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The EQUINE PRACTICE ROUNDS

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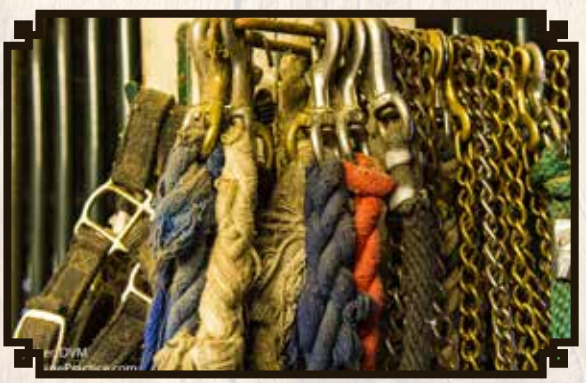
Inside

Horsemanship is Leadership

HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE HORSEMAN



Most horsemen reward bad behavior. "But … my gelding loves me," you say. "I'm his 'special person.'" Of course your horse loves you; you feed him and coddle him, and feed him again, until you end up with a baby who loves to be loved and wants to curl up in your arms. But unlike a small and helpless little human, your "baby" is five to 10 times your size with a club on the end of each leg. A horse can kill you, and the horse that can kill you is your own. Their sheer size and power demands respect. Horses, no matter how tame, are still horses.

Horses love structure. Every herd has a hierarchy, and each individual horse is incorporated into that hierarchy. But so is each person who interacts with a horse. When your mare pushes you around, whether it's on a ride or literally leaning on you with all of her 1,000 pounds, it's not funny, cute, or endearing — it's a test and a challenge. Every horse wants a leader. But when you coddle your horse and appease him or her with treats, you're telling the horse you're afraid. And horses know intuitively that a fearful leader isn't a good one. If you don't make yourself the alpha mare — the leader — the herd will put you in your place, and rarely is that place a position of authority. An effective leader is an effective horseman.

But what makes an effective leader and an effective horseman? Effective leaders learn the personalities of those they are leading.

Training a horse is much like courting a woman. You wouldn't take a girl out for a wild time if you knew she was a string quartet kind of lady, would you? If you did, it probably wouldn't go over well. A horse, like a woman, is a living, breathing being with wants, needs, and desires individual to them.

When Melissa and I walk into a stall, we can read that personality, and that's how we can connect quickly and effectively with your horse. We start to understand who they are and what they want. We're often able to turn to the owners and say, "Your horse is like this, isn't he?" Usually the owner is floored. But once you understand horses and get used to their personalities, they become easy to read. At the core of good leadership is this principle: Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

Once you understand your horse and its personality and wants, walk with an air of leadership. Go into an interview with an air of leadership, and chances are you will get that job. It works the same way with horses. You don't have to lead by beating, nagging, or coddling. Great leaders lead by understanding, empowering, and behaving like leaders. In the end, by becoming a better leader, you become a better horseman. Not only will your horse love you, he'll also respect you. And in the process, you'll become a better person.

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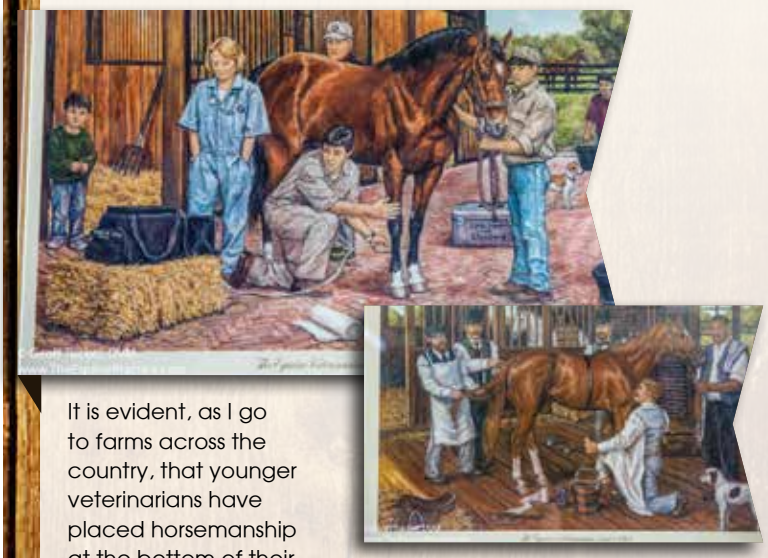
Is Horsemanship Relevant Anymore?

