

Moving towards Softness

WITH JOSH NICHOL
TEXT BY SUSAN KAUFFMANN

Anywhere you look these days, there are people with all kinds of opinions about the best way to work with horses. Amidst this cloud of information, the relationship with the horse is often lost to techniques, equipment and disciplines. By focusing on these things, we miss the essence of the horse – and our horses suffer the consequences of our lack of awareness.

My hope is that more people will come to understand the true nature of these great animals and how working with that nature, instead of against it, enhances every aspect of horsemanship. That is the purpose of this series of articles, the first of which is designed to get you thinking, while the rest will give you some more hands-on things you can do to improve the relationship you have with your horse.

Finding the words to express the way a horse works has been a difficult task, but with help from an individual skilled in this art, I have attempted to explain some of my thoughts on horses. I hope you find them helpful.

~ Josh Nichol

PART I: Thinking about horses and how horses think

ARTO PHOTOGRAPHY

Every one of us would like to have horses that are easy to handle, willing under saddle and genuinely happy to be with us. These things and more can all be achieved through something I call “softness”, which in this context means that there is a *willing flow of responsiveness in every part of the horse, mind and body, to whatever you ask of him, free of any mental or physical resistance.* Softness is the ultimate goal in everything we do with our horses, for only through softness can a horse be and give his best.

Unfortunately, the reality is that many of us find ourselves struggling with our horses on the ground or under saddle, which can be both frustrating and dangerous. Whether your problem is something as seemingly minor as resistance to a bend or something as serious as bucking, bolting or rearing, you know this isn't how you want it to be. The good news is that change is possible – and can often happen quicker than you might think – but moving towards softness will likely require some changes in your way of interacting with horses, starting with your way of *thinking* about horses.

The way we think about our horses influences every part of our relationship with them. Many of the problems we have with our horses stem from our tendency to think of horses in human terms,

interpreting their actions through a distorting veil of human emotions and motivations. For example, you might think your horse doesn't like you or that he's being a “jerk” when he avoids getting caught or bucks you off. Just as incorrectly, you might think that a horse is being sweet when he walks right up to you and pushes his nose into you. In these instances, you are missing what the horse is really telling you because you're thinking like a human, not like a horse.

The truth is that horses perceive life very differently than we do, and therefore, their thoughts and actions have a language and a logic all their own. While most of us understand this to some degree, few of us realize how often we fail to take these differences into account. Therefore, if you want to improve your relationship with your horse, the first step is to develop a higher awareness of the horse's way of thinking, which is the key to opening the lines of communication between human and horse.

One of the things we need to keep in the forefront of our minds is the fact that the horse's primary motivation, in all that he does, is his own survival. This doesn't mean that the horse is scared for his life at every moment, but it does mean that he is naturally going to try to do what he feels is in his best interest. Of course, as prey animals, horses are often fearful, sometimes

of things we don't think they should be fearful of. But before we go and call a horse “stupid” because he shies from a blowing leaf or a boulder he has seen a dozen times, we should recognize that the degree to which a horse is fearful or relaxed is a reflection of how he feels about the person directing him. A horse who feels truly confident in the leadership of the person handling him tends not to react fearfully to his environment, because he knows the

JOSH NICHOL represents a historical tradition of horsemanship, a thread that can be traced back through centuries of time and many world cultures. Yet never has the approach to horsemanship which emphasizes softness, communication, and seeing things from the horse's point of view been common. What you are about to read is a clear statement by a talented young practitioner of the deeper art, and the greater way, of horsemanship. Here are keys which you may have been missing. They relate to what is going on inside the horse, and at the same time they call on you to clarify what may be going on inside of yourself.

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person will keep him safe. If you've got things set up this way, the horse's survival instincts actually work for you, inspiring that horse to want to be with you and follow your guidance. In order to achieve that, you need to fully understand how those survival instincts influence the horse's mind – and therefore his actions.

Essentially, a horse is always wanting to be in a safe place where he feels free from danger, confusion, unfamiliarity or any other form of pressure – a place that gives him a deep sense of overall contentment, or what I call “okayness”. The many forms of resistance we see in our horses often happen because we take them away from places where they feel okay and put them into situations where they feel anything but okay. However, the truth is that although you can force a horse's body to go somewhere, his *brain* will remain focused on that place of okayness. This leads us to a key truth about horses: *a horse's feet will always seek to be where his brain is*. Therefore, any time you take a horse away from where he feels okay, that horse is going to do whatever he can to get back there.

This is a crucial point for you to remember when thinking about communicating with your horse. A horse whose brain is somewhere other than the place you are forcing his body to be is basically unable to “hear” your attempts to communicate anything. This is not a case of the horse willfully ignoring you: it is simply that a horse will attempt to stay as focused as possible on that okay place. Your goal, therefore, must be to become a portable place of okayness to your horse. In other words, *you want to create a foundation in which your horse comes to feel a sense of okayness whenever he is with you*. A horse that feels that way will *want* to be with you because he feels safe and secure when he is, and therefore, he will willingly do just about anything you could ever ask.

