SYNCHRONIZING HORSE

Using Psychology And Body Language To Bridge The Communication Gap

By Samantha Hamilton/Photos by Barry Fitzgerald

According to various popular songs and sayings, there are 50 ways to leave your lover, 100 ways to lose a man and an unspecified but presumably large number of methods for skinning a cat. However, there are basically only three ways of getting someone to do something he wouldn't normally want to do: force, bribery and trickery. And this brings us, albeit somewhat clumsily, to the topic of horses and horsemanship.

There are, of course, variations on each of these

AND MAN

three themes, and while the terms themselves sound harsh, it takes only a minor semantic stretch before they cover just about every technique ever used in dealing with horses. While we're on the subject of semantics, we probably should define for the purposes of this article the terms generally used in this connection: "gentling" will refer to the first contact between man and animal—i.e., the method of convincing a previously unhandled horse to accept human company. "Breaking" is the process involved in getting the horse used to the trappings of a useful life: bit, saddle, harness, rider and so on. "Training" means any schooling more advanced—the learning of cues and conditioning of muscles for any specific activity. In this discussion, however, it might be best to coin a new term to deal with the particular psychological phenomenon of accustoming the horse to man and his ways: the forging of the equine/human link that must occur before any further communication (and training) can take place. In essence, what we are talking about is the *synchronization* of the horse's will to ours, or any method that convinces him that he *wants* to do what we tell him to do; so here, we will call this—the activity of molding the horse's desires to agree with our own—"syncing." And the psychological tactics involved in syncing are, most commonly, good old force, bribery and trickery.

Molding the horse's desires to agree with our own—"syncing"

Over the centuries, every human being who has ever come in contact with a horse has used some variation of at least one of the three motivators, meeting with differing levels of success. The first technique tried was probably force; this is still popular in many circles, in one form or another. When man discovered that the horse was bigger and stronger than he was, he resorted to mechanical devices that increased his power. Manifestations of pure force include out-and-out beating the bejeezus out of the animal, or using restraining devices. There is also the threat of serious physical violence, which is a restraint on the horse's mind and is considered a perfectly valid and necessary part of any training program. There are many tales of respected horsemen whose usual procedure with a particularly unmanageable stallion is to get the horse down and helpless, and then sit on top of him, singing, talking and rubbing their hands over him. Some of these folk are reputed to horse-sit for hours, until the creature is thoroughly accustomed to the touch of man and accepts him as master; whatever else it does to the horse, it reportedly works.

Another demonstration of force is the American West tradition of broncbusting, from whence evolved the modern sport of rodeo; but the early version wasn't a timed ride for cash. It was a no-holds-barred contest between man and beast, and the winner was the one who wound up on top. The battle went on until the horse ran out of steam or the ranch ran out of cowboys, whichever came first. This was generally effective, although as one cowboy put it, it got a little rough on the spine.

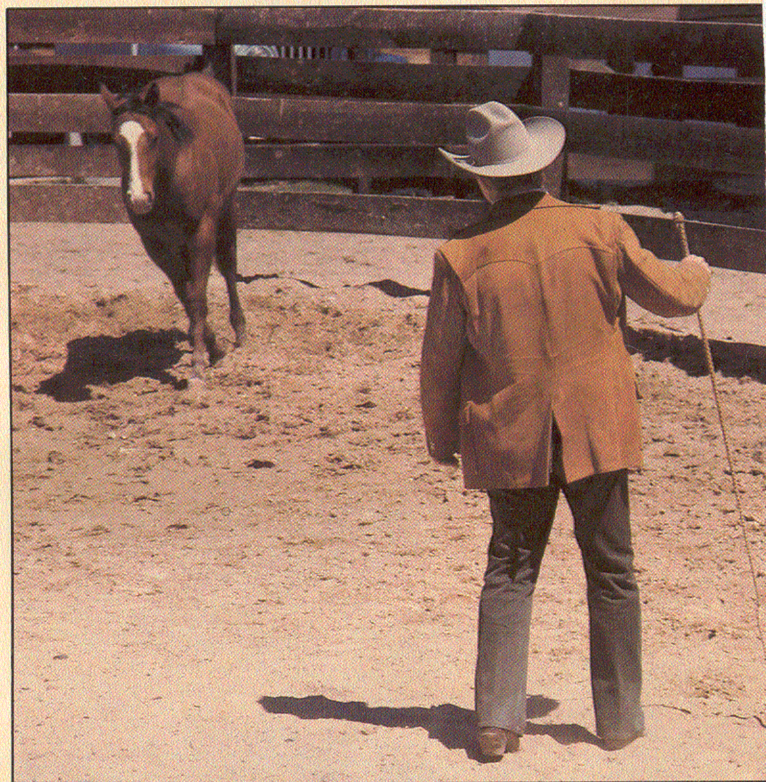
Convince the horse that he wants to do what we tell him to do

After considering all the angles, some horse tamers decided to change their tactics. Somebody at one point remarked that you could catch more flies with honey than you could with vinegar, to which some horsemen replied somewhat hotly that they didn't *want* to catch flies, in fact quite the contrary; but they conceded that the general principle might work, at that, and set about trying to bribe the horse.

