

Insanity

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There are enough people out there who believe our chosen pursuit of 'horsing around' is insane. They often argue that we would be much better off watching TV, shopping, mowing the lawns, spending time at the pub or club or playing lawn bowls.

They may be right. After all, here we are developing or maturing a relationship with a 400 to 600kg, four legged prey animal. These fodder and money processors have a mind of their own, are extremely intelligent, instinctive, perceptive and alert. They would often run away from scary things rather than overcoming their fears. Well some horses are like that and some are not.

One of my NH mentors and teachers introduced me to another definition of insanity. That was 'doing the same thing over and over the same way and expecting (hoping for) a different result'. Since she made me aware of this neat saying, I have seen it used in several other modalities. So it is not exclusive to Natural Horsemanship after all.

In our world today we see some pretty high profile examples of this definition of insanity being played out. For example, fighting for peace, increasing 'fines' to reduce crime, pouring more and more money at 'problems' rather than looking for new and creative solutions and being stuck in the same old patterns with horses. There are many more instances like this but as this is a horse related article, let's focus on being stuck in the same old, same old.

The situation where the human growls 'STAND UP' and gives the horse a good whack in the mouth with the bit/reins is a great same old, same old. If they (the human) do it once on a ride they do it several times. They say they are teaching the horse to 'listen up'. Poor thing must be deaf I reckon as well as having a bloody sore mouth. And just what does the human expect the horse will listen up to treating him like that? Ask them and you will be greeted by a really dumb look as if the question you asked came from another galaxy. But this often happens every time this horse and rider go out for a 'mission'. A growl, a whack in the mouth and the same old response - nothin'.

"Walk!" is another pretty common same old, same old. Once I went for a ride with a few normal (as opposed to natural) people and horses in the bush. One of the humans repeated the 'Walk' word about 14,324 times. As the day literally wore on, the urgency of the utterance got more intense as did our frustration at hearing it repeated so many times in a three hour pleasure trail ride. I mean the horse was walking. Well sort of. He was sort of like bouncing along in the walk. I think his shoes were spring steel. However the reins were never relaxed except when she got off for a break. Someone actually suggested that she might try relaxing the reins and seeing if that would relax the horse. "Oh no, I couldn't do that. He would take off!" With that, two of us put our reins down on the saddle and just let our horses 'take off'. Instead of flight, we just ambled along on our way home. Still didn't convince her to try though.

How insane is it when horses break down? Why does this happen and happen so often? Is there a pattern to common physiological problems with horses? And if there is, then why don't the humans responsible try something different before the problem occurs? These types of problems are good for the Gross National Product (GNP) though, as they add to the large amount expended at veterinary clinics and the retiring of and replacing of horses long before they reach the natural end of their useful lives.

Take tendon and ligament injuries for example. How often do horses suffer these types of injuries because of jumping either repetitively or overtaxing an unfit horse? Six to eight hundred kilograms landing on two front hooves toe first. Wow! Something has to give. The structure of a horse is a fascinating and wonderful thing but lets not abuse it, please.

Founder/laminitis is another insanity (and the conventional treatment of it too). Some horses do it on a regular basis, founder that is. Oh, oh, here comes spring. Lock up your horses (and your daughters) because we don't want them to get fat! I know several horse owners who lock up their horses, feed them chaff and things called gumnuts. Not too much mind you. The horse is either crabby, starving, fat, foundered or sour or all of the above. Not much creative thinking and doing going on here. It's the same old, same old in a different version. Did anyone consider exercise and a diet that fills their bellies with tucker that is less likely to cause founder?

Jamie Jackson, the American ex farrier turned natural hoof care advocate, has written a provocative book called 'Founder - Prevention and Cure the Natural Way'. I say provocative because in the book he challenges a lot of same old, same olds. He starts with a clean slate and does not take on historical myths or common founder preventions, treatments or remedies. 'Do horses in the wild suffer from laminitis or founder?' he asked. 'If they do, they're dead' he surmised. But after extensive study of the wild mustang herds and how they lived and what they ate, season by season, he's come up with some pretty creative solutions to preventing and curing this common domestic horse problem.

Last week I treated a pony who had foundered. Taking the front shoes off took ages because this little guy was so sore in the front feet he could hardly stand on one while I worked on the other. Trimming the hooves to put the whole hoof on the ground (to support the pedal bone which in turn supports the whole horse) was another long drama. Why someone decided to put shoes on him is beyond me. Same old, same old, I guess. My understanding of a foundered hoof is that the laminae that hold the hoof wall to the pedal bone, becomes inflamed and lets go. The pedal bone then wants to (and often does) heads down to earth (driven by the weight of the horse on that leg). If a shoe is nailed on the hoof, the pedal bone is unsupported and held up off the ground only by the hoof wall and shoe. The laminae (which is already inflamed and painful) really lets go, (more pain, each step) and the unsupported pedal bone punches its way out in to the open. This extreme situation is often exacerbated by the farrier taking off some sole material at the toe. Just where the horse needs it most. Insane I say!

My personal version of insanity is collecting horses. Well not really, but for some reason the herd number here keeps growing. Another own personal version of insanity is trying different (from normal) things and approaches with the horses to get better with them than I was yesterday, or the last hour, or last five minutes. I feel a little insane sometimes and am glad I can partake in most of these antics without the scrutiny of neighbours. Some of the things I do and some of the things the horses do are a bit loopy really. (Some of my friends do this stuff with their horses too). But it's fun. Not unsafe though but quite wacky. And I love it! I think the horses like it because they stay with me and have a zest about themselves and they don't run away (much) anymore when I go out with a halter and lead rope in my hand. In fact a couple of them come up to me and say hello. And that's nice.

So which version of insanity do you partake in? The same old, same old or the wild, wacky, fun and games of natural horsemanship?