

# Natural Horsemanship Day @ Contessas

An excerpt of piece written by Alix McCulloch

## Don't Forget to Smile at Your Horse

*Remember when you were first inspired by the energy, grace and sheer personality of horses? When just to be around horses seemed like the only thing you wanted to do? For some of us, being restricted to weekly riding lessons takes us away from that inspiration – into a habit of collecting a tacked horse, riding for an hour and delivering him back, focussing on the lesson rather than on the horse or the relationship. We talk about good rides and bad rides, preferring one horse over another and can quickly become self-interested and lose the very thing that inspired us at the beginning. There are ways of getting back that initial inspiration. One of them is Natural Horsemanship (NH) a training phenomenon from Australia and the US. NH claims to re-educate even the most anxious and poorly mannered horse through play by creating a natural bond between horse and man using techniques different to traditional horse-breaking.*



Eight members of the BBC RC spent a Sunday learning how to be horse whisperers in an NH clinic held at Contessa Riding Centre in Hertfordshire. The yard is small but well equipped and friendly, and shows a serious commitment to the professional dressage standards of owner Tina Layton..

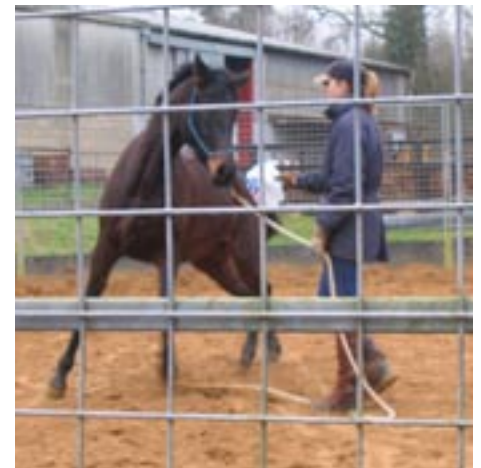
Our trainer for the day was Sydney-born Eula Rohan who grew up riding in the rough-and-ready world of Australian stock horses. When Eula was 14, her parents bought her a horse of her own, investing in a five-year-old thoroughbred ex-racehorse, with little off-track training, what Eula described as 'mental problems', and two speeds: fast and faster. This challenge kindled the interest which led Eula to train with Pat Parelli and Australian NH trainers Ken Faulkner and Darren Simpson. She now works full time backing and bringing on horses of all types and temperaments, including those with behavioural problems.

Eula began her clinic with a lecture. She considered what NH is and whether or not it was indeed 'natural' for horse and man to work together. The basic premise of any NH technique is that in the wild, and over thousands of years of evolution, horses have always been prey animals; man, by contrast, is a hunter. The relationship between the two is not a natural one.

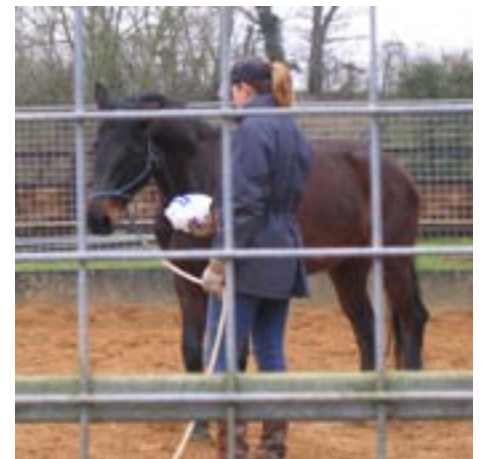
Through careful observation of horses' behaviour in the wild, NH pioneers observed that in a natural setting it is a single horse, the dominant or 'alpha' mare, that controls the herd. In the NH technique the aim is to work with a horse, mimicking equine behaviour using body language and clear signals in order to have him accept you as the alpha mare. Having won his acceptance, the horse will follow your commands and defer to your decisions, just as he would in the wild. Simple, isn't it?...



Eula demonstrating one of the three aids used - the training stick



Jaya shivered and danced away sideways in her attempt to put distance between himself and the source of her fear - a carrier bag!



