

PART ONE of THE ROAD TO BECOMING A HORSEMAN

Oct. 2009 By Sherry Jarvis

The connection between a person and a horse is not only **physical, but mental and emotional**. The path to harmony is **NOT EASY**, and it requires considerable personal investment, with moments of deep satisfaction (thank goodness) but also times of profound frustration. Rest assured that determination, perseverance, and willingness to listen and learn will always bring success towards becoming a better horseman. As we progress down the road on our journey the way we perceive horsemanship often changes. For me it no longer appears as a discipline, but rather a **way of living and being with the horses by adapting myself to how they learn, act, and react**.

For the past four years I have had the privilege of working with a group of women who are dedicated to becoming the kind of horsewoman their horse needs them to be. Six years ago I officially started Heart in Your Hand Horsemanship LLC. However four years ago the idea of the horsemanship camps at my cousin's beautiful guest ranch was born. There were 12 women at that first camp to let me give it a try. I planned and re-planned over and over all the details, until I had completely over-planned. But even so the results were fantastic and it was a huge success.

Since then I have lost count as to how many people and camps I have had. Each one has been different because of the different needs presented by both horses and riders. One thing is for sure they are never boring, you will be tired, you will be fed well, you will have fun, you will have challenges, and most of all you will go away **changed from the experience**. You won't solve all your problems in four days but you will make **significant advancement** and you will be one turn closer down the road toward your destination of becoming the kind of horseman you desire.

People who have come to my camps range from people who live in the city and don't even own a horse, to people who show successfully, to working ranchers, to others with extreme fears, to those somewhere in the middle. They have been from 8 years old to 72 years young, both genders, and with a wide variety of experiences both positive and negative. No matter how vast the differences in skills are or how unlike their goals are, everyone who has come to our camps have a **common bond which is a love of horses** and wanting to be the best horseman they can be by gaining more savvy.

With this original core group of horsewomen who come back annually in October I have tried to make each year a little different and keep new information coming as they grew and changed. It has been a lot of work but worth it, as I have seen the **development of each horse and person** throughout the 4 years.

This year we had the worst weather we have ever had. However, we are fortunate enough to have an **indoor arena**, so it wasn't so bad after all. Even with the rain we do not have to fight mud because the sand seems to suck the moisture right away, so we do not have to worry about bad footing. I enjoyed the rain as Leigh Cheryl and I rode many miles on that last afternoon together.

The private lessons on Mon. were the **crowning glory**. Each person really got something they needed with their horse and some made very significant milestone changes that final day, which brought tears of joy. In fact, for those of you who have been to my camps you know that **tears of joy and tears of frustration** are nearly always a part of the process of change.

On the final classroom session at the camps I usually do what I call **nuggets of knowledge** where we list the things we have learned over the past four days. However this year I did a recap of the road we have traveled these last four years towards becoming better horsemen. I think it is a pretty good road map for anyone to follow towards becoming a good horseman. The first year was all about **CONFIDENCE**: for both the horse and the rider. The theme was *Finding Wings So*

Your Dreams Could Fly. I chose Women's Confident Camp because while doing a demo at the NE Horse Expo it seemed everyone who came to talk with me afterwards told me how they lacked confidence like they saw in me with my special horse Cisco during our routine to music. At that first camp we focused on the ground games, simulations, and lectures which helped build the rider's confidence. Without **CONFIDENCE**, it is pretty hard to be an effective leader or communicator with any kind of horse. Lack of confidence usually causes one of two things either the horse becomes more scared and lacks trust in you to do the right thing, or he becomes even more pushy and lacks respect in your ability to get him to do the right thing.

The Second Year we focused on the **EMOTIONAL ELEMENT** for both the horse and human. We studied the horsenalties. We accessed each horse's emotional characteristics and behaviors. We learned how to read a horse, how they learn and react. Then we learned some strategies about how to handle those emotional reactions a horse can throw at us. While we studied the emotional elements it wasn't a surprise that we were all very emotional, in fact there were a lot of tears of frustration that year. The Theme was *"The Journey Continues"*.

