding that they are prey animals with a flight first nature, Natural Horsemanship training uses methods of desensitizing a horse to scary things in such a way that the horse builds confidence rather than being forced to submit and building up fear inside that might explode when the horse has more than it can take. Horses learn to trust humans to be their leader of the herd of two and are more confident with the human leadership.

Desensitizing can take many forms, but it always should involve repetitive, rhythmic pressure that continues until the horse relaxes. For example, if you are working to get your horse used to a scary object such as an umbrella, let the horse see it, sniff it if he wishes, and then with the horse on a long lead line (anywhere from 12-22 feet), begin walking away with the horse following while you are opening and closing the umbrella. Horses are a lot

more willing to follow something scary than to have it come at them, so we start there. When he is comfortable following the umbrella, you can turn and face him and back away with the umbrella opening and closing, gradually shortening the distance between the horse and you with the umbrella. If he gets upset, don't stop opening and closing it, but rather move farther away and continue until he relaxes.

Horses being herd animals, they typically get upset being away from their group. Recognizing that, Natural Horsemanship trainers work to establish themselves as a leader the horse can trust so that they become a herd of two. Also, the training helps wean a horse away from his buddies by using psychology rather than force. Working hard near the buddies and being allowed to rest when farther away, a horse soon comes to realize that life is more comfortable being with his leader no matter where his horse buddies are. This may be a gradual process, but it works much more effectively than trying to force the horse to accept being away from his herd, the barn, etc.

Good Natural Horsemanship training (and there are some bad versions too, unfortunately) involves starting with a light request every time and only holding or possibly escalating the pressure until the horse responds correctly. At that point, there should always be an immediate release of pressure so that the horse associates the correct response with a release. Releases given at the wrong time only serve to confuse the horse, so timing is crucial. So is the progression of pressure. Using as little pressure as possible but also being willing to use as much as necessary is the quickest way to teach a horse.

It should go without saying that the human has a big responsibility in dealing with a horse. First, humans have to recognize the need to learn about a horse's natural habits. Instead of unrealistically expecting robot animals that do whatever the human wants, we have to learn to communicate with them in ways that make sense to horses. It involves us having to learn about horses' natures, but once that happens, you will never want to go back to the traditional ways that aren't nearly as effective, satisfying, safe, or fun.