

Horsemanship Tip – “Feel”

This is actually not a veterinary tip. It is a horsemanship tip. Nevertheless, it may be the single most important thing I have to say about horsemanship.

Ask Yourself: Do You & Your Horse Understand “Feel”

May 2013 will mark 20 years that I have been in solely equine veterinary practice. Before that, I was a horseman. I had and trained a number of my own horses and had started colts for others. I started my first colt when I was 12 years old. But most of what I did with horses was essentially “blind.” I was “asleep at the wheel” and I am fortunate to still be here, given some of the stupid things I did in the name of “horse training.” You hear this over and over from people who later in life see a different way to interact with horses.

My profession has afforded me the privilege of touching tens of thousands of new and strange horses over those 20 years. I have asked quite a lot of many of those horses. I have asked them to tolerate me as I stuck my hands in their mouths, stuck needles in every site imaginable, cleaned and repaired painful wounds, asked them to enter dark stalls and confining stocks. I have learned a great deal asking these horses to cooperate with me in doing those things, and more and more I have studied the reactions I get from them and what those reactions mean.

Through this, there is one word that means the most to me. And that word is “feel.” I am not sure which of the clinician’s started using that term. Certainly this word is used by many clinicians today. Words don’t really do this communication justice. But “feel” is the word I too like to use to describe this communication with horses. Without my quest for understanding of feel, my vet practice would be much harder and less satisfying for me.

Here are a few things I know about feel:

- The simplest way to see if your horse understands feel is to put downward pressure on the noseband of a halter. Keep modest, even downward pressure for a few seconds. If your horse looks at you like you are crazy, braces against you or sets back against the pressure, you have not accomplished feel. Go outside right now and try it.
- If you can do that and your horse drops away from your lightest touch, then you and your horse get it. Now you need to be able to translate that same feel to every other thing you do with your horse, both on the ground and in the saddle. You will need to teach it in every situation. I can't necessarily accomplish it myself, but it is the goal I keep trying to attain.
- 90% of the horses I touch don't understand feel as it comes from human handlers. Some of these have reached high levels of accomplishment in their respective disciplines and still don't get it. Imagine what could have been accomplished if their trainers/riders had been able to provide more subtle communication to those same horses.
- The real magicians with horses understand feel. That is why the things they do with their horses look so easy. All of today's "natural horsemen" are using feel to accomplish the things they accomplish. Once the horse and horseman get feel, then that dialog can become so subtle that an outside observer may not be able to detect it at all. The real fun begins in communication with the horse.
- 90% of the horse people out there don't get it, and that is a shame for them, and for the horse. All of us can become better at using feel. The best clinicians in the world would be the first to say that. I try to work on it every day, with every horse I touch. I too have a long way to go. It is the journey, not the end goal that matters.
- Once you have the basics of feel, you have trailer loading, ground manners, and a mode of communication

once you are in the saddle.

- Feel is calling out “Hello?” to your horse, and having them answer “Yes?” Think of it as your communication line with your horse. It is the beginning of a real dialog between you and them, and until you get your head around what that means, your communication with your horses is just gibberish. Your accomplishment with your horse is as much luck as it is substance. Until you have it, you are shooting in the dark.

Two books that I recommend, and that illustrate what “feel” means are Ray Hunt’s “Think Harmony With Horses” and Bill Dorrance’s “True Horsemanship through Feel.” In later tips, I will illustrate “feel” with some video clips. But for today, consider buying these two books, reading them, studying them, and asking yourself whether you and your horse understand “feel.”

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