

THE LOST ART OF COMMONSENSE AND HORSEMANSHIP

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Like most Aussie and New Zealand kids, I grew up having an absolute ball with my horses. I remember summers filled with friends, horses and picnics, riding our horses bareback, (because quite simply, we were too lazy to saddle up, or perhaps didn't own a saddle) especially if there was a river for swimming. Who wanted to bother saddling and unsaddling? Trying to stay aboard a slippery pony's back in the water was all part of the fun! The day would often include a race; a full on, mad gallop to prove the fastest (and best in its owner's eyes) horse. As long as we were home before dark, our parents were happy. Our horses were our patient, best mates who were privy to all our adventures, tears, love and attention. Goodness knows what our parents would have thought if they knew we used to dare each other to jump park benches set in concrete...bareback! We used to fall off and leap back on again, swap horses and be bucked off usually giggling at our own stupidity. These same horses also used to polish up beautifully for pony club and then be plaited and presented within an inch of their lives for shows

and gymkhanas. We knew everything about our horses. From his eye, we could tell if he was happy, bored or sad. He was rugged accordingly (if he was rugged at all!), he was groomed thoroughly (daily) and we knew if he was lame by being able to FEEL (if we were riding) or see. Because we knew him so well, we could tell in the blink of an eye if something was not quite right with him and could help him accordingly.

Today, it seems many don't appear to enjoy their horses, let alone love them. Some even give the impressions of treating their animals as a ribbon winning ego trip with little regard for the animal's general happiness or wellbeing and sadly, many have utterly no idea of general horsemanship.

THE HOT HOUSE FLOWER

The animal spends its day in a stable (gosh we can't let him out during the day, the sun might penetrate his rugs and scorch his coat) or if he is lucky, he will go out into a small yard with many layers of rugs, hoods, tail bags, not forgetting his paddock boots. There seems to be an almighty fear, according to some in Australia, that on a 40 degree day, it could suddenly turn cold thus destroying his hard won skin, so we need to ensure he has layers of (unnecessary) woollen and canvas rugs on. Often he is found to be (understandably) sweating and uncomfortable. This actually equates to cruelty. An old horseman once told me, "If you don't want trouble, they are better to be a little cool than too hot." Excess heat can actually distress a horse to the point of colic.

He is fed up to the nines on a diet usually consisting of very high protein or grain to ensure he is fat and round and then not provided with enough exercise to expel the energy he is ingesting. Occasionally he is ridden or lunged in the purpose built arena, never out, never down the road and will never know the joys of a trail ride or gallop up the paddock, those fine, little legs could never cope and besides, he is far too valuable for that! And as for pony club, we don't really go, we couldn't risk him over jumps or to have fun through barrel or bending races, besides the kids would rather play on their Wiis, text mates or Twitter, Facebook or chat online rather than ride the pony.

They actually don't really like the pony or competing but Mum has long held dreams of

her kids and pony winning "the big one" and by god, she will ensure to the best of her ability that they will.

THE "MANIAC"

This highly expensive animal has won countless Royal Show Championships, taken numerous Horse of the Year and Grand National Titles and should do the same for you. After all, you have mortgaged the house to buy him. Somehow, he is turning into a "maniac," you are scared of him and hate riding him. He also refuses to let you catch him if he is out in the paddock. His dislike and distrust of you is palpable.

He won't eat what you feed him, thus dropping weight, changing shape and looking nothing like the star he is supposed to be.

However, you insist on competing him even though he doesn't look or go as he should. He is unhappy, refuses to behave and doesn't place past fifth (if he even gets a call). So you hate the horse and believe the person who sold him to you is a "crook" and you will ensure all and sundry are informed of this.

You then believe the judge is stupid, blind and deliberately out to ruin your day. This "idiot" who has voluntarily given up their day to judge, obviously cannot see quality when it is in front of them! You make a mental note to also complain loudly to the show organisers, threatening to never compete at their show again. You then ensure that this "idiot" also knows your opinion of their decision by behaving like a recalcitrant, spoilt child and informing the judge of just who your horse is and exactly what he has won! (Heck, if we judge bash enough, we might not have any more shows to actually compete at if all our judges decide they have had enough of being abused and attacked by belligerent competitors.)

