

## Continuous Improvement

© Glenn Wilson - December 2008

*"It's amazing what a horse will do for you, if he only understands what you want. And it's also quite amazing what a he'll do to you if he doesn't". Bill Dorrance - 'True Horsemanship Through Feel'*

Smart corporations, businesses, organizations and individuals use a process called 'continuous improvement' to better their performance in their world.

In that process, these entities and individuals examine what they do, why they do it and how it can or needs to be changed to produce a better result. If there is a change or an improvement needed, what are the benefits, the costs, the time requirements and who or what programs, techniques and information can be used to facilitate the improvements. Also, thought is given as to what is in it for the target audience. What, how and why?

Modern jet airliners are a great example of continuous improvement. They carry more weight, higher, faster, further distance and with less noise than the models before them. And they do it using less fuel too. Less energy to do more.

So then, how can 'continuous improvement' be applied to horses when they are what they are? We can't really make them higher, faster, more efficient using less energy: or can we? I believe it's not so much about applying it to the horse but applying it to ourselves and our way of doing things, our understanding and our relationship with our horses. We are the part of the horse-human relationship that we can change or improve - if we want to, or feel there is a need to, or if it may benefit us and our horse.

If you are still with me, the next thing I'd like to reflect on is that I feel there are generally three types of responses or reactions from readers, to this type of article.

1. Those who mostly agree with what is written; because they themselves have experienced some, or many, or all of the matters written about. These people are in the frame of mind to have tried or will try to apply them to their relationship with their horse/s.

2. Those who are challenged and/or interested by the proposed concepts and who respond by thinking that they would like to improve with their horses and if they don't try new things, new attitudes and new teachers, then doing the same old thing is going to produce the same old result. "Why *can* some people ride their horse bareback in a halter?"

3. The people who may be challenged by the thoughts and concepts put forward (or they may not be) and in response, reject them. It's all B.S. as far as they are concerned because they are either quite happy with the way things are - and they may in fact be great, or they do not like change - for whatever reason. "Why would you want to ride bareback in a halter? That's what saddles, stirrups and bridles are for!"

Riding bareback in a halter is not what this story is about. It's about looking at what we do and how we do it with our horses and then looking at and considering change for improvement in the way we think about and what we do to and how we treat our horses.

Where the inspiration for this story came from was the discussions I've had over the past couple of weekends with horsey people. We talked about why there seems to be a great difference in the ways people do things with horses. Of course there are a great many different ways and results from the ways people do things with their horses too. Some just seem to work better than others.

Variety is the spice of life, so the saying goes, but when that 'variety' includes practices that seem not to be the best for the horse then the spice certainly turns sour. Then we could balk at the subjectivity of just what is the 'best' for the horse and the conversation can really get complex; because what "I" consider to be 'better' for the horse, some people believe the opposite.

If we consider a couple of examples of what is 'best for the horse' like say, hoof care; why is it that many horse people allow their horses to have long, split, flared and unbalanced hooves? Are these people just 'unaware' or something else? Either way, why would they let their horse's hooves get like that when it hinders the horse's optimum performance? Have a look at [www.hoofrehab.com](http://www.hoofrehab.com) for more info on hooves. Or feed: Some horse owners are quite happy over feeding a simple diet of lucerne to an already fat, laminitic and scatty horse. Sadly the opposite occurs some times too when the horse lives in a bare paddock and a bit of hay is tossed over the fence every now and then. There is a happy medium in horse nutrition and condition and these two scenarios are at the opposite ends of the scale. [www.safergrass.org](http://www.safergrass.org) is a great site for horse feed information. Rugging horses is another aspect of horse care that could to be examined – from the horse's point of view – as well. Search 'rugless horses' on the internet or read 'A Lifetime of Soundness' by Dr Hiltrud Strasser for more detailed information.

My point is; why do these and many other things occur in the horse world when there is a real abundance of well researched and well proven information there for our education and for the horses benefit? There are books, magazines, internet sites, clinics, teachers, DVDs, videos, chat groups and well trained trainers and knowledgeable, qualified practitioners all within easy reach, yet many horse people seem to not be interested, or aware or keen to explore 'knowledge and information'. Ignorance is only bliss for the human. The horse often suffers because of it, and it can be so easily rectified if the will and thirst for learning is there or can be stimulated.