Bribery can also be called the reward principle, coaxing or luring. The best lure or reward for a horse is, of course, food—especially some

Tackless training: Dr. J.P. McCall maintains the horse's gait by keeping his shoulder and leg—the aggressive center of gravity—aimed just behind the colt's "center"—his shoulder.

particularly tasty kind that he can't get on his own. If this form of persuasion is used in the early stages of syncing, the bribe offered must be tempting enough to overcome the wild horse's natural fear of man, and this is an uncertain proposition: there are some previously unhandled steeds who will walk docilely up to the nearest man with a grain pail, and



By pushing into or pulling away from the horse with the "lead" shoulder, McCall can work him in a tight serpentine.

others who would sooner eat scrub grass and bark for the rest of their lives as get within sniffing distance of a human. Therefore, while bribery is excellent for many stages of breaking and training, the most popular method for initial syncing is the final one: trickery.

There have been some dillies. In medieval Europe, it was said that the ground-up powder of the chestnut (or night eye) from inside a docile horse's leg, if blown into the nostrils of a wild steed, would tame him instantly. An old Chinese legend held that once you grabbed a horse by the forelock, he was yours and you could lead him anywhere. Various tribes of American Indians were said to have wrapped themselves in a horsehide or rubbed themselves with manure or mare's milk before approaching a herd they hoped to infiltrate.

A shortcut to mounting and mastering an unbroken horse was also attributed by early pioneer writers to the Indians: they were said to lead the novice into a stream at least withers-high, and mount him there; the reasoning behind this was that the horse would be too busy swimming to buck off the weight (since bucking would have entailed putting the head down and consequently drowning)

and by the time they reached the shore, the horse would be used to the rider and too tired to care much, anyway.

And along with the tricks are the legends of men such as James Rarey, who was reputed to be able to tame any manner of wild animal in only a few minutes. Rarey was sometimes called the Whisperer, as it was rumored that his magical technique was to whisper in the animal's ear; others contended that his secret was to scratch the beast gently between the eyes. In any case, contact with the head seems to have played a part, since several of the "instant syncing" techniques have included it; one of these theories states that light but firm pressure on the horse's forehead reassures him because it reminds him of his earliest pleasurable sensations: the feeling of his mother's belly against his head as he nursed.

The most successful and widely accepted mode of syncing, however, is a judicious combination of all three elements. This isn't to say that all horsemen are wheedling, vicious, deceitful ogres; on the contrary, in scientific jargon, bribery and violence are called positive and negative reinforcement, and trickery is called applied psychology. Most syncing programs start out with bribery and trickery. The foal or unhandled horse is persuaded to stand still and be petted by the human through the use of an edible lure; or, the horseman simply bides his time with the approach, letting the horse first get used to the general idea of a man in the pasture, over a period of time coming closer and closer until the animals pays man no mind at all and will stand to be touched. Once the horse or foal accepts this stage, with or without the free lunch, the human begins handling the horse's head. Eventually, he can even put on and take off the halter. This gradual and patient conditioning of the animal is not precisely trickery; it's more like what politicians are fond of calling a "partial truth." In convincing the horse that neither man nor halter will hurt him, the trainer is being truthful; what the trainer *doesn't* say is that as soon as the horse misbehaves, he may very well be reprimanded and made fairly uncomfortable.

These principles—from bribery to the force of discipline—have apparently been in use for as long as there have been horsemen. That syncing, breaking and training have always been considered respected and remarkable skills is evidenced in the earliest known work on equitation, the Greek Xenophon's tome, *The Art of Horsemanship.* While he goes into precise and poetic detail on the subjects of buying, basic health care and riding, on the topic of training he is reticent almost to the point of curtness. The entire chapter runs less than a thousand words, and can be fairly comprehensively summed up in the phrase, "Don't botch it up yourself; hire a trainer." But in the brief section devoted to gentling colts to handling and haltering,

Throwing his weight (by proxy, with the crop) between the horse and the wall, McCall reverses the colt to the inside—almost like flipping pancakes.