The Third Year we focused on thinking and having a plan. The **MENTAL FITNESS** was stressed for both the rider and the horse. We set up patterns and puzzles for the horse to solve. We talked a lot more about feel and how to develop it. Each person was given a check list of tasks to perform in order to access where they were in their horsemanship journey. By checking off the tasks we could and couldn't do with our horses we had a better picture of where we were on this road to becoming a horseman. We caused the people to think about where they have come from, where they are, where they want to go, and how to get there. The theme was *"Are We There Yet?"*

This year we focused on developing the **PHYSICAL** in both the horse and rider. We stressed life up/life down, postures, conformation, etc. We accessed individual horses their willingness, calmness, attentiveness, conformation, abilities, and physical movements. We tried to apply the feel we have developed in ways to change the horses body and movements, towards relaxation, energy, and balance to set them up for collection. The Theme was *"This is Your Time!"* We demonstrated our steps forward by a short performance to music in a celebration of what we have accomplished the past four years. This really stretched some of us way out of our comfort zone. Another important element on the road to becoming a horseman. If you always play in your comfort zone pretty soon your playing field will start to shrink instead of grow.

As a result of the study of **CONFIDENCE, EMOTIONAL, MENTAL, AND PHYSICAL FITNESS**, necessary for horsemanship these dedicated women have all become better horsewomen. Through this evolution they have developed different goals. Even though they have all progressed at very different speeds and levels depending on how much time and effort they have had to put into the journey they always support and encourage one another because of their **common bond of a love for horses** and to be the best they can be for their horse. It has been a pleasure being a part of their journey, and I look forward to what might happen next year. It will take some creativity to develop a new program for next year, but I'm sure we'll come up with something that will be meaningful and applicable to the next turn on our road to becoming horsewomen.

Horsemanship is an art form that to me takes a lifetime to really come into, because it is a way of life that involves change, constant assessment and adjustments to fit each horse. I'm not sure I will ever arrive at my final destination as a horseman, but I do know this that despite the hardships of change and learning, I'm having a heck of a good time riding down the road to becoming a horseman, and I know these women are too!

**CONGRATS TO EACH OF YOU WHO IS RIDING DOWN THIS ROAD TO BECOMING A BETTER HORSEMAN!
IT IS EXCITING AND VERY REWARDING WHEN WE FEEL THAT RIDE THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF!**

Hope to see you on the trail this fall,
Sherry Jarvis

PS "A little learning is a dangerous thing but a lot of ignorance is just as bad." -- Bob Edwards

PART TWO of ROAD TO BECOMING A HORSEMAN

Nov. 2009 by sherry Jarvis

In last months newsletter I described how I have been guiding a small group of women over the past four years down the road to becoming better horsewomen by their attendance at the annual Oct. Alumni Women's Horsemanship Camp. The article explained how we explored confidence for both the horse and rider the first year. Then the following three years we studied the emotional, mental and physical aspects of becoming better horsemen. You can read part one of this article in the newsletter archives (Oct. 09) In Part 2 of this article, I am going to continue this discussion by expanding upon the nuts and bolts of what I am currently learning and teaching.

Because I am a retired school teacher I find it helpful to divided learning into smaller chucks so that it is easier for the student to digest. I believe that there are (four main categories or roads) we need to take in order to become better horsemen. I have also discovered that progress is much quicker and improvement enduring if we take these roads in a specific, sequential order. Therefore we avoid getting lost on the journey.

When we become proficient in one category then our experience on the next road will be much easier. In other words the road to becoming a better horseman will be a lot smoother when we build our skills with purposeful progression. It is when we try to take short cuts that the road becomes very bumpy and more difficult. While it may be possible to jump onto any road (or category) at any time, and sometimes it may even be necessary depending upon the situation, it does help to go in an order. Traveling in this manner is a lot more pleasant for both the horse and rider plus the results are far superior to anything I have every tried in the past.

We need to develop skills in these four categories on our road to becoming better horsemen:

- 1) Develop a Learning Frame of Mind for both horse and rider.
- 2) Advance Groundwork
- 3) Improve Rider's Posture
- 4) School the horse for Optimal Movement and Self-Carriage

Within each of these four categories there are different levels; beginning with the easiest and most fundamental skills and building up to the most complicated aspects of training. It doesn't matter where you are right now, or if you ever want to achieve the most complicated and advanced maneuvers with your horse. What matters most is that you have a general understanding and skill set in each of these categories so that you can be safe and have more fun with your horse.

Here are some of the things I have realized about each category on my own road to becoming a better horseman.

1) Developing a Learning Frame of Mind

What is involved?

- It is so important for the rider to have an awareness of self.
- It is imperative the rider be very attentive to the horse.

