

II

WHAT IS IT ABOUT HORSES?



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Edie Smart on Romeo and Malcom Cook on Bonica

"The Horse; The noblest of the animal creation ever rendered subject to the hand of man, his most valuable, best and bravest servant, dauntless in danger, enduring in extremity, uncomplaining in distress."

– Frank Forester, from the dedication of his book *The Horse of America*, 1857

WHAT IS IT ABOUT HORSES?

"There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man."

– Attributed to Sir Winston Churchill, among many others.

Our Community of the Horse is tied together by the bonds that develop between horse and horseman, and among horsemen because of their shared respect and affection for their equine partners. In this chapter we explore how these bonds develop and manifest themselves to the benefit of both species.

- Building a Relationship -

Bonica is a Thoroughbred yearling hunter prospect. Since coming to Trappe Hill Farm she has had three hour-long sessions with her "breaker," Malcolm Cook.

In the first Malcolm taught her to move about the round pen as directed. In the second he saddled her and rode her back and forth in the stable yard, lead shanks attached to the halter serving as reins. In the third, fully tacked up, they soloed on a 45-minute trail ride. Today she and Romeo will go out together. Malcolm has prepared her by holding her loosely by a lead shank, letting her rest her face on his chest while he stroked her, reinforcing the relationship that has evolved during the prior sessions.

During the hour-long ride that follows this picture Bonica will handle two frightening and unfamiliar situations – fording a small running stream and confronting a large black bull. Malcolm, who grew up in Argentina raising, breaking and training polo ponies, is matter-of-fact about handling young horses...

"It's a process of gaining their trust, and building their confidence in themselves and in you. Your job is to make sure that every new experience ends up a happy one. Horses expect justice. If they don't do what you want because they don't understand, you must explain, not get mad. Only if they know what they did was wrong is it permissible to reprimand them."

As for the bull... *"In Argentina, when horses learn that cattle are afraid of them, not vice versa, they get a great kick out of chasing them."*



- Communications -

One evening we started talking to our houseguest, Dr. Lisa Newton, Professor of Philosophy at Fairfield (CT) University, about the human-horse relationship. Lisa is not a "horse person", but here is what she said:

"There are philosophers who talk about a social contract between people and animals. Animals have modified their behavior – allowed us to use them, and we have modified our behavior to accommodate their needs and adjust to their feelings. That bond of affection improves the functioning of both the human and the animal as they associate with each other."

She went on to describe experiments that showed that when a person stroked a horse the blood pressure of both went down as a result of the physical interaction.

The best horsemen (and women)* seem to exude an aura of affection and confidence that even the most wary horses recognize, welcome and reciprocate. Last fall we had four weanling colts, one of whom was much more stand-offish than the other three. As Debbie Easter (manager of Albemarle Stud), Dr. Reynolds Cowles (a noted veterinarian) and I were visiting them in their paddock the non-social member sought out Dr. Cowles, wishing to be petted by him as much as the other three were eager for attention from Debbie and me. Somehow that shy creature recognized something special in this horseman, and wished to be associated with it.

One spring we visited our two-year-old Cozzene colt on the day he was to be sold at Keeneland. He had been in Florida for five months, training for the sale, following recovery from earlier colic surgery. The horse had a very good pre-sale work, 10¹/₅ seconds for a furlong, and we were there to wish him well. At the trainer's request a groom, who did not know who we were, led the big roan from his stall and out into the courtyard for our inspection. As I laid my hand on his warm shoulder I felt a strange feeling of peaceful comfort, while the colt turned to look over at Edie. Suddenly I wondered why we were selling this beautiful animal. Then the groom looked toward Edie and said...

"He knows you."

Later on, as the colt was being walked around prior to his turn in the auction

*[Ed. note] Henceforth for simplicity we will use the term **horseman** to apply to an individual of either gender and all ages, unless there is a specific reason to do otherwise. We believe few ladies will object. At least we have found none yet who would prefer the title "Mistress of Foxhounds" to that of "Master."



ring, we saw him act up, standing on his hind legs and waving his feet at his handler. As he was brought under control and started walking again he looked over at us and rolled his eyes, as if pleading to...

"Get me out of here." But it is our business to breed for the market, and we need to sell the best to cover our costs. So now the roan colt has gone to Japan, leaving many millions of Yen as recompense. But we have not forgotten our parting, wondering still if we should have kept him.

Some believe there can be a mind-to-mind connection between horse and owner. Peggy Carter, a veteran horsewoman from Tryon, NC, is convinced she has communicated with one of her horses by mental telepathy. She first suspected it one day, riding at a walk. She thought...

"Let's trot," and without any physical signal from Peggy the horse started trotting.

At first she decided that her body had given some inadvertent sign to the horse, so to check out that possibility she saddled another horse and ponied the sensitive one along side, again at a walk. When there was no physical contact between the horses, and a slack lead line, she again said silently to herself...

