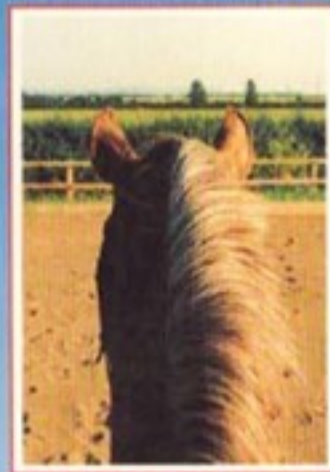


BALANCE...The Way Forward

Straight Forward Riding



Lesley Ann Taylor
and Carol Brett

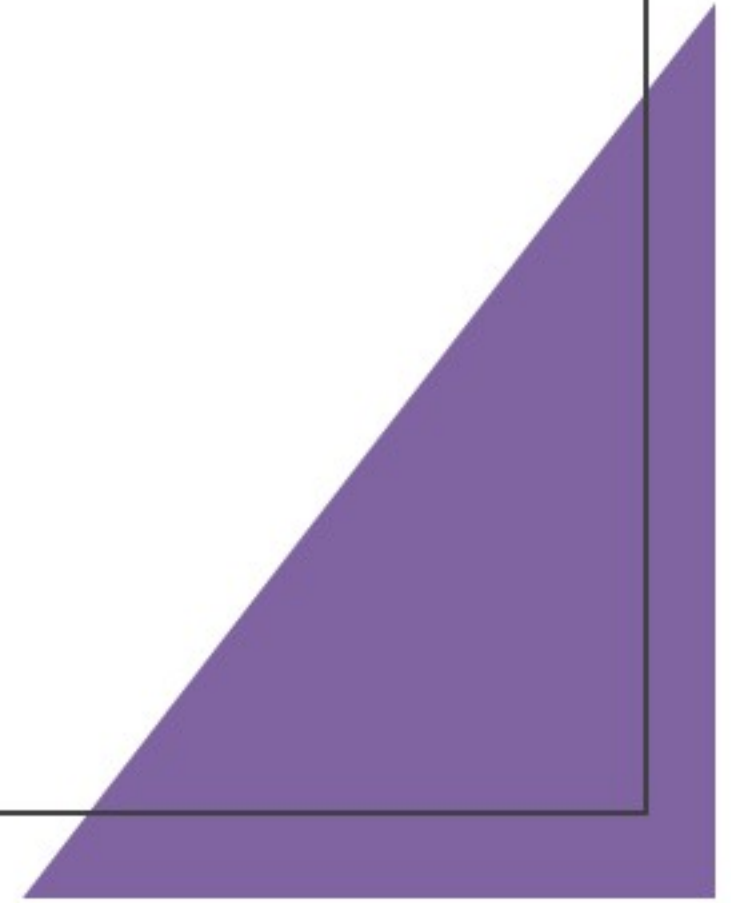


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Chapter One

Communication and Harmony



There are so many articles and books written about riding and training techniques that it can quite boggle the brain! Who do you believe? Which trainer is the best? What is the latest thinking on training techniques like 'deep and low' and the use of draw reins? What is the difference between competition dressage and classical dressage?

There are countless numbers of people to whom you can ask these questions, and all will have an opinion, but the 'person' who rarely gets asked the questions and yet can provide the most honest and reliable answers is....the horse!



Do you just go up to the horse and say, *“hello horse, what is your opinion on draw reins?”* and expect them to tell you?

Well, there are animal communicators who are doing just that, but let’s not get distracted.

We can all make use of the feedback that the horse is always providing, but the missing link in this line of communication, is often a willingness or ability in people to notice!

Even when it is accepted that the horse is expressing an opinion, the evidence (which is in the way the horse is behaving/responding) then relies on interpretation by the people involved in that horse.

A horse that is frightened, confused, uncomfortable and either reluctant or reactive, can often be described (and treated as) being 'badly behaved', 'resistant', 'difficult' or 'ungenerous' 😞. It is this fundamental lack of awareness that leads to poor examples of horsemanship and some very miserable and suppressed horses.



As I re-write this book in 2024, it is heartening to see a massive rise of interest in the 'social licence' aspect of the way we humans manage, train and ride horses. In particular, the way horses are treated when used in competition.

This interest can potentially protect ridden horses from many levels of harm and abuse, which is important, but it needs to be remembered that in this time of Social Media, it isn't only people with a genuine knowledge about and respect for horses who will determine what is considered to be acceptable. If enough people decide that using horses in competition is cruel, they could kill off many equestrian sports.

With this in mind, anyone and everyone who has an influence on the lives of ridden horses, would be wise to make sure that we can stand by our actions, as having the safety and welfare of the horse as our priority.