I guess Albert Einstein was correct when he described his circle of knowledge idea. It's the one where if all one knows is contained within a circle, then the outside edge of that circle represents what is not known. As a person's knowledge (the circle) increases, then what is not known (represented by the outside edge of the circle) also increases. In other words, the more you know, the more there is to learn. But what happens when the circle of knowledge is small? Yep, there aint much these people don't know. And they seem happy staying in that position of limited knowledge. The downside can often be that these holders of a limited amount of knowledge are fully convinced that that is all there is to know or is needed to know. They have been doing such and such for so many years and it works fine – for them. Perhaps they haven't considered other options, so that horse and rider can get along and develop a stronger relationship?

Bill Dorrance, in his gift to the horse world, a book called 'True Horsemanship Through Feel', repeats over and over that the horse really tries to 'get along' with humans. The horse is willing to meet our wishes and will do this much better if we can use 'feel', because, Bill says, if we can use feel to 'feel of the horse' then that horse is much more likely to use feel to 'feel of us'. This knowledge is there

in an easy to read and delightful book, yet still people yank, pull and shout at horses to try to get them to do what these people want. They don't *ask* the horse, they *make* the horse do stuff. Generally it looks and turns out ugly. Conversely, some people dance with their horses without anything apart from willingness, acceptance and desire connecting their horse to them. These types of dances look and feel free, flowing and quite beautiful.

There is a lot of information available about riding a horse without a piece of metal (or anything) in the horse's mouth. Have a look at [www.naturalhorseworld.com](http://www.naturalhorseworld.com) for great articles on bitless headgear for horses. There are many different types of bitless bridles and halters available and there are many people who have successfully adopted this way of riding and controlling a horse. Yet there are so many horse people and disciplines and rules that state that a horse must be ridden with a bit. Why? A bit will not stop a horse that bolts. A bit can and often does hurt a horse and at the very best, be bloody uncomfortable for the horse. If you haven't done it, try putting a bit in your mouth and have someone gently try to guide you around the house.

So what causes so many people to continue to use these harsh pieces of equipment? Don't they trust their horse? Don't they care for the comfort of their horse? If Alexander Nevzorov [www.hauteecole.ru](http://www.hauteecole.ru) can do the things he does with a horse with a string around the horse's neck, then surely dressage riders do not need to hang off the horse's mouth to maintain collection. But the rules state 'a bit....blah, blah, blah.

Change them then.....The rules. If some riders can make the distinction between what is traditional and what is more efficient, effective and polite for the horse then change the rules to allow for them to express their preference. Allow riders to do dressage with the option of bitless or bitted. If the bitless horses score badly then I'm sure the bits will be popped back in the horses' mouths pretty quickly. However a recent experiment in Kentucky apparently showed the opposite result though. Have a look at [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com) for more information.

Shoes on racehorses are another 'stuck in the mud' situation. A sound barehoof horse is very capable of covering great distances over all types of surfaces and also more than capable of doing trackwork on watered turf and galloping if they are good enough to race. It does happen that horses sometimes are raced without shoes (and win). But the rules state they must be shod. Why? Shoes do not improve grip, shoes do not help in the health of the horse but they sometimes come off in a race and hit the horse or jockey of a horse that's not winning. So how about giving the trainers of these horses the option of running barehoof? If the horses without shoes fall over, lose the race by a furlong or their feet fall off, then by all means, put the shoes back on and all are happy. But if the barehoof horse wins and continues to win, then I would guess that track farriers may have to ditch the anvil, hammer and nails and learn how to carry out natural barehoof care. Hey, that would be good! (My personal bias rearing up here - sorry).

So why is the status quo? Why is change difficult for some? Why all the restrictive rules? Why are some people stuck in a world of limited or old information (when there is, in reality, an abundance of verified knowledge)? Why can't these people open up to learning or why don't they want to? Why indeed? Do horse people with current, validated information have to infiltrate the Pony Club, the ARC, Turf Club, Dressage Club, Show Jumping Club, even the Show Society and the breed societies and subtly infuse new 'truths' into their traditional ideas? Because the 'do not offend anyone' way seems to be really, really slow to effect change, what is the best way of infiltrating the minds in these

organizations? For example, I have a big paddock full of unrugged horses with pretty nice bare hooves. Well most of them have nice hooves – some are in rehab. They are generally a picture of health. It's only the converted who come and have a look and say hello. None of the local cowboys do, no dressage riders do, no thoroughbred owners or trainers do, nor do vets. They're just not interested. Or they don't want to know. Or they just don't know.