The year 2015 celebrates the 254th anniversary of Veterinary Medicine. The first veterinary school was established in Lyon, France, in 1761 by the most respected horseman of that time, Claude Bourgelat. He became nationally recognized in his time for his horsemanship skills and later became the director of the Lyon Academy of Horsemanship at the age of 28. While the primary purpose for the establishment of a veterinary school was to combat cattle plague (rinderpest), he also realized that horses were suffering from disease and that people needed to know more than just how to ride. King Louis XV of France agreed, and the Royal Veterinary School was established.

The roots of veterinary medicine started with horsemanship. But is it as important today in a world of sedatives, high-tech diagnostics, and fewer horses?

A friend of mine was teaching a class on equine dentistry a few years ago at Cornell University. He has performed dentistry for about 40 years and was trying to convey to a student the importance of horsemanship in the approach and application of his skills. The resident instructor dismissed his attempt with the comment, "We are creating veterinarians here, not horsemen."



It is evident, as I go to farms across the country, that younger veterinarians have placed horsemanship at the bottom of their skill sets. Worse yet, they seem to be comfortable with that.

This last week, my services were requested by an owner whose horse had been over-medicated. What's more, the vet who had performed the dentistry still had difficulty in addressing all of the teeth, stating to the owner that he had addressed only about 75 percent of the mouth upon completing his task.

I am the first to tell you that there are a few horses that, even with medication, are difficult or even impossible to float. But this horse was not one of those.

In my book, "The Ten Irrefutable Laws of Horsemanship," I review the different personalities of horses, describe the use of energy, and promote the approach of "seek first to understand, then to be understood." Using this information, I approached this horse, applied my technique, and completed the floating and addressed every tooth, all without drugs and with minimal objection from the horse. Upon completion, we offered him some grain. Rather than spilling grain out of his mouth, the horse kept his lips closed and chewed every kernel. The owner stated this was the first time in a long time he had not spilled his grain.

What makes this example stand out from the rest was that the vet who had last floated the horse stopped by while I was working. Instead of watching and asking questions, he defended his actions and then left. I know he was busy that day, but would it have hurt to have stayed for a few minutes to witness the fact that horsemanship can trump over-medicating?

Veterinarians train hard and learn a lot. Today's students learn more in a year than I learned in four years because there is that much more information. In addition, there is an abundant amount of continuing education to add to this knowledge. However, it is my observation that there is little taught about the application of horsemanship in veterinary technique. This is in direct conflict with the roots of veterinary medicine, and it needs to change.

I have heard countless stories from owners who have said, "My vet couldn't do that," in relating to things such as passing a stomach tube, cleaning a sheath, or dressing a wound. One example of this occurred again this week. I had just finished floating a horse when the vet arrived to remove some excess granulation tissue from the front of a front cannon bone. This is a simple and painless procedure when it is done on a calm and gentle horse. The first thing this vet did was strongly sedate the horse, and I am not sure why. As a vet who has worked around horses for 42 years, I know that vets can bring out the ugly side of a horse, but this horse showed no signs of creating a dangerous situation. I was perplexed, but I think this young vet had not been taught any other way.

I am beginning to realize that if someone doesn't do something to bring back simple horsemanship to our profession, as well as to all the horse professions, it will be lost forever. Get two or more "older" vets together, and the same topic always comes up. What kind of vets are the vet schools creating? While they are smart and hardworking, some don't know which end of the horse to stick the thermometer in. While drugs make this profession easier and safer, shouldn't we consider what is best for the horse?

Horsemanship is as relevant today as it ever has been. Older vets need to impress upon the schools and the new graduates the simple fact that horse owners are tiring of having their horses treated like an auto in the mechanic's garage. Working with horses is hard and dangerous, but using horsemanship to overcome the issues presented not only is the right thing to do, but it adds a dimension of fun in an otherwise long day of repetitive veterinary drills.

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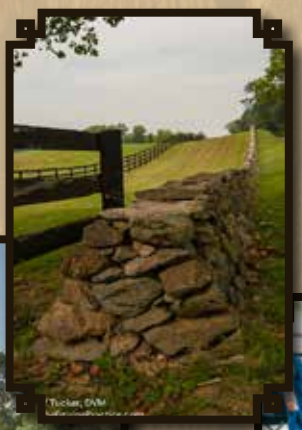

