

# Natural Horsemanship Training Explained



**The history and philosophy behind natural horsemanship and what it means for you and your horse**

## *A Note From The Editor*

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Amy Herdy, Managing Editor  
*MyHorse Daily*



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The introduction of “natural” horsemanship was hailed as a new era for the relationship between equine and human. Here, two horsemen-turned-authors take a look at the philosophy driving this popular trend.

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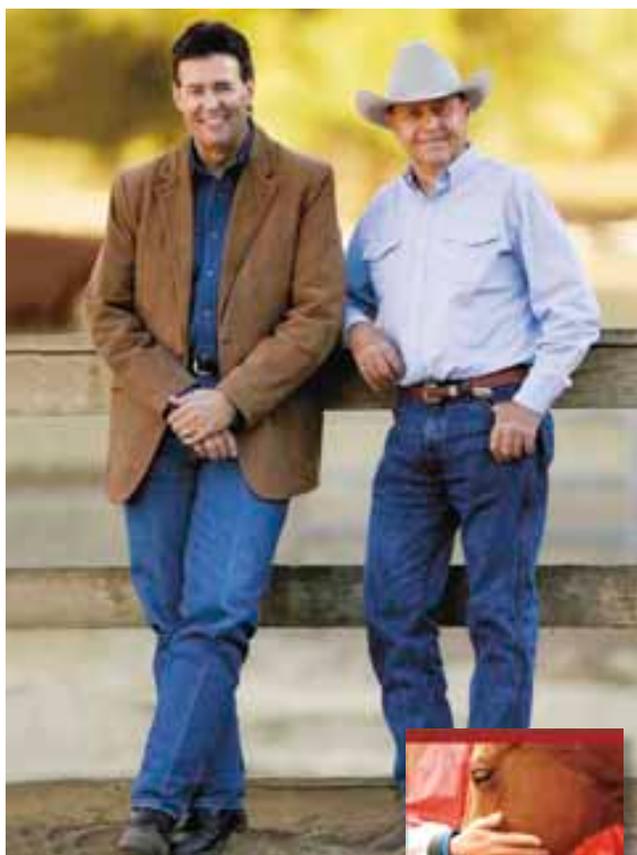
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Adapted from a story by  
Jennifer Forsberg Meyer

Over the past decade, the term “natural horsemanship” has become part of everyday equestrian jargon. But what exactly does the term mean, what is involved in its practice, and what is the difference between that and traditional horsemanship?

According to behaviorist/veterinarian Robert M. Miller, originator of imprint training for newborn foals, and Rick Lamb, a horse lover and equestrian radio program host, it's the trend toward gentler, “horse-centric” techniques that characterizes this “natural” approach, which is believed to benefit both horse and rider.

Is this an entirely new concept? Well, yes and no. In their book *The Revolution in Horsemanship and What It Means to Mankind* (The Lyons Press), Miller and Lamb maintain that many natural horsemanship techniques date to antiquity, with the teachings of Simon of Athens, Xenophon, Alexander the Great, Antoine de Pluvinel, William Cavendish, and Francois Robichon dela Guerinie, among others. In successive



From left: Rick Lamb and Robert Miller, co-authors of *The Revolution in Horsemanship and What It Means to Mankind*, believe that natural horsemanship benefits both horse and rider.



generations, there were horse “whisperers” the likes of Denton Offutt, John Solomon Rarey, Kell B. Jeffery and Monte Foreman to carry the banner.

### Background

The term “natural horsemanship” was reportedly coined by Pat Parelli, one of a group of innovative trainers and clinicians who owe much of their knowledge to a modern-day cowboy named Tom Dorrance (see sidebar), who believed that non-coercive techniques that consider the horse's point of view are the most humane and the most effective.

Dorrance's influence, especially through his protégé, Ray Hunt, can be traced to virtually every corner of the natural horsemanship movement. Others counted as founding figures include Dorrance's brother Bill, as well as Parelli, Monty Roberts, Richard Shrake and John Lyons.

This growing number of like-minded clinicians—most of them gifted teachers and entrepreneurs—“spread the word” through clinics, demonstrations, magazine articles and videos. Throughout the 1980s, their message spread among cowboys, ranchers and the horse-owning public at large.