After thinking long and hard on the above and all the questions raised, an answer came to me. It is about knowledge and understanding and also about the connection. Not if there is one but the quality of the connection. Imagine if you are a long term regular user of a mobile phone; (I reckon for some this will be easy). Over the countless calls made and received, the quality of the connection is just ok. You can hear the other person and they can hear you. You live with and accept that that is as good as it gets because you don't know any different. Then someone else uses your phone and says to you that your phone sucks or your carrier is dudding you because the voice quality is really poor. What do you do? Believe them? Reject what they say and believe that the quality you have is good enough and you don't need or want better reception? Or do you start looking for better alternatives – researching the information available, trying the alternatives – seeing if you can get a better result?

It is similar to the connection we have with our horses. Just about everyone who is involved with horses has some form of connection and there are all levels and qualities of connection. If an experienced horse person is used to pulling, yanking, pushing and fighting with their sometimes uncooperative horse and accepts that that is the way it is, how do we tell them that it can be very, very different? If the same person doesn't understand true partnership and the aspects of leadership that others take for the foundation of their relationship with their horse, then the 'quality' of the connection is somewhat different from what it could be. If that same person has never had a horse come up to him or her and just want to be with them rather than their paddock buddies, then they do not know what they are missing. These people sometimes use feed to catch a horse. They leave the halter on all the time because they think the horse is easier to catch. Their horse sometimes pushes into them, stands on their feet or just presents their back end to them. It really is about the quality of the connection all right.

I guess it all has a lot to do with human ego; because as far as I can determine, horses don't have egos. Human egos and horses are often found in the same arena. Horses don't understand (and are not interested in) human ego at all. For that matter not many humans understand ego either. It can be a very inappropriately powerful form of energy to have, especially around horses. And if horses don't understand ego, then it is a very useless thing for them to have around or to have to deal with. Maybe a person's ego is inversely proportionally sized to their personal circle of knowledge. (This last sentence made me chuckle – I hope you did too). If our ego is getting in the way of a better relationship and better performance with our horse then it is not up to the horse to have to negotiate around it, is it?

So, do we just go about our business and not say anything so as not to offend or let them (other horse people with what we think is a less than optimal relationships with their horses) go about theirs. That sounds fine till one day you stop off at one of their horses' paddocks and say hello to the horse. Then you notice his hooves, his coat, his demeanour and his stress levels. And none of it is very pretty. The horse is quietly suffering and doesn't need to. Then you want to change the world or wonder why the world needs changing and is not.

Or is it? Something to ponder, and meanwhile the horse *is* waiting.

For the last word I feel it is only fitting to hand over to Bill Dorrance again. With over ninety years to think and learn about how and why and what we do to and with horses, if anyone should have a good idea, then Bill did. On 'improvement' Bill says, "I think there is always room for improvement, regardless of what you're doing. If there isn't room for improvement it isn't very interesting, whatever it is. Not for me anyway".

© Glenn Wilson

**Acknowledgements:** I give my thanks to Bill Dorrance and Leslie Desmond who partnered to produce 'True Horsemanship Through Feel', a book that probably needs to be read several times for the 'real message' to sink in. And to Kelly and Cristina, my two moderators and mentors, who convinced me to get off my high horse and look at life from their perspective.

**Glenn Wilson – Writer profile.** Glenn lives in North East Victoria and shares a bush lined sixty hectare property with his partner Kelly and a dozen or so horses, some Wiltshire Horn sheep, wwoofers and guests at Waterfall Creek Guest House. He became an accredited barehoof practitioner in 2008 and really enjoys helping to maintain and rehabilitating horses and their hooves. Glenn writes because he'd like to see more horses happier and healthier and having their horse needs met. Visit [www.waterfallcreek.com.au](http://www.waterfallcreek.com.au)