Efforts to explain what "brilliant" horsemen do instinctively

Jeffrey Method From Down Under

Fashions and methods of breaking, training and riding have come and gone, but the theme of any new discovery or trend seems to be that necessity is the parent of invention. It is not too uncommon for a recognized and sophisticated trainer, a lay horseman who has been using a particular method for years, or even a relative novice to suddenly be forced by circumstances or lack of equipment to rethink the whole proposition, and discover an alternative angle that is more effective, easier or less traumatic than some more common techniques.

One example of this serendipity is the Jeffrey method of gentling, developed by a farrier in Australia who found himself wrestling with the problem of shoeing previously unhandled animals.

In the isolated ranches of Australia, horses are extensively used for rounding up cattle. Much of the equine stock is never handled until the age of three or four; they are then brought in, quickly and often roughly broken, worked for two or three months and turned out again until the next roundup. Conditions on the Australian range are primitive, and these methods are traditional—as are similar programs in the American West—but the horses are not always left with good feelings about humanity in general.

Horseshoer Kell D. Jeffrey, working a delicate job with limited time and resources, decided to find a better way to handle the feet of previously untouched horses. He worked out an alternate system of syncing, which he believed took advantage of the natural intelligence and cooperativeness of the animal.

The first step is to advance toward the horse until he gets frightened; then retreat, let the horse think it over, and advance again until the animal is comfortable with the idea of having a human around. Next a "choke rope"—a thick soft cotton rope with a large metal ring as the slip-release—is put over the horse's head from a distance, using a lightweight pole if necessary. The loop is adjusted directly at the poll, so that when the rope is pulled taut, pressure is put on the windpipe. As soon as the horse responds to the pull of the rope, by shifting his balance and/or body position in the direction desired by the handler, the pressure is immediately released. According to Jeffrey, an experienced and patient horseman can use this process to establish control without excessive roughness. When the horse accepts and quietly obeys every tug of the choke rope, the handler approaches him, retreating and readvancing if necessary, until he can touch him.

Working outward from the withers and shoulder area, the handler rubs his hands over every part of the horse's body until contact is accepted everywhere. The handler also puts the weight of his arms and body over the horse's neck and back, repeating the rubdown process from nose to tail and then down the legs until the horse is completely relaxed; at this point, most horses think next to nothing of having their feet picked up, and once they have learned to balance, farriery can begin.

While Kell Jeffrey's main concern in developing this method was to get green colts to stand quietly to have their feet picked up and worked on, he reports a bonus by-product; horses who are synced this way rarely buck when first mounted and—he claims—can be ridden (in a closed corral) in a matter of two to three hours.

occurred, the string would snap, and the horse's mouth was saved. Still, this didn't eliminate the panic behind the grab; so McCall eliminated the reins altogether, reasoning that the students would either fall off or learn confidence. However, some of the students then grabbed for the pommel—so the saddle had to go as well. Stripped of artificial restraints and balancing aids, the students had to request—rather than demand—cooperation, and learned to use only their bodies, wits and wills to do it. McCall is more than pleased with the results. Not only did it make the young trainers kinder and more confident, but it fostered refinements of reinless longeing and of McCall's own understanding of the horse's body language. That McCall has indeed discovered some important constants in equine communication would seem to be evidenced by the fact that while it takes the student six to eight weeks to master the movements

Intensifying his crouch to pick up the horse's pace, McCall also cross-steps to invite the horse away from the wall.

Learning and using equine language is neither farfetched nor impractical

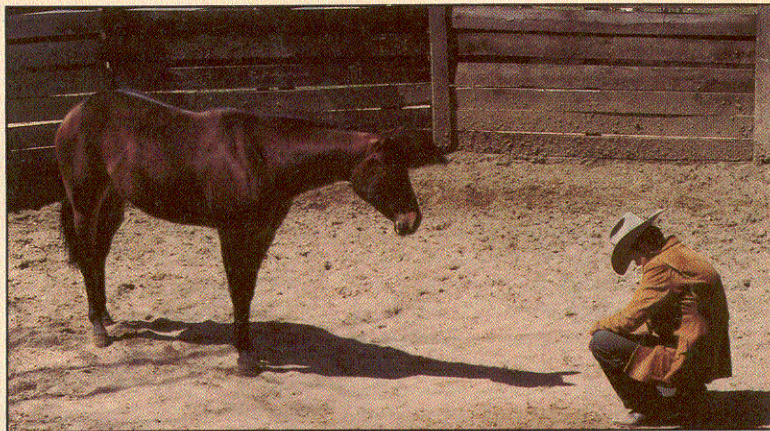
involved, it takes an unbroken colt only 30 to 60 minutes to learn to interpret Equine spoken with a Human accent.