The current wave of trainers and clinicians in this vein includes Clinton Anderson, Buck Brannaman, Craig Cameron, Peter Campbell, Leslie



**Above: A rider attending a Julie Goodnight clinic learns some of the basics of natural horsemanship. Right: Clinician Clinton Anderson befriends a young prospect during a “Road to the Horse” competition.**

Desmond, Bryan Neubert, Linda Parelli, Julie Goodnight, GaWaNi Pony Boy, Chris Cox, Mark Rashid, Stacy Westfall and Dennis Reis, among many others.

### **Why Now?**

Some skeptics have argued that nothing humans do with a horse is truly natural, in the strictest sense. They contend that humans’ inborn nature generally prompts us to use coercion as a first—rather than last—resort. On the rare occasion in history when an enlightened individual took a gentler approach to horse handling, the results were sometimes looked upon as anything but natural. Case in point: the itinerant Italian



TOP: HEIDI NYLAND. BOTTOM: KIM DOUGLAS



As clinician Stacy Westfall illustrates, exercises in natural horsemanship can take many forms.

horse trainer whose work with his trick horse Mauraco reportedly prompted God-fearing peasants in 17th-century Arles, France, to burn him for being in collusion with the devil.

So why the popularity now? Within the last 100 years, according to Miller and Lamb, the following factors have converged:

>> Behavior emerged as a field of study, making it more likely that humans would examine how a horse's mind works.

>> The populace became better educated, and interested in learning yet more.

>> Modern technology vastly speeded and facilitated the sharing of ideas.

>> Urbanization changed Americans' attitudes toward animals, to the point where horses became viewed less as objects and more as companions, and violence towards them became less acceptable.

>> Women (who tend to be more nurturing and less aggressive than men) came to be involved with horses in growing numbers—even outnumbering men.

>> Horsemanship became a recreational interest rather than a necessary life skill, making one's relationship with the horse the most prized benefit to many.

### Countering the Naysayers

Among the criticisms routinely leveled at the natural horsemanship phenomenon is the contention that it's all "flash"—that is to say, marketing and promotion. "On the contrary," Miller and Lamb argue in their book, "marketing only brings attention to a product, and poor products cannot stand the scrutiny.

"Indeed, the demand for education has resulted in vastly improved systems of communicating timeless principles of horse psychology and horse handling, enabling ordinary horsemen to achieve extraordinary results with their horses in greater numbers than history has ever known."

Do clinicians seek to make money sharing their techniques? Certainly, but this isn't a bad thing, the authors contend. "As an industry," they write, "natural horsemanship has a comfortable life of its own, a secure and sizable niche within the larger equine industry. It feeds the hopes and dreams of countless backyard horsemen, and an increasing number of serious competitors. All are more than happy to pay for the sustenance. The product is that good. Everybody wins."

### 'Different' vs. Right or Wrong

When shopping for a natural horsemanship clinician, it's important to remember that different clinicians might

## TOM DORRANCE: NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP PIONEER

Adapted from a story by Judy Reynolds

*Editor's Note: Tom Dorrance passed away in June 2003 at the age of 93, but his philosophies are carried on by many of today's natural horsemanship trainers and clinicians.*

Some called him a guru and a Zen master, and no wonder. Even in his 80s, Tom Dorrance had an uncanny ability to read a horse and divine what he needed and when. But Dorrance shunned such labels, simply saying, "Everything I learned, I learned from the horse."

He was too modest. For more than a quarter century, Dorrance was at the head of a quiet revolution in horse handling. His philosophy of "true unity and willing communication," built on an acceptance of the mind, body and spirit of the horse, had found an enthusiastic audience among equestrians frustrated with more traditional approaches to horse-human relationships. His disciples—including Ray Hunt and Buck Brannaman—spread the gospel in clinics from coast to coast.

### Westwind Ranch

The steady stream of horse trailers bouncing down the road to Westwind Ranch attested to the undiminished appeal of Tom Dorrance's ideas and methods. One bright fall day I was part of the procession, with my 9-year-old Thoroughbred, Laddie, in tow.

We needed help. Laddie had spent three years on the racetrack and could be explosive. He liked to bolt. He traveled heavily on the forehand and would hang onto my hands at the canter. I had trouble getting his attention at times and often felt frustrated and vulnerable while riding him.

Previously, I had sought the advice of an excellent hunter/jumper trainer and a talented dressage rider. Laddie's dramatic tendency to bolt had led both to recommend a double-twisted wire snaffle. Though this bit offered more control, I knew it did not address the fundamental problem, whatever that was. Safety was still out of reach. I decided that if I had to ride Laddie in such a severe bit, I'd rather not ride at all.