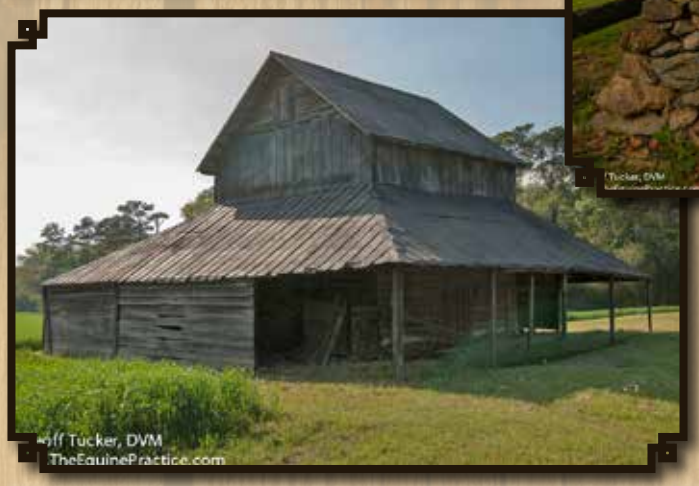

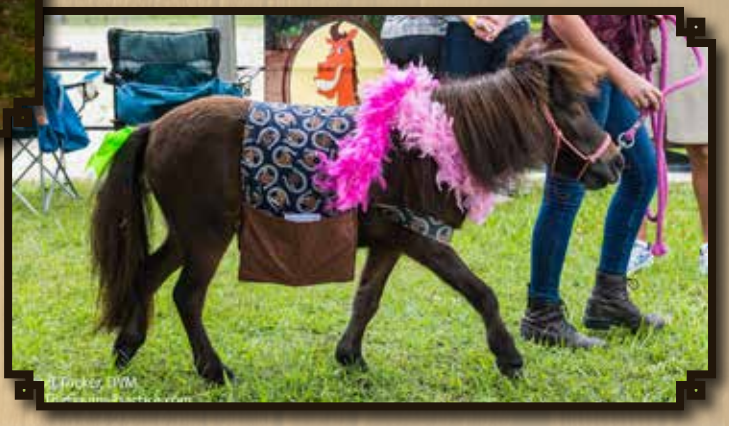

"Put Her Down, Doc. She's as Good as Dead."

The dark winter's evening sky had enveloped the land, and my regular day was done. My bones were warming, and my stomach was filled with great food. The evening would have been perfect if I'd had no emergencies and could have snuggled into my warm bed piled high with a feather comforter. But my long day wasn't over as the answering service called about a colic 45 minutes away.

Hoping this won't be interpreted wrongly, I have to say that I enjoyed working on colics. For me it was an easy diagnostic exercise with concise parameters that could be interpreted accurately. My goal was to determine if the horse had a medical colic or a surgical colic, and I had developed a reputation at Cornell's emergency clinic of being not only accurate, but effective (because I sent them in early, about 90 percent returned home after surgery).

I drove through the evening with confidence in my abilities to quickly asses this horse's situation and return home with a successful outcome. Helping my confidence was the trainer who had called me. He was a professional with experience, and I knew he was calling me about a serious colic. He knew the difference and would never have called me if it were otherwise.

I pulled up in front of the long pole barn with very high ceilings. I gathered my equipment and briskly walked through the cold January air and into the dimly lit barn. The trainer stood in front of the open door and without looking up at me said, "Put her down, Doc. She's as good as dead."

I quickly looked in and saw a familiar picture: a blanketed horse laying down in the middle of a concave floor, her blanket and mane covered in a thin layer of shavings collected from rolling about in agony. Her eyes were glazed and distant, her nostrils flared. The odor of sweat mixed with the smells of urine, manure, and old shavings penetrated my senses and added dramatically to the scene before me.

"I've tried everything short of beating her to get her up," the trainer said. "It's no good." I had to agree and started back toward the truck to get my euthanasia solution so that I could end the mare's suffering. Like a cartoon, I felt an angel on my shoulder speak clearly in my ear. "Wait! You went to Cornell. What did they teach you there? They taught you to do a full exam. Go back and do a full exam!"

I turned on my heel and went back to the horse, now moaning. I bent down with my stethoscope and listened to the heart which had only a mild elevation. I could hear a moderate amount of gurgling in the abdomen and my training started to tell me that this wasn't a serious colic. "What was it?" I asked myself silently. My mind was thinking as I decided I needed to get this horse up to examine the other side.

In order to get her up, I first needed to get her blanket off, but it was twisted tightly about her body. I unbuckled everything, but the last thigh strap was very tight. I struggled to release the tension and after successfully releasing it, laid the blanket to the side and gently tapped the mare's back with my toe.

The mare sprung to her feet, did a full body shake, and walked over to her hay and started to eat. Our mouths dropped open in disbelief as we alternated our gaze from her to each other and back to her. I was the first to laugh out loud as we both realized that this very sensitive National Show Horse thought she was dying from a too-tight thigh strap.

The trainer involuntarily made himself small with bent knees as he quickly walked out of the barn in complete embarrassment. I turned to my shoulder and thanked my angel.