The mutual lessons take place in a small high-walled corral. The student's assignment is to control the horse through a longe routine involving walking, trotting, cantering, stopping and reversing—with no other aids than his body and eyes. The student must also learn to reel in and let out the imaginary longe line; ideally, the final goal is communication of cues at any distance within the horse's sight range.

In the center of the ring, the trainer performs a stiff lunging movement (knees bent, shoulders tensed) toward the horse's hindquarters. The colt (according to McCall) instinctively recognizes this as an aggressive action, and moves to get away from it—in this case he moves forward (because the "threat" comes from behind him), and because of the corral wall, he moves around the circle. The trainer follows the colt's motion by turning his own body in the center of the circle with a kind of gliding side-step, keeping the aggressively flexed leg and "lead" shoulder aimed at the horse's hindquarters. The horse respects the continued implied threat and stays in motion so long as the position is maintained; but he is not overly frightened or panicked by the trainer's action, because the shorthand message is one that he is used to in the normal conversational language of herd hierarchy. He understands and obeys it without question, and unless the trainer inadvertently confuses him, he will cooperate completely. To impel the horse to a faster gait, the trainer flexes his body again, intensifying the "about to spring" position; to keep the colt at a canter, the trainer's body is maintained almost fully tense, in a sort of sideways semi-crouch. The "whoa" gesture is very similar to the "giddap" move, except that the force of the trainer's body is aimed directly at where the horse is about to step—as if the trainer were about to rush in front of him. Using only his legs, hips and shoulders, the trainer can get the horse to back up from this position in a patient reversal of the "go-forward" process. To ask the horse to reverse direction—turning either inside or outside—the trainer does a modified version of what vaudeville used to call a bump-and-grind: the hip and leg cue is firmly presented in front of the horse to stop him, and as the trainer (dropping his shoulder) reverses the direction of his own glide-step, the horse follows suit with his own body, and will resume at any pace the trainer asks in the opposite direction.

As the lessons progress, the signals become refined to the point where they are almost imperceptible to the casual eye; because of the excellent capability of the equine eye to detect

McCall drops eyes and shoulder tension to indicate the decrease of his personal space; by ceasing aggression, he invites the horse to approach.



For a shy or excited filly, McCall must clarify the invitation by surrendering still more space; in this posture, or turned away, he is less threatening.

Synchronizing

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serious efforts to organize and explain what most "brilliant" horsemen seem to do instinctively. McCall explains that it was not until he had to *teach* this communication that he began to consciously recognize the patterns; through the observations of himself and his students, he was able to start codifying and explaining it.

Learning and using equine language for syncing is neither farfetched nor impractical; the only major prerequisite is a long experience with horses in all circumstances. Thorough knowledge of conventional syncing techniques and well developed equestrian skills are also necessary for best results. The "body language" method of sync takes more time, patience, careful observation and sensitivity in the early stages; but as a trainer gets used to doing it, it actually takes less time and seems to be at least *as* effective, if not more so, than many other methods. Anyone with time, an appropriate enclosure and sufficient experience and interest can probably—with a certain amount of educational trial and error—work out a system similar to that used at the University of Maryland; although it may not be universal or easy to teach, it should be adequate for the individual and the horses involved.

There are, of course, certain horses who will respond less readily than others. Breed does not seem to be a major factor; people who have written up experiments similar (in intent, if not choreography) to McCall's have reported good results with everything from Thoroughbreds (generally retired from the track) to half-draft breeds. High intelligence is probably a favorable aspect, as it is for any phase of training. Horses who have been previously mistreated or spoiled seem to present the greatest problems. Their habits and phobias are already programmed, and they have (they believe) every reason for trying to dodge the trainer. It may take weeks or months of patient "re-syncing," starting at the "gentling" level, before such horses come to trust the trainer enough to be receptive to his suggestions. Foals who have not adequately completed the process of herd socialization may be candidates for difficulty, although little conclusive research has been done on this possibility. Probably the best time to begin