One of the original "horse whisperers," the late Tom Dorrance spent much of his life helping people get in tune with their horses.

The morning Laddie and I arrived, Dorrance was talking with five visitors about a string trick. It had four steps, and if you missed even one, you couldn't complete it (a concept Dorrance often relates to horse handling). This trick required attention and dexterity, and it could make someone feel like an idiot. Not that this was its intention. Dorrance loved brainteasers, maybe because he loved to see people try to figure things out—including their horses.

"If people figure a thing out for themselves, maybe it'll stick with them awhile," he said.

### A New Way of Thinking

I soon learned that taking a "lesson" from Dorrance involved more deduction than instruction. A few spare observations were often the only clues you were given in trying to figure out the how, what and why of a situation.

Nonetheless, in my week at Westwind, I gradually learned some of the basic principles underpinning what Dorrance called true unity and willing communication between horse and rider. Because they are amorphous and

impossible to fit into the how-to mode of today's equine literature, these principles can be maddening. And, I must admit, they turned my "training program" completely on its head. But they changed my relationship with horses forever, as they have for countless others who learned from Dorrance or his followers.

Here are a few of Dorrance's principles:

**Establish mutual respect.** At one time or another, most of us have been told that the horse must respect us. In trying to win that respect, I have often been counseled to "make" the horse do what I want him to do, and the quicker, the better. Very few people concern themselves with earning the horse's respect. Dorrance did. His definition of respect was based on an understanding of the horse's perceptions, motivations and preferences. It requires reading the horse, noting the look in his eye and position of his ears, so that at any given moment your response will be appropriate. And it means that everything is done slowly, quietly and carefully.

"It's very important to be able to present

CAPPY JACKSON



**According to Dorrance, simple exercises like mounting provide opportunities for working on communication.**

yourself to the horse in a way that is acceptable to him," he said.

In Dorrance's view, respect also meant seeing to a horse's needs, from making sure he has enough hay and water to adjusting his tack for maximum comfort.

**Work with a horse's instincts, not against them.** "People don't always take into consideration the way the horse looks at the safety issue," Dorrance said. "They force the horse into situations where he doesn't feel safe, at the same time expecting him to learn something new."

The horse's instinct to flee when confronted with a perceived threat is a prime example. Dorrance did not try to push a horse toward the source of his fright. A spook was sometimes met by turning Laddie to face the object and, at the same time, allowing him to move away from it. The purpose: to build the horse's confidence that the rider will not confine him beside the perceived danger and to let the horse assess the danger so he can learn to feel safe.

**Use your powers of observation to make every experience count.** Working with Dorrance was intense, because he was constantly noticing so many seemingly insignificant things that many

of us overlook. Tiny details, he said, when added up, can provide a clear picture of bigger issues down the road. "By solving the little things, you might avoid bigger problems later on."

For example, saddling and bridling a horse was an exercise in total awareness when done under his watchful eye. "If the horse stands quietly for bridling, saddling and mounting, then you have some communication going on," he said. To put on the bridle, Dorrance turned Laddie's head slightly toward him. Every time the horse began turning away, Dorrance gently bent him back, sometimes pressing his right hand up where the throat meets the jaw to relax him.

The same goes for saddling. The horse was to stand absolutely still, without grinding his teeth, shaking his head or fidgeting. If at any point he became agitated, Dorrance stopped everything and settled him down before proceeding.

As for the mounting, Dorrance preferred getting on from a fence or block, because it's easier for both horse and rider. The horse could be encouraged, with the reins over his head, to move up closer to the rider. Dorrance advised a little lift on the inside rein as the rider swings his leg over the saddle, which will help the horse keep from moving off. If he steps away as you mount, that small beginning could lead to much more dangerous moves.

All these details require a tremendous amount of attention, but Dorrance believed they are the foundation for willing communication. "It's like the string trick," he said. "If you're having trouble on step number two, you won't get to step number three. And if you don't clear up problems at step number three, you'll have to wait for step number four."

Dorrance understood fully what so many of us only pay lip service to: the fact that we cannot "make" a horse do anything. We can ask a horse, but we can't make him. Not only is the horse 1,000 pounds heavier than a person, but also his persona is the living expression of freedom and independence.

