



# WHOLE HORSEMANSHIP

By Dianne Lindig

## Sweat the Details

The popular expression, "Don't Sweat the Details", may be good advice for some of life's situations, but it's not a useful philosophy for effective horsemanship. The most widely accepted, (and most famous), horsemanship experts of today agree that, to interact with horses effectively, one must understand the horse's perspective, and must work through and with, not against, the horse's natural instincts.

In *Animals in Translation*, renowned author and animal behaviorist, Temple Grandin, says, "We, (animals and autistic people), see the details that make up the world, while normal people blur all those details together into their general concept of the world."..."This is the single most important thing to know about the way animals perceive the world: animals see details people don't see."

This attention to visual detail has served horses well throughout their evolutionary past. Catching the tiniest movement of a well-camouflaged predator in one's peripheral vision has allowed many a horse to alert the herd and to evade attack in the wild. In the literal blink of an eye, a relaxed horse's posture can go from, "No problem, keep grazing", to a rigid, high-headed expression of "Danger! Be ready to move!" The herd members' acute awareness of these changes in each others' body language, and their ability to react quickly to them, has helped to insure horses' survival.

In negotiating life as a member of a herd, a horse must notice signals as subtle as the position of one's ears, the direction of one's gaze, or the licking of one's lips, in order to recognize the difference between, "Don't you dare take another

step!", and "You're welcome to come join me". Monty Roberts' research and writings identify these visual signals, as well as chest/ shoulder positions used in herd communication.

Although domestication has certainly colored horse behavior over the years, the modern-day horse is nevertheless the genetic descendant of those individuals whose alertness and attention to detail made possible their survival in the past. In other words, it is still a fundamental part of a domestic horse's nature to be highly aware of the visual details around them, including many subtleties of body language which we humans often ignore.

I often see examples of this during the Groundwork and Psychology session of the Whole Horsemanship Clinics that I conduct here at our ranch. People often have the idea that the apparatus that they have attached to the horse, (the halter, lead rope, or bridle), plays the primary role in their communication with it. Many start by staring straight at the horse, and pulling on the rope to ask the horse to walk, to transition to a trot, to slow down, or to stop, while ignoring completely what their own body is telling the horse to do.

This doesn't work very well, since no human is any match in size or strength for a horse, and

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also because they are actually pulling the horse off balance and making it awkward by pulling its weight into its forehead. I instruct my students, instead, to use their body language and breath first, before they put any pressure on the lead, in order to signal the horse. I use a tall, energized body position, as I inhale, in order to signal the horse to get ready to move, just as a watchful member of the herd might signal his buddies to pay attention. My shoulders are turned parallel to the horse's, so he or she feels welcome to move with me. By the time I exhale, the horse is already walking. I use the same series of signals to transition to the trot. To walk again, I simply relax my body more, and slow my steps. I use my lead or other apparatus strictly as a "follow-up" to reinforce what my body is already telling the horse to do, but rarely do I have to apply any substantial pressure with it.

Backing up works similarly, except that with my shoulders frontal to the horse's chest, the horse knows to move out of my space as I begin to move into theirs. (I stand slightly to one side or the other of their blind spot that is directly in front of them.) Typically, by the time I stand up tall and

inhale, the horse is already beginning to back away from me, with little or no pulling on the lead rope, and no shaking of it that might cause him to raise his head and to stiffen his neck.

Although I usually demonstrate this method successfully with each of our horses that the students are working with, in their presence, some will say, "You make it look so easy! He just won't do it the same way for me!" They often struggle with finding the awareness of their own body that allows them to use their body language in this way. I'll show them video of themselves and of me, and I'll point out the differences in their body language and mine. At first, some people simply can't see the differences, because we humans haven't relied upon body language as a primary means of communication for quite some time. Most, however, do eventually become quite good at it, and wonder how it could have seemed so foreign at first.

I train all of our horses, (and students), to depart in balance, to do walk/ trot/ canter transitions both up and down, to do square, balanced stops, bending turns and circles both directions, to back up, and to do turns on the haunches both ways, from the ground, before I ever ask for these skills when astride the horse.

The beauty of consistently using body language and breath signals is that, they work the same when astride your horse as they do from the ground, (with the exception of facing the horse with your shoulders in order to move it away from you). So, the ultimate purpose of this groundwork is not just to "look pretty", (although it certainly does!), by performing complex ground maneuvers athletically, rather, it is a concrete way of enhancing your horse's performance and your own when riding.

In this case, *Pretty Is, Is Pretty Does!*. By using your horse's sensitivity to the details of visual stimuli, including body language, (rather than ignoring it!), you can achieve a higher level of communication that uses more subtle signals between horse and rider.

Once you are astride your horse, you are, of course, also tapping into the horse's sensitivity to touch and feel. We will explore how to make use of, rather than ignore, this part of your horse's nature, next month in Part 2 of "Sweat the Details". Until then, be safe, and Enjoy the Ride!

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