

THE BIG QUESTION

I believe that riding on the back of a horse is a great privilege, not a right.

I also believe that we, as horse people, do not ask ourselves the 'BIG question' often enough to put things in a very real perspective, especially from the horses' point of view - because we so called 'natural horse people' are supposed to view life from the horses' point of view. Aren't we?

The BIG question is of course; should we be on their backs at all?

If you talk to any horse health professional, they will tell you of the plethora of physical and mental problems horses suffer because we ride them. Even referring to our own experiences, and if we are shamelessly honest, there are probably many instances where our horse/s have pulled up sore or lame or even just snitchy after a ride. An unfortunate truth though and one not to be ignored. The amount of effort by some involved in 'creating a nice top line' is for whom? Not the horse surely. In creating a 'nice top line' I wonder if anyone asked the horse if that's what they want. I wonder if the humans involved in this type of activity with horses have asked themselves the 'BIG' question.

We do ignore the very reality of riding horses. Well, some of us do anyway. Just because there is a long and 'proud' history of humans riding horses does not necessarily make it the best thing to do for the horse. Yes, battles were fought on horseback; we used them to advance our human cause to take us almost to where we are today (but along the way we discovered oil and infernal combustion engines) and even today we 'use' horses to win competitions (a substitute for fighting wars - winners are grinners), to gamble on, to play games on or to help give us a sense of freedom as we ride off into the sunset or sunrise to escape the drudgery of modern life. And, as has been well highlighted during the recent horse flu epidemic, we use horses to achieve economic advantage, prosperity and a boost to the Gross Domestic Product.

However I suspect the majority of horses would most likely rather be left alone to graze in the paddock; to be horses. Whilst we may kid ourselves and think "my horse really loves going for a ride"- it may just be a break of the boredom and restriction of either living alone or living in a rather uninspiring and uninteresting paddock that gives the horse some 'pep' when he or she is taken out of that mundane type of existence and given the stimulation of a day away. I know I would love a day out if I lived in a five, ten or twenty acre paddock (but I'm not a horse).

Given that horses truly like to roam in the wide open spaces (unless they have psychological problems stemming from interacting with humans) and they like to do this in the company of others of their type, living in a square, flat paddock with the same old boring grass, scenery, routine and company, day in day out, just does not meet the horses' natural needs. Of course there will be some interest shown by the horse when we take them out for a day. So for a really honest answer as to whether or not they really enjoy the outing, we must therefore ask the horse.

When do horses socialise? An interesting question indeed. What I mean is; when do horses most often get to meet other horses? When we take them out for rides or go to events. Do they get excited? You bet they do. Would they be just as excited if we decided not to ride them at these get-togethers? I'll bet they would. So the 'riding' part of such an occasion really becomes superfluous if one is looking at life from the horses' point of view.

A good friend, recently and very enthusiastically, told me of her discovery of taking her horses for a walk. Actually as she described it, these outings are more of an adventure. One up the front, she's in the middle and one behind. They are team expeditions. The three will head off for an hour or two exploring the natural bush that surrounds her property. "The horses absolutely love it" she said. "Their ears are pricked; they watch where they put their (bare) feet, they are so aware of what's around them, they explore. It's wonderful". And the vital key to the real essence of this type of experience she has with her horses is what she said next. "I feel so connected with my horses when we do this". "Much more connected than if I rode them". "I feel as if I am part of the herd; we have the adventure together". Yesssss!

She is also questioning whether we should be on their backs too. And she is also very aware that to ride a horse is

a real privilege, not a right. One day I reckon one of these well respected horses will actually invite her onto his back for a ride. If and when that happens I hope to hear about it because it will confirm, once again, the way I feel we can communicate with horses.

Having just written all that above I have a confession to make. I really enjoy riding horses. But that is not the confession. It is a statement and one which led me to explore this BIG question 'riding' issue. My confession is that recently I took saddle fit seriously. Yes I know there are an abundance of articles and tomes of advice out there about making sure the saddle fits the horse. Well, I finally took a gullet measure to my horses - and was aghast at discovering that my saddles are way too narrow. Not one fitted any of the four riding horses properly. I am so sorry and apologised to my horses profusely and set out to find saddles that do actually fit. Up until just recently, if the horse didn't pull up sore after a ride I assumed that the saddle must be OK. But we all know what 'assuming' does. Well it made a real 'ass' out of me and my horses suffered in silence. And then one actually gave me a few humps. "Hello, there must be something wrong here" and that is when I took saddle fit much more seriously than I had previously. I took riding my horses for granted and I didn't even show enough care to ensure that the saddles were comfortable for the horses. Well I do care now! Another BIG learning experience!

Even the journey of finding wide or adjustable gullet saddles is an interesting one. A traditional local saddle maker claims that his saddles fit 'all' horses. One saddle fits all, type of deal. Hmmmmm. The commercial saddle and horse gear shops will, by and large, sell you anything. One tried to sell me a synthetic stock saddle as a 'treeless' saddle. I only had one experience where the sales person claimed that the saddle I was looking at would not do the job; which was to fit a wide shouldered (and overweight) quarterhorse. I ended up on Ebay and finally purchased the very saddle that I knew would do the job. And now I have four saddles, in very good condition, for sale. All of this so I can indulge myself and ride a horse (or two). See, I still haven't got my ego tamed. I haven't even come to terms with the BIG question myself. But I am working on it.

Not long after I embarked on my 'natural' journey with horses I was out on a trail ride with a group that included one very 'normal' horse person. This person went through horses like Elizabeth Taylor goes through husbands. Even the 'new' horse played up before the saddle went on him. But that's another story in itself. Anyway, as we rode through the bush she told me of a lady she knew who had horses and had decided not to ride them any more. My 'normal' riding partner just could not understand this person's stand. I thought, "I'd really like to meet this person one day".

Just as my friend, whom I wrote about earlier, made a great discovery about just 'being' with her horses, we 'natural' horse people, have for a long time, known that just hanging with and truly being with, as well as playing with our equine buddies can give us so much pleasure. We can exist without riding them, can't we?

Can't we?

Well, that is where the BIG question comes back to haunt us.

Riding horses, if it is a pleasurable experience (for us), can be addictive. For those who are thus addicted, we can ask ourselves - "how long can we go without riding our horse before we really miss the experience?" Sometimes we do have extended periods out of the saddle. Could be winter, could be summer, could be the horse is lame, could be we are lame. But when we finally bite the bullet and get our horse out of retirement, do all the games stuff, slip the saddle blanket or pad on and then the saddle and the horse nary blinks; and then we slide up into the riding position, it feels like home. It feels so good! No wonder it's addictive. We ask for and get yields to both sides like it was yesterday. And then our horse just stands there waiting and asking "what now?" Some of us even get off at this stage and give thanks to our buddy for being so good. And some of us poke around on the front lawn to check if the brakes and steering and reverse are working.

And so the connection between horse and human is again placed on a level of predator on prey animal's back. (Sorry!) Just another one of life's true ironies really.

That they let us up there in the first place is just amazing. That they carry us to all sorts of strange, weird and wonderful places is equally, if not more, amazing. Are these 'animals' trying to tell us something? Are they patiently waiting for us to wake up and pay attention before trying to teach us something? I suspect they are. In fact I know they are. And the best place to learn from another or the best place to have a conversation with another is not from on their backs, but from on the ground, where we can look each other eye to eye.

Only from there can we ask our horses the BIG question and let them answer. Truly!

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