"For lack of a better word, I've taken to calling this the horse's spirit," Dorrance said. "The older I get, the more I have come to believe that this aspect of the horse is the most important and the most overlooked."

use different approaches and techniques to achieve the same result. They are not necessarily better or worse, and any comparisons, as Miller and Lamb point out, are analogous to saying to a car dealer, "Tell me why I should buy your Chevy instead of that Ford across the street." In short, the choice comes down to personal preference.

Despite all the choices out there, resistance to natural horsemanship persists among some longtime horse industry insiders. As Lamb explains, many people still don't understand the principles that undergird natural horsemanship.

"Some think it's just all-gentle, all-the-time, but that's not accurate," he says. "A natural horseman will get after a horse to insist on compliance, but the difference is he'll always give the horse a chance first to respond to a gentle request—one that the horse can easily understand."

### 'Natural' vs. Traditional

Natural horsemanship seems here to stay, with related tie-ins to new kinds of equipment, hoof care, health care, alternative therapies and equine nutrition. But accepting natural methods needn't mean turning one's back on traditional horsemanship.

As Miller and Lamb write, the phenomenal popularity of natural horsemanship occasionally results in a disturbing disdain among new converts towards anything that smacks of "tradition":

*In their zeal, [beginning students of natural horsemanship] sometimes alienate other horsemen who have not yet been converted. This is a normal stage in the process of resetting the mind to see the world from the horse's point of view. But it is a transitional stage ...*

*Traditions—even new ones such as natural horsemanship—must always be considered on their own merits ... for instance, traditional Western*



Clinician Linda Parelli works to establish communication and mutual respect—two fundamentals of natural horsemanship—with a young trainee.

*riding gets its share of criticism for its use of curb bits. But natural horsemanship does not preclude the use of curb bits. Remember Xenophon's lesson from so many centuries ago: Even the harshest bit may be made light by the rider's hands. Any bit can be used cruelly and any bit can be used humanely. The entire California vaquero system of bridling is calculated to produce a horse that can be controlled with a very light touch on a curb bit. There is nothing inconsistent there with natural horsemanship ... in any approach to horsemanship, we must consider both its philosophical basis and its practical application.*

*What has often been missing in*

*traditional horsemanship, as practiced by the average rider, is a commitment to seeing the world through the horse's eyes, to understanding what motivates him and to making him a partner rather than a servant. This is the philosophical part, the horseman's mindset. When the natural, empathetic mindset is present, traditional methods take on a different flavor. They are applied with more sensitivity. The hands don't yank on that curb bit; they change an angle slightly or squeeze gently, and no one knows except the horse and rider... when the horse's point of view is important to the horseman, traditional and natural horsemanship are not so far apart as they first appear.*

### **The Bigger Picture**

Ultimately, Miller and Lamb insist that this revolution has the potential to improve human beings, as well. "[It] is a test to prove that we humans can use our *power of reason* to displace our animal instincts, and to have an amicable relationship with another individual, no matter how different that individual is from us," they write. "We *can* avoid the use of force, eliminate conflict, and establish a mutually beneficial relationship *if we know how.*"

The process involves re-inventing ourselves, not just as horsemen, but also as human beings. "This new person," write the authors, "observes, remembers and compares. He listens more and talks less. He takes responsibility

COURTESY PARELLI NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP



rather than assigning blame. He controls his emotions. He becomes aware of his body language. He commits himself to acting justly. He cultivates patience. He forgives. And, of course, he places the wants and needs of another living creature ahead of his own." The authors point out that if we, the ultimate predator, can change ourselves enough to establish mutually beneficial relationships with horses, the ultimate prey species, then we should be able to do the same for our own species—to the benefit of humankind:

*Who among us would not agree that the world would be a better place if our leadership was benevolent, our purposes clear, our intentions honorable, our behavior consistent, and our relationships empathetic? ....*

Though their techniques may differ, natural horsemanship proponents such as John Lyons (top) and Leslie Desmond (above) all seek a conflict-free relationship between horse and rider.

Natural horsemanship is here to stay, with clinicians like Chris Cox actively spreading the word about horse-friendly training and riding.



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We all know there is something different and special about horses. But perhaps it is really that there is something different and special about us when we're with them. We recognize in the horse a means to reach our highest

calling as humans. Perhaps that is the real importance of this revolution in horsemanship.

And, if so, perhaps natural horsemanship is a clarion call to all of

us—about reaching that potential.

The Revolution in Horsemanship and What It Means to Mankind is available from HorseBooksEtc. at <http://horsebooks.etc.com>. 🐾

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