- It is valuable to know how to get and keep a horse's attention.
- It is foremost that the rider has great intention and focus.
- It is essential for the rider to be a calm leader in a variety of situations.
- It is significant that the person be able to read a horse and understand behaviors.
- It is vital the person breaks through any defensive behaviors in the horse.
- The central key is developing a relationship with the horse which means a healthy happy partnership. It doesn't matter whether it is a young or old horse, a problem or challenging horse, a remedial or rescue horse, because all horses will appreciate this and therefore become more willing.
- It is crucial that the person have an open mind to new learning.
- It is necessary the person is willing to experiment and learn from mistakes.
- The attitude the rider has towards the horse will have a great influence on everything you do with him.

2) Advance Groundwork

What is the focus?

- Developing the balance, feel and timing of the rider is just as important in ground work as what we are doing with the horse. Everything we do on the ground is transferrable to riding for both the horse and rider.
- Balance and communication are best developed in the context of groundwork because the separation helps clarify "issues" that are most often the result of miscommunication or misunderstandings between horse and rider.
- How equipment affects communication and motion is best assessed in this category. A rider can become fully aware of various training equipment, ropes, halters, whips, sticks, saddles, padding and bridles and how to use them better because they do not have the added things to think about while being on the horse's back.
- The difference between aids and contacts is clarified and both the horse and rider learn their specific roles in the partnership.
- Undesirable behavior issues can be dealt with in a safe way. The change of behavior on the ground can and will transfer to riding. Get it better on the ground and it will be better when riding.
- Habits are created, which will affect either positively or negatively the daily handling with your horse, from vet care to trailer loading.
- Three layers of advancement in the horse and rider:
Emotional balance (calm and attentive during exercises),
Mental balance (understanding exercises and skill development)
Physical balance (energy, relaxation and self-carriage within the exercises).

3) Improve Rider's Posture

How do we do it?

- Focus on the rider's balance and position through awareness exercises performed in a specific

order.

- Separate the rider's balance from the horse's balance so that the rider can become more aware of exactly where and how the horse is struggling and then offer better assistance.
- As the rider's balance improves, feel improves and then the timing of the aids provides clear communication that is recognizably useful to the horse.
- Ideally this begins on the ground using exercise balls and reins for simulation exercises.
- A safe lesson horse is an invaluable tool where the rider is on a long line without reins.
- Once in the saddle, this category of training focuses on the rider finding their own point of balance and working from their core on the back of a horse.
- A video tape or a set of professional eyes on you with constructive criticism are priceless learning tools about your posture. This can be a painful process but you will learn more about your posture from these experiences than any other.
- Correct posture also helps a rider feel safer. A feeling of security allows the rider to be more confident with calm leadership from the saddle which the horse is looking for.
- Having a sense of balance that is independent of the horse's motion is what professional riders have that gives them the ability to ride a variety of horses very well. While this level of quality is not often taught to non-professional riders I believe it is imperative for all riders to learn because the correct development of a horse depends on good rider posture.

4) School the horse for Optimal Movement and Self-Carriage

Why is it necessary?

- Focus on helping the horse achieve balance while carrying a rider.
- Finding correct use of the body while bearing the weight of a rider is a learned skill for a horse and one that is often ignored.
- Although a horse can and often do what is asked while out of balance the cumulative effect of riding an unbalanced horse can be lameness, illness or behavioral problems.
- Understanding the difference between the most advantageous motion and acceptable motion helps the rider understand WHY the horse is behaving poorly, performing poorly or having chronic health issues.
- It is a simple matter of (basic physics) between the rider's body, the horse's body and gravity. When these dynamics work together then harmony is achieved.
- By helping the horse achieve his best possible movement with self-carriage under saddle we show the horse that his need for safety and comfort in the exercises we ask him to do are as important as our own agenda of pleasure or performance.
- The fundamental skill of helping a horse find his finest movement with self-carriage which is not forced but is relaxed with balance and energy is crucial for the health and well being of a horse whether he is only ridden on the trails once a week or is expected to go to Grand Prix.

As we travel down the road to becoming better horsemen these four categories will help give us a proper road map which will lead us to our desired destination. The better our learning frame of mind is the better our ground work will be, the better our ground work is the better the horse will

ride, the better the rider's posture is the horse will be able to move with more freedom and proper self-carriage, which is the kind of ride that dreams are made of whether you are a recreational trail rider or competitor at any level.

Sherry Jarvis

"Good better best, never let it rest, make your good better and your better best" – George Burns

"It's been a long, long road but it's paying off, baby."--Calvin Borel

"High achievement always takes place in the framework of high expectation"--Charles Kettering