



Warwick Schiller

Listening to your Horse

A few years ago my wife bought a new reining horse named *Sherlock* and he was an amazing athlete, but had some odd behaviours that I wanted to unravel. The way I approach problem horses is to go back to the very beginning of the training and retrain them from the start, ensuring each step along the way is good before adding anything more. At the time I thought I had this horse training figured out, but this horse had a level of shut down that I had not encountered before. Very, very obedient, but tense in a frozen sort of way. His tenseness did not result in explosive behaviour, but really going inside himself.



The group at the Texas clinic where the Mustang laid down



The Mustang was not fussed by passing riders



Fast asleep...



He led me to look at things outside the lens at which I viewed training and looked into different ways of working with horses. Clicker training was one of the things I started using to give him a different perspective on being asked to do things. But it was still training. It was still me asking for something, and expecting some sort of outcome. Then I read some articles about some of the little facial expressions and head movements horses do that tell us how they feel about what is happening. It turns out that even the tiniest things mean something.

Soon after I was doing a clinic in Texas. In the morning group was a nine-year-old Mustang who has random bolting issues under saddle. During the groundwork portion of the clinic, he started to block out his owner with his head when she went to walk down beside him and ask him to step over behind. Normally I would have suggested she just slip her hand under his jaw and move his head back in front of him before walking down his side, but I wanted to experiment. I took the lead rope from her and went to walk down beside him. He turned his head and blocked me. Instead of doing anything I stopped and stepped back when he did it. I then stood still and waited for him to process the fact that he had just said something to a human and they listened instead of corrected. Initially, it took him a little while to process.

I tried again with the same result and this went on for some 15 to 20 minutes and eventually, he didn't block me out when I went down that side. I could then disengage his hind end, walk back to the front, and then back down the side with no worries. He seemed to be fine now, so I handed him back to his owner and said: "let him stand there for a while, don't ask for anything."

I was helping someone else in the clinic about 15 minutes later when I heard a gasp from all the spectators, I turned around and he had buckled at the knees and dropped to his belly and was fast asleep, snoring little dust clouds in the sand. He then had a roll, got up, shook, and buckled at the knees and went back to sleep. I asked his owner if that was normal behaviour for him and she said she'd had him for six years and had only seen him lay down once, and on that occasion as soon as he saw her he jumped straight up.

He slept for one and a half hours until it was time for the afternoon group to come in, we woke him up and he went back to his stall. The next day when the morning group entered the arena, his owner asked

what I thought she should do. I suggested she stand with him and see what happens. After 15 minutes he lay down and went to sleep, sleeping for four hours until lunchtime. He slept while horses cantered past him, and he slept through the blaring loudspeakers.

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Upon returning from that clinic, I looked at scientific research into sleeping habits of horses and learned that although horses can sleep standing, they need to lay down for about 30 minutes per day to get the deep restorative REM sleep they need. If they don't get that sleep they can be nervous, and that nervousness can cause all sorts of things. Including bolting. It has been over three years since that clinic, and that horse has not bolted since.

For me, it was a watershed moment, the first time I had solved an issue with a

horse where I didn't train the horse but listened to the horse. Over the past few years, I have really made that listening a big part of what I do. It's not easy personally, as you really have to change your judgements of every situation, and you also have to be able to lose your expectations. It also makes you be more present, and even from that, I have seen a huge change in horses that I work with.

We all know that horses, when taken away from their herd, don't oftentimes feel safe, but it's interesting to dwell on what makes them feel safe in the herd. It's not the physicality of the herd, as horses don't fight off predators, they run from them. What I believe is what makes them feel safe is the group awareness of the herd. The more horses, the more "lookouts" they have. This is where being aware of those little signals horses give us a double benefit. I think when we notice those subtle signals, we tell them they are being listened to, but also I think a larger benefit is we are relating to them how aware we are, and that awareness gives them the same sense of safety as the herd, and that causes relaxation.



One of the stallions in Morocco. Half an hour earlier he was quite interested in being pushy, biting and striking.

I recently got to work with some Barb stallions in Morocco, and they were all distracted, unsettled, pushy and all were a little bit nippy. When I worked with each of them, I turned them loose in a round pen as I didn't want to be close to them because they had some bad habits that could place me in danger. All of them ran to the fence whinnying at the other studs back in the barn, so I worked on attracting their attention with a flag. I didn't drive them, nor move their feet, just got their attention. As soon as their attention moved to me, even something as small as

an ear flick. I would take the energy out of the flag and put it down. All of them soon became very relaxed and settled, and came up and engaged with me without the distractedness, pushiness and the nippiness they had previously shown. Some of them I could walk around and they would follow me like a well-behaved horse on a lead, a far cry from the way their handlers bought them into the round pen.

It was another watershed moment. In the past, a change like that would have involved me putting a fair bit of pressure on them, moving them around and then letting them rest facing me. I did nothing really but tell them how aware I was of where their thoughts were, and the change was amazing. I would really encourage you to look more into this subject, and listen to your horse more, then benefits will really surprise you. 🐾

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