

Horses - DIY

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Problems seem to proliferate when horses and humans get together. To alleviate much suffering and prevent such problems from occurring, perhaps we need to get our skill and knowledge levels, about horses, up before we join them in the paddock or in a relationship.

Over the past few months I have been observing a DIY horseman. Amazing enough as his progress has been, it has also been an extremely rocky road that they have both travelled thus far. Perhaps that is his and his horse's chosen journey but it also focuses the spotlight on the sobering maxim of "I really don't know what I don't know".

A parallel that comes to mind is – If this guy came by an aeroplane and became interested in flying it (as opposed to him deciding he would become a pilot) and he then proceeded to figure it out for himself; what are the chances of success or failure?

Ignorance is not bliss when the landing is abrupt, unplanned or less than survivable. Knowledge and experience are the keys to success and these can be acquired the quick, easy way or the slow, painful way.

DIY out of a book seems to work best when the intrinsic risks are low. Making a set of wooden shelves is a low risk activity, except when using the saw. DIY wood turning a bowl to go on the shelves carries a much higher risk and expert instruction is highly recommended. Why people think DIY horses is a path they'd like to travel is nowadays a bit beyond my comprehension. I'll explain more about this shortly.

Riding horses, according to Rick Lamb, popular radio and TV horse show presenter and author of a couple of great horse books, "can become life threatening in an instant". (See *'Human to Horseman'* by Rick Lamb).

I'd have to agree with Rick on his take of the danger associated with riding and just being around horses. But by being a 'knowledge hungry' person I sought the advice of some experienced horse teachers (in clinics, books, DVDs, the internet and conversations and also by being aware, to some extent, that horses could be dangerous and probably more dangerous if used with less rather than more knowledge, I went about reducing my risk. However looking back on the whole horse experience, I went into horses pretty 'cold'. I am fortunate that I didn't seriously injure myself, my horse or someone else.

If I went into horses 'cold, then many people go into horses 'freezing' and some either get scared, hurt, killed or lose a lot of money. This is a real shame. It's also a shame for the poor horse too, for they can get scared, hurt, killed or labelled as a 'bad horse' by becoming part of a family who know very little about horses. Innocence (or ignorance) is fraught with all kinds of danger.

Why is it often unusual for many interested in getting a pony or a horse to have a good solid in-depth learning and training first? Yes, I know some people ask their neighbour what to do or ask Grandpa what he did with horses when he was a kid, but that is a much different scenario from actually studying horses and being trained and assessed as competent with the safe minimum that is required to know and to do when it comes to having a horse as part of the family. We do it with new car drivers these days, we do it with aeroplane pilots, fork lift drivers,

machinery operators, chain saw operators, teachers, health practitioners, farmers, motorcycle riders and all manner of other endeavours, so isn't it time we did it with prospective horse owners?

Would it be a better world for humans and horses if horse/human relationships began from a point of real knowledge and competency rather than from a point of 'DIY and hoping it will all be ok'?

I reckon it would.

Firstly, many of the myths could be dispelled and replaced with the facts. Facts like horses are a herd animal and really need the company of other horses to thrive both mentally and physically. Facts on horse feed requirements and living conditions could replace some of the myths and well intentioned ideas (but real furbies) that seem to be quite common in the horse world today. People could learn how to lead a horse; on both sides too (it's amazing how many people cannot lead a horse safely and with respect from the horse - and I'm talking about people with quite some experience with horses too). They could learn the physiology of the horse's skin and coat and realise that maybe rugging a horse may not be the best thing for the horse, they could learn about his hooves and realise the real reason why a horse can walk across rocks apparently without feeling them, with shoes nailed on his hooves; and why feeding the horse a couple of meals a day, above the ground is not the best for the horse for several reasons. Why even putting a halter on a horse could be covered - as there seem to be a number of different ways of doing that - some just seem to work better than others. All this information (and more) is a pre-requisite before any attempt is made to climb on the horse's back.

Apparently one of the most horse accident/human injury prone situations is leading a horse through a gateway. Float loading mishaps are the next highest on the stats list for injuring humans. This should *not* be the case if safe passage through a gateway and float loading techniques are learned and used by a horseperson.

Instead of standing in front of a horse to do either, why not teach the horse to 'drive' forward while you stand beside him? He's not likely to side-pass into you. After he's gone through the gateway, you can ask him stop and to yield his back end around to partially face you and wait till you come through the gate. It sure beats getting run down or scrunched up against a strainer post by a horse that's had a little spook! Driving a horse onto a float he passes by you as he walks up the ramp of the float and you gently throw the rope over his neck. He stops at the front bar and awaits the next instruction - which may be 'stand' or 'back up'. This has to be better than playing 'squash' in a horse float with a five hundred kilogram opponent.

If the prospective horse owner has been taught 'other' things about horses then at least all these things can be discussed and debated and an informed decision based on facts can be arrived at when attending a safe horse handling and general care course.

Perhaps it is time that a certificate of competency is required before a horse is purchased, leased or borrowed. Despite the howls of protest that such an idea would probably create, let's look at the advantages of how this type of approach has created a safer world in other spheres.

We can still fly and drive but we need verified training and checking to do these things legally and safely. The accident and death rate in aviation and motoring

has steadily declined despite more flying and driving taking place. Training and risk assessment are par for the course these days in all work places - even on golf courses. Why? To make these places safer. There seems to be a general acceptance that if a person would like to own and use a gun, then that person must first complete a firearms safety and handling course. Because guns can kill and injure, society has now deemed that mandatory training in their safe use is necessary. A blunt truth about horses is that they can kill and injure too. We still do dangerous things but at least by doing a risk assessment and carrying out proper and relevant training, there is less chance of things turning pear shaped. It may be seen as another imposition on our freedoms and civil liberties, but is it really? Being trained on the safe handling and responsible care of horses to achieve less personal injury and deaths and happier, healthier horses seems like a great idea to me.

Many of us probably engage in a 'safe practice' process with our horses already. Or many of us probably believe we do, but in reality, we may do many things that could be improved to achieve a better, smarter and safer outcome. It's just that we don't know what we don't know. We don't know that there is another way or a different way or that what we do is a time bomb ticking.

It may be a bit challenging going 'back to school' especially if we've 'been doing horses for years'. But if you want proof of the effectiveness of 'going back to school' then book into a Defensive Driving Course. If you don't come out humbled and a better driver after investing just one day on one of these courses then I'll eat my lead rope. And if that works for you, then put together or book into a 'safe horsemanship' clinic.

Much of the teaching and learning for safe horsemanship happens on the ground. It is easier to teach and learn, face to face, rather than on the back of the horse. It's how we have a conversation with other people, it's how we get to suss them out and get to know them and it works very well with learning new things with horses too.

There are many instructors and teachers in the horse world today who focus on safety; safety for the humans as well as the horses involved in any interaction between the two. They may use different tools or they may use less or no tools at all to communicate with the horse. For instance, using a short twisted cotton lead rope will not allow a person to easily 'drive' a horse through a gateway. A twelve foot lead rope attached to a proper fitting halter will. A well fitting rope halter is also considered by many as a much more effective communication tool than a webbing halter, and they come in nice colours too. With this lead rope/halter combination on a horse, sometimes just lifting the rope off the ground and pointing the way you'd like the horse to go is all that it takes for him to get the message. It sure beats pulling and tugging on his head.

When it comes to horses, it is well worth avoiding accidents, pain and injury. Be educated, be smart and be safe. It's much more fun that way!