



Super-Natural Horse

DON'T JUST WISH FOR A NATURAL HORSE.....

... If you want to ride, you need a Super-Natural Horse!!!



SUPER NATURAL HORSE

By Lesley Taylor-Brett

It is not unusual for some people to feel challenged by some of the information we share and the ideas/concepts we ask them to consider, but we did not set out to be inflammatory or controversial. However, we do not shy away from the role we have, because we are committed to doing what we can, in our own small way, in:

- Helping people to help horses to have positive experiences and get some benefit from their interaction with humans, and
- Helping horses to help people to have positive experiences and get benefit from their interaction with horses.

The line....BALANCE...helping people helping horses... sums it up pretty well and can be read in many ways. You may already know of some of the work we are involved in if you are already a BALANCE Saddle owner and/or are interested in horse-friendly saddles and saddling methods, but what you may not realise, is the reason we (the BALANCE organisation co-founders) ever got involved in saddles at all, was through our work as trainers and teachers of riding.

Our specific focus was, and still is, teaching people to ride their horses in a way that does not cost the horse in terms of his own comfort, safety and health. It is not a topic that seems to be talked about very much. The BALANCE organisation exposed some serious flaws in popular and accepted methods of designing and fitting saddles back in the early 1990s but, until that time, the way in which saddles have an impact on the horse was not talked about very much at all. You will find countless numbers of books, articles, DVDs etc. that provide all manner of opinions about how best to train horses to carry humans, but when you think about it, how many of them talk about the act of riding from the horse's perspective? This is what I want to 'talk' about here, because the fact that you have found your way to our website suggests that you are the kind of person who feels it important that their horses get something positive from the experience of being ridden. At the very least, the enjoyment of the rider should not come at a cost to the horse's levels of comfort, health and soundness. The particular angle that we (Carol Brett and myself) come from is a fascination and passion for encouraging, supporting and teaching people to recognise and work towards the bio-mechanics of good (efficient and safe) movement in the horse, the rider and the partnership between the two when riding.

What we realised many years ago was, that what seems to be missing from so many current 'schools' of training horses and from the understanding of so many riders, is an appreciation of the impact that the rider has on the physical, psychological and emotional states of the horse when he or she climbs aboard and as such, what degree of damage and potential dis-ease the act of riding unbalanced and therefore, bio-mechanically compromised horses can create unless and until, through correct training, the horse learns how to recover his equilibrium despite the unnatural weight of the rider.

Our thoughts about this whole topic crystallised after meeting a particular Doctor of Osteopathy who is based in the UK in 1994. Gavin Scofield has, for many years, specialised in the treatment of horses and made a study of the way their health, soundness and performance is affected by many factors in their lives, but with a particular emphasis on how riding and training techniques impact on the structures, movement and organisation of the equine body. Meeting Gavin Scofield and listening to him speak galvanised our commitment to doing what we can to help more people, to help more horses to achieve high levels of health and fulfilment through their interactions. Unfortunately, for many (possibly the majority) of horses, the process of training them to carry a rider, takes them into a range of health, soundness and fulfilment that is at best mediocre and at worst....devastating.

In an article like this, there is not the space to go into much depth about the whys and wherefores, so my aim here is to stimulate some alternative thinking, discussion and study on this topic. The truth is, that when we make the decision to climb onto the back of a horse, we have to accept that the very act of doing so removes him from a natural lifestyle. Is that a bad thing? It depends on the horse, so we can't have fixed rules about it. They are all individuals, and as such, some horses seem to thrive on the challenge of interacting with people while others, very clearly, struggle.

What is clear though, is that the minute we subject a horse to the weight of a rider, his life is never going to be the same. It can't be, because of the way the weight of the rider changes his natural biomechanics. Put simply.....an innocent and untrained horse will find himself unbalanced by the rider's weight (no matter how light, how talented and experienced a rider he/she is). His balance is corrupted in a forwards and downwards manner, which instantly overloads all the structures in his front legs and feet. His untrained body will also adopt a posture that effectively disengages the hindquarters and the hind legs from their job of supporting the dynamic (in movement) weight of the horse, and relegates them to a role that merely propels him forward. The innocent horse has no understanding of how to recover from this state of unbalance and the inherent potential for strain, injury and discomfort, unless and until the rider is willing and able to train him how to. In my opinion, any horse that any human being elects to ride has a right to expect a certain level of commitment from that rider to, at the very least, help him (train him) to re-organise his body and movement in such a way as to neutralise the negative impact of the riders weight. In the very best examples of training and riding it is possible to progressively train the horse how to use a combination of his movement, posture, power and fitness to become stronger, more adaptable, better balanced and co-ordinated than he ever needs to be in a natural life.