Riding and training trends.

As in many things in life, fashion, trends and attitudes seem to go in cycles and some years ago, there was a definite increase in horse owners looking for alternative ways of training horses, which co-indexed with the rise and popularity of what became labelled as 'natural horsemanship'.

It should never have been given that name/title, because there can never be anything 'natural' about the control of a horse by a human and persuading it to carry a rider is about as unnatural as you can get, even when done with respect and kindness!

This was created by trainers who were predominantly from a Western riding background, who claimed to have studied and adopted ways of influencing/training horses that mimic the way wild horse herds, communicate and control each other's behaviour.

There is no doubt that compared to some of the hideous ways of breaking horses for riding that had been common in certain areas of the USA, these 'natural horsemanship trainers' were promoting a less aggressive approach, and that had to be a good thing.



They usually created systematic and formulaic programmes of training, and there is no doubt that creating a step-by-step programme was helpful to a lot of horses, simply because it made the riders and handlers more consistent and aware in their own behaviour. Training horses can take far longer than needed, and be stressful for everyone, when humans can't be consistent!

Coming (mainly) from the USA, these trainers tended to be very good at marketing and creating goal-oriented communities who were willing to pay a lot of money to belong.

Nothing wrong with that, and I know that a lot of horse owners who were searching for direction and wanting to be part of a community of like-minded people, got a lot out of it.



There is no doubt of the potential benefit of training humans to be more aware of the way horses perceive them and react to our own body language.

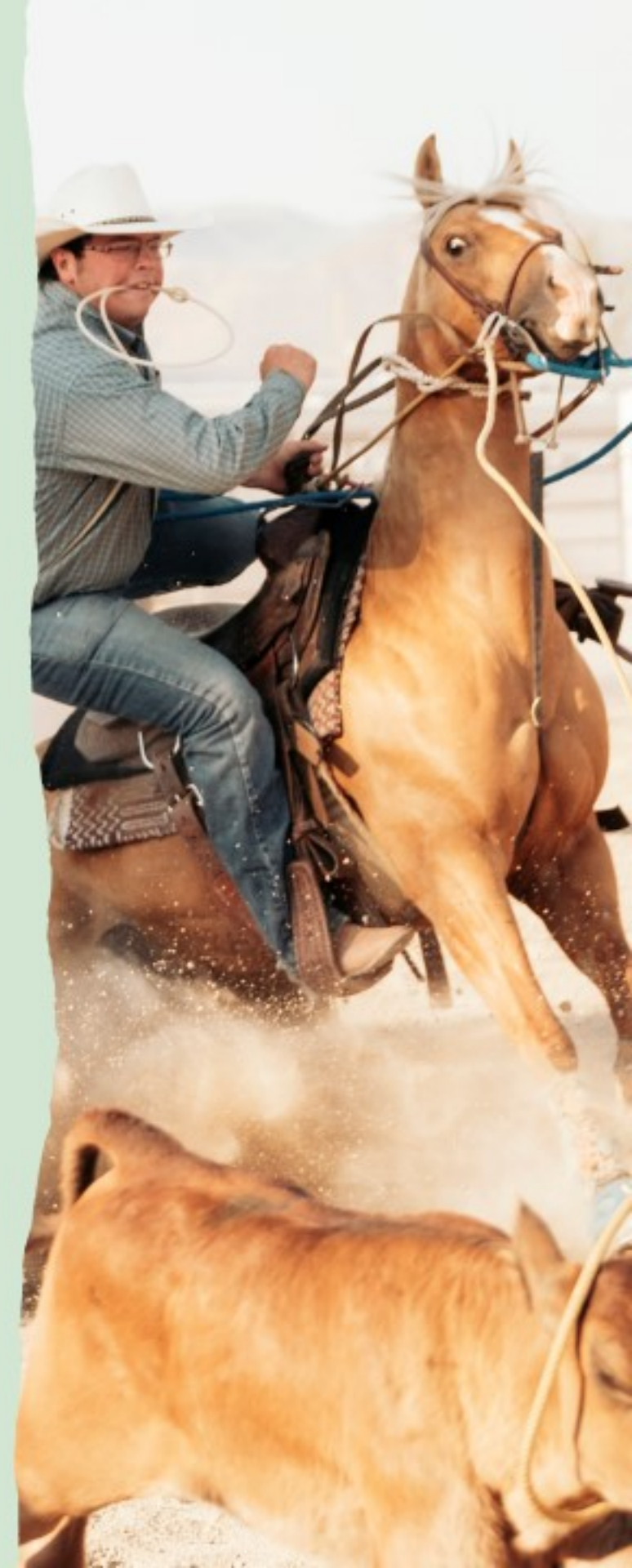
There is also no doubt that there are methods of working a horse from the ground, when appropriate and relevant, that can help a horse to understand what we are asking from them before we get on their backs and can also help them to be more adaptable and confident.