"Let's trot." The horse on the lead line immediately broke into a trot, to the surprise of the animal Peggy was riding, who had received no command to do so. She repeated the experiment four times with the same result.



Winkie Mackay-Smith tells of a family experience. They were given a tough Thoroughbred by fellow distance rider Denny Emerson, but the horse proved too unreliable to take across country. Winkie got on with him, but everyone else had trouble – the horse acted mean on purpose. When they tried to get rid of him no one would take him. So Winkie put the horse in cross ties, sat down in front of him, and started thinking:

"This is your last chance. There's a little girl coming, a good rider. If you don't work out for her I'm going to have to put a bullet in you."

Then, after a few minutes she stood up, loaded the horse in the trailer (which he hated) and drove to a neighbor's ring. There the girl got on, and the horse went around the ring to perfection. Winkie concludes:

"They took the horse, but as the little kid led him to the trailer he stopped at the ramp and looked back at me. I thought 'oh-oh, here we go again.' Then he turned his head back and got happily on the trailer. His look meant 'we made a deal.' It was a fabulous match, and the girl went on to be a great horsewoman."

Winkie's husband Matthew, a noted veterinarian, is less certain of equine ESP:

"It's impossible to have a thought that does not impact your body. Horses are very sensitive to body language. They too cannot separate mind from body, so they read your whole being the only way they know."

But he doesn't have an explanation for Peggy Carter's experience.

The relationship goes two ways. John Heckler was hunting, galloping his favorite horse Blue, when the horse stepped in a concealed hole and fell. John was pitched into the ground in a fall that left him permanently paralyzed from the waist down. John gave the horse to Mount Vernon, where he became the mount for "George Washington" in the many re-enactments at the plantation. At the end of one re-enactment, as John was watching from his wheel chair on the mansion's veranda, "George Washington" dismounted, leaving Blue unattended. The horse saw John, and came over to him, putting his head on John's shoulder, as if to say *"I'm sorry, I miss you."* John Heckler was a tough optimist, but this time he cried.

- What Do We See in Horses? -

Pursuing this person-with-horse relationship, I asked a random group of horse people, out of the blue, *"What is it about a horse that attracts you?"*

Here are some answers:

Lindsay van Melle Kamp, budding equestrienne, age 11:

"I like horses because they have a nice way of being. They have body language, similar to cats, and use their body language to talk to you."

Florence Hillman, endurance rider, foxhunter and owner of driving horses:

"They represent individual freedom for me. It's to be able to climb on their back and go!"

Peter Winants, horseman, photographer, scholar, historian, and builder of equine institutions:

"My day begins with riding. Riding once was physical – getting in shape to hunt. Now it is an intellectual exercise – training a horse, developing a rapport with him, loving how he keeps me in touch with the countryside."

Linda Devan, foxhunter and whipper-in:

"The physical beauty and grace appeals to the artist in me. I've loved horses ever since I read The Black Stallion as a little girl. They are noble, adrenaline-raising animals. I feel cool riding them."

Donna Rogers, horsewoman and environmental activist:

"I never tried to put it into words. From my earliest memories I was in love with horses. I manipulated my entire life so I could be with them."

Lily Calvert, five year-old emerging equestrienne, who also owns and manages a stable of fifty toy horses:

"I like them because I can ride them and take care of them."

Cari Furze, Grand Prix rider:

"I love horses for the companionship, and working together with them to achieve something."





PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Susan Bishop

Paul Mellon, hunting and racing enthusiast, distance rider, and art collector. [taken from his book *Reflections in a Silver Spoon*]:

"It is the color, the movement, the speed, the excitement, the competition, the skill of riding, the cleverness of the horses, and the primitive element of luck... but it is mostly the love of the horse, the well-kept, well-trained, beautifully moving horse, the horse as an object of art."

Susan Bishop, foxhunter:

"They're sensual. You can relate to them."

Adrienne Hewitt, endurance rider and foxhunter:

"They bring me where I want to be, both outdoors and spiritually. They carry me there. I do not see God in cities, in concrete canyons. I see Him in the fox, and the rocks, and the light."

Heidi Stirrup [yes, that is her last name], policy staffer to the Majority Leader, U. S. House of Representatives.

"It's the magnificance and beauty of the animal, and the love and appreciation it engenders. There is great gratification in caring for it, as well as the fun of riding. I love grooming them, the sweet smell of hay, listening to them munch, even mucking stalls. Some people get it, and some just don't."



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Heidi Stirrup

These friends have provided a summary answer to the question: What is it about a horse that appeals to humans?

Collectively, they tell us: *"It's a beautiful, powerful, trusting, generous, honest, sensual, even spiritual partner, in a relationship that lifts your soul, flatters your ego, and adds a dimension to life that otherwise would not be there."*

And, as Heidi says:

"Some people get it, and some just don't."

In the following chapters we will see how these relationships are played out between horses and people, and among horse people, in the horse-loving community in which we live.



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

A veteran horse, interested in the people across the fence of his "back yard" paddock