From the book "True and Incredible Stories of a Horse Vet" by Geoff Tucker, DVM

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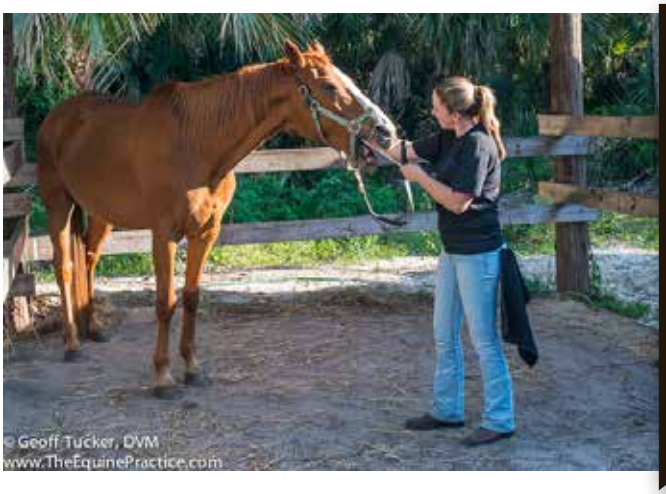
Signatures

Signatures are as unique as fingerprints and snowflakes. There are people who investigate handwriting as a way of determining who committed a crime, and that's why so many criminals cut out words and letters from magazines to write the ransom note — that way no one can identify the bad guy. They certainly don't want to leave a signature to identify who they are.

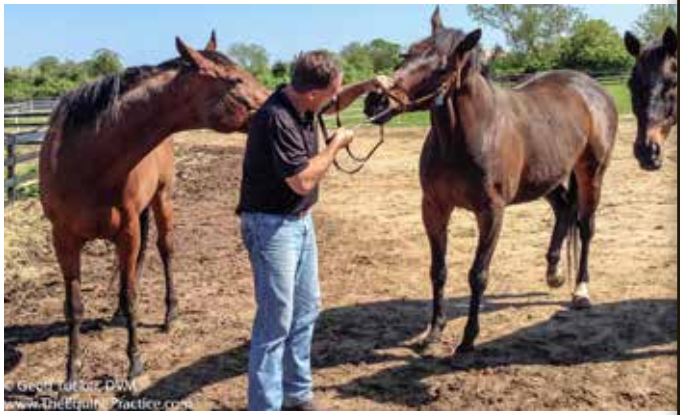
In equine dentistry, dentists often have a signature they leave behind when they float the teeth. Last week, when we had a few new horses in a barn to work on, we ran into a perfect example. Of the eight horses we were seeing, a few came from one barn, while the others came from another barn. Even though we weren't told this, we knew it anyway. Two horses that were from the same barn had a distinct pattern created by the floater that we see fairly commonly. The other six just had never been done, and even still, these horses had their own natural signature.

There is only one goal in floating teeth, and that is to remove all the sharp points from every tooth in the mouth. This results in the removal of oral pain and the subsequent free movement of the tongue and the full and uninhibited movement of the jaw. This helps healthy teeth remain healthy, or if there is disease of the gums, this new pain-free movement allows for the areas to heal. I have seen this repeatedly over the decades of floating teeth that I have been a part of.



There are some equine dentists who, for whatever reason, either miss certain spots in the mouth or over-float other spots. It becomes their signature, and when we check several horses floated by any given individual, the signature becomes obvious.

Interestingly, the horse leaves its own natural signature too. In almost every horse that has not had routine dental care, the left side becomes sharper than the right. My theory about this is based on the observation that there



are right-handed people and there are left-handed people. Horses chew in a circular direction, and I believe that most horses favor one side of their mouth when chewing. Just like you, as you eat your sandwich while reading this, you pick a side of your mouth to chew your food on. While I call this left-sided chewing and right-sided chewing, I'm not sure which one is the predominant direction. I can say, though, that in the majority of horses, the left side almost always gets sharper.

I have found that horses that we float every six months for at least four floatings often no longer have a sharper side. They also often have teeth that are aligned as if they had been wearing braces. When Melissa first started working here, she could easily tell the horses that had been floated for a while by me, by their aligned teeth and evenness of wear.

Melissa and I laugh with delight when we come across a signature caused either by the horse or by another dentist, because we know that in a few years of consistent floatings, with removal of all oral pain, the signature will be gone and the horse will be comfortable. It is a process that takes time, patience, and effort, but the result is so worth it.

Prevention is better than correction! Find out why an appointment every six months is so important.

Visit http://www.horsemanshipdentistry.com/straight-from-the-horses-mouth/ or call 1-888-HORZVET (467-9838) to schedule your next appointment