What Carol and I saw, was that problems seemed to start when these 'Natural Horsemanship' trainers moved on from training horses from the ground to getting on their backs and then teaching others how to ride like they rode, as part of their programmes.



As I mentioned before..... most of the Natural Horsemanship trainers came from a Western Riding background, which had practically emphasis on... understanding and protecting the comfort and bio-mechanics of the horse. 😞

I am not going to get into the reasons for this and the implications here, but will just say that to understand how to ride a horse in a way that first and foremost does it no harm, requires an education in the bio-mechanics of good (safe) movement and balance.



Fortunately, there are more 'natural horsemanship' trainers who have in recent years, realised that they need to learn more about bio-mechanics and understand what helps horses to carry riders in a safe way. They have looked beyond the 'western style' approach and sought out trainers who have other skills and knowledge to provide them a more rounded and useful education to share with their students. A definite and large step in the right direction.

If you are interested, I wrote a piece several years ago, explaining some of this and a downloadable pdf version of that is currently available on the BALANCE website, here is the [link](#) to that file. There is also a video with the text read out-loud on the BALANCE YouTube Channel. It is called [The care and training of the Super-Natural Horse.](#)



The very fact that these days, more people accept that horses are sentient beings who need us to pay attention to the non-verbal 'language' they use so that we can understand them, is progress.

It's very encouraging to see more people turning their backs on the joyless domination of the horse that has been all too common, particularly in the training of competition horses.



Having said that... there are still too many people who are willing to pay large amounts of money to a bored looking instructor (often slouched in a chair at the side of the arena and looking at their phone!) to shout abuse at them, while making their poor horses grind around a 20m circle for an hour at a time!

The instructors can often charge even more if they shout out their criticism and orders with a foreign accent! 😊



It is also still too common for horse owners to have lesson, only for the instructor to say *'just let me get on for 10 minutes'* and then proceed to bully and abuse the horse for an hour before handing the dripping and defeated animal back to the owner to cool off!

Unfortunately, many owners are too intimidated by the instructor to object to the way they are riding and so the horse has no-one to protect it.



Of course, there are times when it *can* help the horse to have the instructor get on and help to clarify something and for the rider to observe from the ground, but it needs to be done with a specific intention and not as a way of a bored instructor to show off!

Doesn't this come back to the fact that when we stop communicating with the horse and are not prepared to acknowledge the information that they are giving us, we tend to lose our way. We fail to notice that what we are asking from the horse may not be appropriate or fair to expect from that individual.

It is the nature of horses to try to figure out what they need to do to be as comfortable as possible, or better said....they try to figure out what gives them the most relief from discomfort, and humans have been taking advantage of this behaviour for centuries.

This presents riders, handlers and trainers with the moral and ethical dilemma of being very clear about what they ask horses to do, why they are asking and how they persuade the horse to comply.

Less telling and more listening

To be a good partner to a horse (and other people!) requires less telling and a lot more listening and general observation. We need to re-discover the kind of innocence that questions the information we are given by others. For example: we frequently hear that 'good dressage should present a harmonious and beautiful picture' and this is true, but how many have looked..... I mean really looked at horses at dressage competitions?

The sad fact is.. That it is all too common to see horses who look tense and tight in their movement, disengaged with their hind quarters with poor basic paces, a lack of co-ordination and balance... the list could go on and on. 😞

In higher levels of dressage competition, one would expect to see excellent examples of sound horses, moving with power and elasticity because the judging at the lower levels would have weeded out poor training and riding technique.

Certainly, if all judges, from the lowest levels to the highest levels were to stick to the FEI definitions of correctness, and if they were all to mark accordingly and consistently, they would reward the best trainers and riders and penalise those who do the horse potential harm through bad, rough or constrictive riding. They should be blind to the popularity or fame of the rider in front of them because their role/responsibility is to keep competition dressage honest and the best example of a mutually beneficial horse/human partnership.

Times (*and distortions*) in dressage are a'changing 🙄

When Carol and I wrote the first version of this Straight-Forward-Riding book, back in 1998, the most common problems one would see in competition dressage, were:

Horses being ridden with their heads behind the vertical and with their hind quarters disengaged. This created poor and incorrect balance and movement.

Typically, one would see collected paces that were disengaged and lacking in any power. When you watch a horse in Piaffe, which is the highest level of collection asked for in competition dressage, you know there is a problem when the hind feet are coming higher off the floor than the front feet!