And after each class, you make sure that you flog this "maniac" of an animal, rip him in the

"A good rider can hear his horse speak to him, a great rider can hear his horse whisper, but a bad rider won't hear his horse even if it screams at him" Unknown

mouth and work him harder and harder...he needs to know who is boss!

However, I digress, horses are not like cars, they will often react differently to a different owner. Does anyone ever think to ask the previous owner, if practicable, to give them a few lessons to ensure that you, as the new owner, understands which buttons to press or ask about his little idiosyncrasies' or what steps were taken to ensure the horse stays not only happy, but successful at the level of competing when he was bought?

"TRAINING"

Your horse is being "naughty" or "difficult." It would appear that every time you ride him, he is deliberately annoying and disobedient:

Do you check his saddle actually fits him and is not excruciatingly uncomfortable? Or does it **HAVE** to fit purely because it is a Joe Bloggs brand and you have spent \$4k on it?

No, the frustrated rider will take him to someone who will "fix the mongrel." This will include ensuring that his head is **DOWN**, usually well secured with a jaw breakingly tight nose band, maybe a double bridle with tongue tie, draw reins or whichever gadget is currently in fashion and then jammed into position from his rider who is armed with spurs and whip, possibly two whips so that he can be "driven" into rock hard, unyielding hands.

Unfortunately when a horse is driven into an unyielding hand, he cannot go forward, the only place he can go is up, usually in a spectacular rear, often over backward and then he is punished (thrashed) to within an inch of his life just to let him know who is boss. The horse cannot raise his head from where it is tied and every muscle in his body is aching, he has also had a rider no matter how light or heavy, relentlessly driving their seat into his back and the welts from that whip and the cuts to his side from the spurs are agony. Yet tomorrow, he will be expected to undergo the same treatment again. Until he is either sent to the knackers as a dangerous, mad brute, or breaks down into a horse with no top line, no muscle tone and no brightness to his eye, but hey, you can ride him, he doesn't go forward but his head now stays down.

Would you do this if HORSES COULD SCREAM or IF HORSES COULD CRY and tell you how they feel??

I recently attended a top level dressage event where my first impression was of an agonisingly lame horse "performing" a test. Not only were two judges officiating in different cars, neither of which stopped or questioned the rider, but the rider just kept going. Surely the rider must have

been able to feel just how chronically uneven the horse was? This was mentioned to an official who felt the horse was perhaps a little "bridle lame?" However, the combination was allowed to complete the test whilst comment was passed that I was not a vet and had no qualifications to make a judgement. One does not have to have veterinary qualifications to see the utterly and **painfully** obvious.

So many horses were so harshly ridden, without any form of lightness or ease to the equation. What happened to softness and the occasional pat? Most of what I saw was animals continuously spurred and jammed into the bridle. One poor creature was being led about and anytime it looked as if it may look the wrong way it was jabbed in the mouth!

Question if certain competitors have an understanding that, when they compete, there is no guarantee as to the luxury of utter silence or lack of disturbance.

I have witnessed competitors abusing photographers because they have "upset" their horse by daring to be near the arena! It is lovely to work in the confines of a quiet home arena but it is smart and good practice to incorporate into the general work regime, an occasional change of environment. Perhaps take the horse out to a competition, without competing and work it at the grounds so it is exposed to all the "disturbances" which may naturally occur in a day's competition.

A laughable but true situation I recently heard about involved someone's horse apparently being so badly traumatised by a coffee vendor steaming milk on site that it could never compete well again if a vendor was nearby. For heaven's sake! At the Olympics and in Europe, at the very top echelons of dressage competition, spectators are constantly up and down, banging seats, complete with screaming kids and in an electric atmosphere.

There you would be seen as a fool to be carrying on as a prima donna, demanding everyone be quiet so that you could complete your test/workout in peace and quiet. Forget the fact that perhaps it is **your responsibility** to ensure your horse should be in tune to you and well trained enough to be listening to your seat and legs - having enough trust in you to complete his work - without worry as to disturbances. We are extremely quick these days to lay the blame for our poor performances at the feet of show organisers, judges, bystanders, the weather or any other 'thing' that we have perceived as ruining our chance of winning.

It appears that the simple act of individually taking responsibility has diminished our ability to perceive and act with common sense all round and treat both others and our horses with dignity and respect.