Achieving a state of being that we (BALANCE) refer to as.....'Super Natural'!!! Of course, what I am talking about is the original intention behind what we know as dressage. Unfortunately, over many centuries of riding, the term has come to represent some of the best, but also some of the very worst examples of horse/human interaction, because the word has become more strongly associated with the training of horses for competition, rather than its original meaning. It is undeniable that misguided attempts to persuade horses to conform to a particular image seen in the competition dressage arena, with little to no understanding of its purpose, is so often the foundation

of bad and destructive training. However, just as potentially destructive are the attempts to ride horses in ways that 'interfere' with them as little as possible in terms of rider influence. I refer to the passive, slightly apologetic, way of 'riding' that has become popular in the past few years under the general heading of 'natural horsemanship'. Many people are trying to ride within the guidelines of some misguided fantasy, based on the notion that it is kinder/more advanced/superior for the rider to give the horse as little interference as possible in order to describe the act of riding as 'natural'.

THERE NEVER HAS BEEN, AND NEVER WILL BE, ANY SUCH THING AS 'NATURAL RIDING'

The very term is an oxymoron. Horses have been providing service to people for generation upon generation, and as we become more sophisticated and have more access to data than we ever have before in our history, it would be wonderful to think that this has led to better lives for our horses. However, our very 'cleverness' seems to have created confusion about what horses need to be healthy in the human 'world', and many ridden horses seem to be stuck at one extreme end or the other of a gulf of ignorance.

At one end, we see horses who are trained in harsh, even brutal ways where they are coerced into bending to the will of the rider through physical punishment, and psychological fear. Probably as a reaction to this offensive behaviour, at the other end of the gulf, we find horses who are uncomfortable, damaged and often confused through being ridden in an apologetic way, by riders fearful of doing harm or causing offence, who sit on them, but leave them abandoned like a rudderless ship, adrift, undirected and powerless to find their way back to a state of balance and grace. Although not such an obvious 'cruelty', I would argue that it is very important that the increasingly popular notion that the kindest way to ride a horse is to be a passive passenger is challenged by those of us who know better. The damage that this kind of 'passenger riding' does to the horse's body, mind and dare I say it.....soul, are pervasive and long reaching. The fact that it is becoming so popular and even promoted as a 'superior' or somehow, more evolved way of interacting with riding horses makes it all the more dangerous.

I know as I write this that these very words are going to create a similar outcry of indignation and defensiveness, as happened when we dared to challenge the way horses were being (and still are) damaged by saddles. I do not set out to cause offence to anyone by writing these words. I realise that people who have adopted a passenger style of riding, have done so with good intentions and with a consideration for their horse because they do not understand the ramifications of their efforts to do no harm. What I suggest is that when we are willing to return to the most reliable source of information about what is appropriate (safe, kind, supportive to the horse), we have to go back to the simple, physical biomechanics of the way the horse's structures have evolved to function.

Riding and training techniques have to use this as a baseline for reference when deciding what is appropriate and what is not. When we train a horse to do what he needs to do to truly carry a rider in balance and without compromise to himself, he will be stronger, healthier, more athletic and more resilient than his wild cousin. In other words.....beyond natural, more than his natural state. This is where the notion of the Super-Natural Horse comes from. In order to achieve this Super state of being, he needs the support of having some boundaries set by the rider that don't restrict the range of movement he needs to have in order to use his body efficiently, but do prevent him from getting himself out of balance and off track. In other words, making sure the way is clear for him to make the most beneficial choices and making it harder for him to get it wrong. Riding with a good rein contact and (hold onto your hats) an appropriate bit that provides communication back and forth between horse and rider are important and helpful tools. We can all think of times when we have seen a bit used badly, but this does not justify the conclusion that all bits are bad. It is what is attached to the bit that makes it either an invaluable tool that helps the horse when used well, or an abusive method of manipulating the horse into a submissive state. I can't say this often enough. We cannot create many absolute 'rules' when it comes to deciding what is right and wrong, good and bad when it comes to riding horses.

Every horse is an individual and has his own needs depending on environment, the work he does, his personality, etc. What is good for one horse may be a problem for another. The 'rules' that we DO need to treat as absolute, are those that arise when we study the way that the form of the horse's physical structures (joints, bone shape/density, angles etc.) have been designed by nature to function in their most reliable, efficient, comfortable, safe, range and quality. As one of the world's leading authorities on this subject, Gavin Scofield is in the process of producing some text and additional material that will create a far greater clarity in riders, trainers and judges in all equestrian sports, as well as other professionals like veterinarians, therapists, farriers etc. about what ridden horses need and where the line needs to be drawn between what is appropriate and what is not, in the influences they have. When this is ready (we will be quick to let you know when it is), I would urge you to read it.