The piaffe is supposed to be the highest expression of forwardness in collection in competition dressage, but what is often seen at lower levels and used to be very common in the higher levels, is a kind of soft shoe shuffle, with the front feet barely coming off the ground, because the weight of the horse was too far forward. Often with the rider bouncing up and down with enthusiasm to make up for the lack of action from the horse!

Why?..... Because the trot has usually been shortened by the rider from the front and causing the horse's back to contract and drop. This rotates the pelvis in the wrong direction and effectively inhibits the full use of the hip joints and hocks. With the hind quarters disabled the horse's weight stays too far forward. This isn't a collected trot, it's a disconnected trot.



It may be counter intuitive, but for a horse to be in a collected organisation, the spine has to be able to lengthen!

In many rider's mind, there is only the image of a horse shortening its whole frame as soon as the word 'collection' is mentioned. In reality correct collection creates a shortening of the horse's base i.e. the length of the stride and the degree to which the hind feet can step closer to the point of balance. The image of a hedgehog or an armadillo can be useful reminder that the shortening of one side of the body is, by necessity, enabled through the lengthening of the opposite 'side'.

Too strong an emphasis on the shortening aspect of collection can create influences that cause contraction in the neck and back that disable the hind quarters and destroy the quality of the movement to the point where it becomes inefficient, incorrect and ugly.

In 2024, the way horses are being selectively bred, trained and ridden in higher levels of competition dressage, seems to have created a very distorted and peculiar way of moving that tends to emphasise the exaggerated contraction of the limbs as they come off the ground, rather than a focus on the weight of the horse being carried more by the hind quarters in a strong, efficient and easy way.

The way the horses have to move now, in order to get the highest marks, makes them look (to me) like they are performing some kind of circus tricks.

It could be said to be clever to be able to get a horse to be able to move like this, and it is probably seen as more impressive than a horse who is just very well balanced, well organised and only needing to put the least amount of effort into producing movements that are desirable and correct in accordance to the FEI definitions. Maybe it's just me being too old and set in my ways!

Are these horses showing good balance and engagement, with their weight taken more on the hindquarters than their forequarters?

Or, has this exaggerated and different way of moving become a new kind of competition dressage that the FEI

needs to acknowledge and clarify whether it is what they are now defining as correct and desirable 🤖



When we wrote this little book, we wanted to question and challenge some of the ways that horses were being trained and ridden back in the 1980s and 90s.

We wanted to make it simple for any rider to understand basic natural bio-mechanics and movement, so we will cover some of the basic and important building blocks of good riding in the following chapters.

We will keep it simple, because simple and consistent is what horses find most helpful, but don't make the mistake of thinking that simple means it is always easy! In fact, one of the hardest aspects of using a stripped-back, simple approach is that humans can find it difficult to believe that anything simple has value and difficult to stay consistent in the way they ride.

It is humans who invented this thing that we call riding, not horses!

A fairly obvious thing to say, you might think, but worth keeping in mind and before we move onto the chapters that look at these foundations of good training and riding, I just wanted to mention something else that I think is worth keeping in mind...

Horses are perfectly 'designed' to function efficiently and safely when left in their natural environments, but when we impose the unnatural weight of a rider on his back, it overloads his forequarters and disrupts/disables his natural balance and movement. This creates:

- an immediate loss of balance *(which often leads to bracing and 'stiffness')*
- a lot more stress on most of his joints *(which often leads to damage over time)*
- a sense of vulnerability *(which can make the horse reactive and tense)*

So, as I explain in my Supernatural Horse article, if we care about the welfare of the ridden horse, we have to (*as a minimum aim*) learn how to address the way our weight corrupts his balance and changes his natural way of moving.

Once a young horse has been 'disabled' by the new and unnatural influence of a rider, he doesn't know how to recover his balance. He just has to learn how to adapt and compensate. It is the rider who has to help the horse to learn what he has to do to carry a rider, in a way he never has to use when not being ridden!



So, just sitting on a horse and going along on a loose rein or no rein contact at all, might create the illusion of giving the horse 'freedom' but is not a kind way to ride. It just abandons the horse to the consequences of having to move in an unnatural way. 😞



The next chapter in this book looks at some of the key 'ingredients' needed to train and ride horses in an effective, consistent and fair way.

The Contacts.

- 🐾 What are the contacts we have with the horse?**
- 🐾 What qualities in each of them work best?**
- 🐾 Why do horses sometimes not want to accept a contact?**
- 🐾 Is a light contact always the best contact?**
- 🐾 The difference between a contact and an aid?**



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Thank you.