Having won her confidence and curiosity, Jaya was unnerved by the presence of the bag, but trusted the feel of Eula's touch through it.

There are other concepts that support this basic. Eula explained that it is essential to motivate a horse to create a partnership, giving him things to do that he'll enjoy and instructions he'll learn easily.

The NH principle rejects tack, discipline, threat and aggression of any kind to contain a horse, in favour of freeing him and inviting him to work with you. It has to be a partnership. It's also vital to establish a sense of justice and responsibility: to maintain a firm hand without aggression and to adapt your body language depending on the responses of the horse.

Eula demonstrated the three artificial aids used in the NH method: a special rope halter, knotted at the pressure points to act on the nose, cheek and poll; a rope attached to the halter under the chin and a training stick which acts as an extension of the arm.

Beyond that it's all in the minds of trainer and the horse: no other aids allowed. Eula explained that a trainer is aiming for good communication, but note this is not just teaching a horse to understand us. The relationship is two-way and a good trainer will be constantly aware of the horse's body language and messages coming back. In a normal situation a horse will give you what he thinks you want, so it's up to you not only to give clear signals but also to read what he is telling you.

The next key aim, and part of communication, is for good, clear body language: again two-way. Thirdly, be clear of your outcome, this includes assessing the horse's mental and emotional fitness: if he's been frightened into submission, injured or confused he'll show this in his responses. But of course, given his identity as a prey animal, a horse will naturally be afraid of almost anything.

There is an expected responsibility on both sides: for a trainer to act like a partner and leader, not a master, for her to ride with an independent seat, for her to respect the horse and think about things from his viewpoint, and for her

to use her natural power of focus. The horse has responsibilities in the pact too: to act like a partner, to not change gaits or direction, to respect the trainer as a leader.

Having heard about the basics, we then made our way outside to Contessa's outdoor round sand school where we watched Eula work. She introduced us to two horses she had been schooling and with them demonstrated the basic principles of NH.

### The complete article on NH is attached to this newsletter – so read on!

If you're interested in the concepts of Natural Horsemanship and want to learn more, there is a lot of good information on the web. Have a look at:

[www.australiannaturalhorsemanship.com](http://www.australiannaturalhorsemanship.com)

[www.contessa-riding.co.uk](http://www.contessa-riding.co.uk)

[www.equinecommunication.com.au](http://www.equinecommunication.com.au)

[www.montyroberts.com](http://www.montyroberts.com)

<http://parelli.parellinet.net/>

[www.parelli.biz/PNH/Groups](http://www.parelli.biz/PNH/Groups)

[www.horsewhispering.co.uk/](http://www.horsewhispering.co.uk/)

#### Books

Whispering Back by Adam Goodfellow, 2004

Dancing with Horses by Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling, 2001

Creating a Bond with Your Horse by Kelly Marks, 2000

The Man Who Listens to Horses by Monty Roberts, 1997

Horse Sense for People by Monty Roberts, 2001

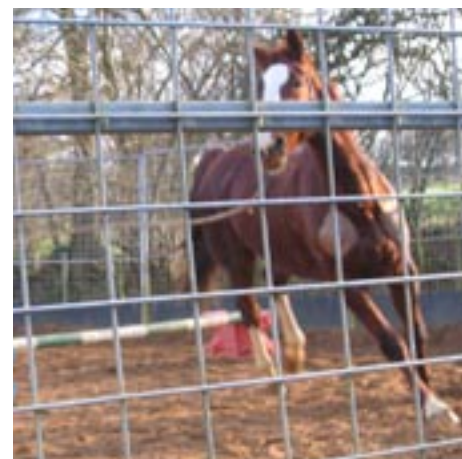
Almost a Whisper: A Holistic Approach to Working with Your Horse by S. Powell & L. Carter, 1999



Eula with Peuro, A box walker and messy in his stable, he displayed classic symptoms of boredom and stress, including weaving, and he bit anyone who walked past his stall



Building up with a routine of touching and driving games, we watched as the now fully socialised Puro, cured of his weaving and biting habits and clearly enjoying fun and games with Eula...



... trotting and cantering on command, with and without a jump!