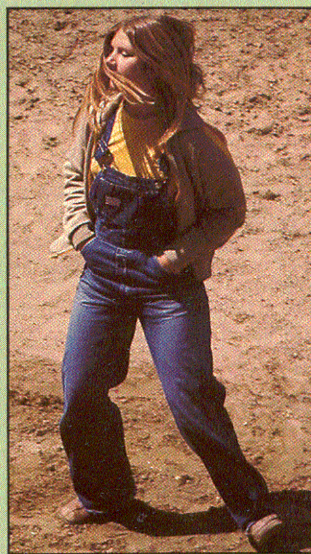
Tackless Training

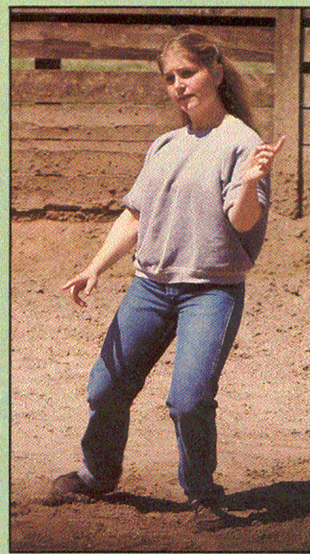
"You know," says Dr. James McCall, watching a student and her filly moving in flawless harmony, "it *still* amazes me that it works. I broke horses the old way when I was younger—and believe me, it rattled my spine—and all the time I didn't know there was a much easier way." McCall is still fascinated by every facet of his discovery, and is willing to express his views on the more theoretical points.

"I think girls are better at this kind of training initially, because they're more graceful, they learn the flowing movements quicker; but I think sometimes boys are as good or better in the long run, because they know how to be aggressive without being angry—a lot of women think you have to get angry to be aggressive." An interesting point, considering that in our society, little girls are often not taught aggressivity as a positive attitude, such as in the "friendly" aggression involved in football. Some women may disagree with this, but it might be an instance where we can learn about ourselves from the horse.

Another psychological matter arising in the training process is the difference in breeds: "You can lean a little harder on a Quarter Horse," explains McCall. "Sometimes you really have to make yourself clear. One thing you have to learn is you never make a threat without being prepared to back it up, and that means hitting him if he asks for it. But if you handle a Thoroughbred colt the same way you handle a Quarter Horse, he'll go right up the wall. You can go a lot lighter with a Thoroughbred and get the same results—push too hard, he gets scared and won't do anything. Sometimes when I'm winding down one of those fillies to call her in, just me standing there is too threatening for her and she won't come near me; then I have to squat down on the ground, really decrease my personal space. The crouch you use to drive them increases your mobility, but having one knee on the ground decreases your mobility, and they know that, they'll respond to that. Arabians, now, are a whole other thing; you lean too hard, they resent it, you go too light, they ignore it. But they love to play games—if you convince them that everything you're doing is a big game, they love it, and they'll do anything you ask."

When are they first ridden? "As soon as they're old enough, the first time you call 'em in and they look at you like 'Well? What's next?' that's the first time you get up on them. They know when they're ready, and if you know the horse, then you do, too."





motion, the shorthand can be further abbreviated to a subtle series of hand signals, or even—maintains McCall—eye contact. Voice is rarely used except to get the horse's attention; a horse who loses his place or doesn't understand will stop stock still and watch his trainer intently, waiting for the patient clarification he knows will come. To call the horse to him, the trainer relaxes his shoulders and legs and drops eye contact; dropping the shoulders and flexing the elbows into the traditional welcoming posture has the effect of hollowing the body away from the horse. He responds to this the same way he would respond to another horse presenting a submissively outstretched neck: he comes over to investigate and offer greetings.

Only a week after the first longeing session, newly broken two-year-olds can be saddled and ridden around the trails of suburban Maryland; McCall's former student and current wife Linda is responsible for much of the development of the mounted tackless technique. The tackless training process is so effective that horses who have undergone it and must be sold have to be "desensitized" to prepare them to cope with the human-oriented and often conflicting signals given by most average riders.

The idea of training through mutual communication is beginning to gain popularity and more trainers and behaviorists are making more

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this type of sync is when the colt is from one to two years old. After this, an expert rider can train the horse and school him even through simple dressage maneuvers without any aids but the natural ones: weight, legs and hands—the hands not necessarily on the reins.

Basically, communication sync is a translation of the three persuasions used on all levels: (threat of) force, bribery and trickery. But it is translated to a form that is more natural to the horse, and may, therefore, make him more comfortable with the entire breaking and training process. No matter what method is used, a horse who is comfortable learns faster, performs

more willingly and is usually more reliable in terms of temperament than one who is nervous or confused; this is an established behavioral fact, and all of these elements are important in evaluating the usefulness of any horse for any activity. A comfortable sync period is also more enjoyable for the person dealing with the horse; the owner/trainer/rider will feel more secure and more involved with the individual horse, which is one of the most vital considerations in any program of syncing and training. After all, the happiness that all horsemen receive from their activities is purely selfish in motivation, as is our desire to make our steeds the best, healthiest and happiest they can be—and what's wrong with that? ◻