THE USE OF EQUIPMENT IN THE TRAINING OF HORSES

When we are talking about equipment like bits, whips, rugs, saddles and shoes, you can see people dividing into different 'camps'. There are those who have been using all of the above, plus a variety of other gadgets and gismos on horses with little to no thought about whether they are beneficial to the horse or not. All they know is that the equipment has made it possible/easier to get horses to do what is required and they see no reason to question beyond this. Another camp is reserved for the people who are worried about introducing/submitting the horse to anything that it wouldn't come across in a natural state. Any mention of bits, martingales, saddles with trees inside, metal shoes, whips, spurs, dropped nose-bands etc. creates a variety of reactions from mild feelings of unease to downright revulsion and offence!

We feel that what helps the majority of horses lies somewhere between these two camps.....in, dare I say it.....a more balanced area in the middle. There are horses who benefit from the appropriate use of any of these at certain times in their lives and others who do not need them at all. For example, I have seen horses who have been well shod for 10+ years and leading interesting, healthy and sound lives, turned into lame, miserable shadows of their former selves because their well intentioned owner has been persuaded by others that to shoe any horse is unkind and will only lead to damage!

Some years ago, we witnessed some horrible situations where horses were suffering terribly because their owners had been persuaded that to stable and rug horses was unkind and unnatural. Unfortunately, the particular individual responsible for this mis-information was a Veterinarian, which gave their rhetoric more credence than was safe. In their own country and their home environment, weather conditions and facilities in which their horses were kept, the no stabling and no rugging idea worked well. However, no consideration was taken for the fact that many horses are living in conditions that make the lack of man made forms of shelter and the lack of rugs a real problem and detrimental to their welfare. Even experienced horse owners fell for the sweeping pronouncements that horses should not be confined to stables and should not be restricted by rugs.

We know of a good number of horses who were miserable because they had been used to a routine of coming in during the nights through the coldest and wettest days of winter, or having a well fitted rug to supplement their own coat. Suddenly they found themselves literally left out in the cold and far from being happy and healthy, they were miserable, cold, wet and covered in mud-fever, rain scald and feet that were losing integrity through being water-logged. But, no matter, at least their misery was natural!!!!!!

Forgive me if I sound cynical, but I find it depressing to see horses dealing with discomfort, ill health and stress. Their plight is all the more upsetting to witness, when I can see that it is the result of their owner's efforts to do the 'right thing'. That their misguided or misinformed actions are actually creating a problem, albeit that they are done with the best of intentions. So, let us agree, for the sake of the horse, that once we remove him from his natural state by deciding to ride him or get him to pull a cart of some kind, we can no longer apply all that we perceive as 'natural' as our yard-stick for good management. We have to let go of the idea that having a 'natural' horse is always desirable aim.

Rather, once we choose this path of riding and/or driving the horse, we have to be willing to learn how to interact with him and to train him to be a SUPER-NATURAL horse...A SUPER NATURAL horse is one who has become so much more of an athlete, so much more versatile, adaptable and powerful than is ever required of him in nature, in order to carry a rider in a way that does not damage his mind, body and soul. The interesting thing is, that in taking our horses in this direction, in a progressive and constructive way that respects their diverse and individual needs we take them to a place that can allow them to experience lives that are far healthier and far more interesting than their wild and natural cousins. The same process creates the potential for humans to develop skills of mental focus, self discipline, strength, sensitivity, fitness, co-ordination and balance, so one can say that good horse training is a win win arrangement which allows horses and the humans to

experience mutually beneficial forms of partnership. Let's be rid of this idea that we do the horse little to no harm if we just sit on his back in a passive and undemanding state, and that riders who ask their horses to work in a frame not usually seen on the prairie are all bad.

It's time to roll up the sleeves and be prepared to make an effort to develop the levels of knowledge, skill, fitness, agility, co-ordination and feel that are needed by any rider before they can help their horse to carry them efficiently, safely and comfortably. Most of these skills need to be developed OFF the horse and then taken to the horse. It is alarming to think about the number of people who use their horse as a piece of exercise equipment. Unfit, flabby and un-co-ordinated bodies are best kept away from the back of a horse and do less damage when taken to the gym to get into better state for a horse to be asked to carry. I feel fairly well equipped to make such a statement because after years of spending most of my time behind a desk during the past 10 years, my own state of fitness is no-where near appropriate to impose on a horse. If I want to ride again, I know that I need to commit to some serious weight loss and some regular physical activity first.

So, here's to helping horses become more than they ever could be in a natural environment, in order to make the experience of carrying a rider something positive and life enhancing.

Keep it Constructive!