In order to achieve this goal, you must learn to recognize when your horse's thoughts are not with you and learn how to *call that brain to you* when you don't have it. Once you are able to easily call a horse's brain, that's when real communication can begin. We will go into detail about various ways to accomplish that in the next article, but for now, try to do some observing when you are with your horse and notice how often and for what reasons your horse's brain is not with you. For example, his brain might be back with his buddies at the barn when you are out on a trail ride, causing him to jig, toss his head or rush back home to where he feels more okay. Or it might be focused on an attractive patch of grass, a scary object or an unfamiliar sound. Just learning to notice these moments for what they are – the horse's brain leaving you – is a very

important part of the process.

Of course, *what* and *how* you communicate, once you have the attention of your horse, will determine how far you get in building the kind of relationship you want. The main thing you want to communicate to your horse is that you are a trustworthy leader, because that is what is going to allow the horse to feel okay when he's with you. However, in order to earn the position of leadership, you must communicate to your horse with *horse* clarity and consistency. To do this, it helps to understand how horses communicate with each other, and to use that knowledge as much as possible when we work with them.

Most of us are pretty familiar with the more obvious vocalizations and body language that horses use to express themselves – things like nickering, pinned ears and swishing tails – but a lot of people are not as aware of how important *space* is in the language of horses. This issue of space is sometimes confusing to people because it is not such a big deal in human life. We certainly do have some sense of “personal space”, but the way our society is, we learn to ignore it to a great degree. If we didn't, we would learn much more about the person sitting next to us on the bus or the one in line at the supermarket.

To a horse, control over his personal space – who is allowed into it, and who is moved out of it – is the primary means of establishing leadership, which in turn establishes okayness. Leadership, whether you are a horse or a person, is earned by *gaining directability of a horse's feet*. This means that you are able to draw a horse to you, as well as being able to ask that horse

to move *with* you

or *away* from you. In a natural herd, the lead mare is the primary director of space, able to get the other horses to flow with her or away from her, depending on need. Because of this, the other horses look to her in times of trouble to get them to safety.

The lead mare has earned her position by showing that she can and will direct the other horses' feet. To do this, she uses different degrees of pressure at different times. Sometimes, just a mild glance is enough, but if necessary, she will use pressure as strong as a bite or a kick if that's what it takes to get the other horse to do as she is directing. In this way, she *never lacks clarity*. If she says “move”, she will make herself clear to the horse she is directing by *applying as little pressure as possible, but as much as necessary* to create the change she is asking for, then *immediately dropping the pressure* when that change occurs. That release from pressure rewards the right thing, thus making it completely clear what was being asked. Think about how this applies to the way we can most clearly ask something of a horse.

The lead mare is also extremely consistent, which allows the other horses to trust her. For example, she will almost never walk around another horse that is blocking her way. Instead, she will direct that horse to move out of her space as she approaches, and she will not fail to follow through with what she presents. She will also insist on her personal space being respected, and you can be certain that any horse bold enough to come into that space uninvited will learn very quickly that such behaviour is not allowed. Because of this clarity and consistency, the other horses know what is expected of them, and they know that there is someone who is capable and in control, which makes them feel safe. This



Softness, togetherness ... the beginning of the beginning. This is the essence of the relationship we want with our horses.

creates great peace in the herd – the “okayness” previously mentioned.

We need to receive the same directability from our horses as a lead mare receives. I say “receive” because it is something our horses *give* to us when we prove to them that we have earned it – not something we take from them by force. People often make the mistake of putting too much emphasis on the “moving away from” part of directing a horse, thinking that by sending or chasing a horse around a pen, they will gain “dominance”. What this really does is scare a horse and make his brain leave you even faster than his feet can run. It is not surprising that a horse treated in this manner will typically leave physically at the earliest opportunity, and is often unsettled under saddle. It is truly much more important to be able to draw your horse's brain to you, and to keep it connected with you even when you are directing the horse's feet to move further away.

Whatever kind of ground work or riding you do, it is that directability you need, because directability leads to that all-important quality we are looking for in everything we do with our horses – softness.

Softness is the product of a horse whose brain is present and who is participating in a conversation with an equally present human on an intimate level. Softness – or the lack of it – influences everything from your horse's way of going to his soundness and its value cannot be overemphasized. The degree of softness your horse gives you depicts the degree of leadership you have earned. If you don't have true softness clear through your horse, this tells you that for some reason – typically a lack of clarity and consistency on your part – your horse does not have complete faith in your leadership.

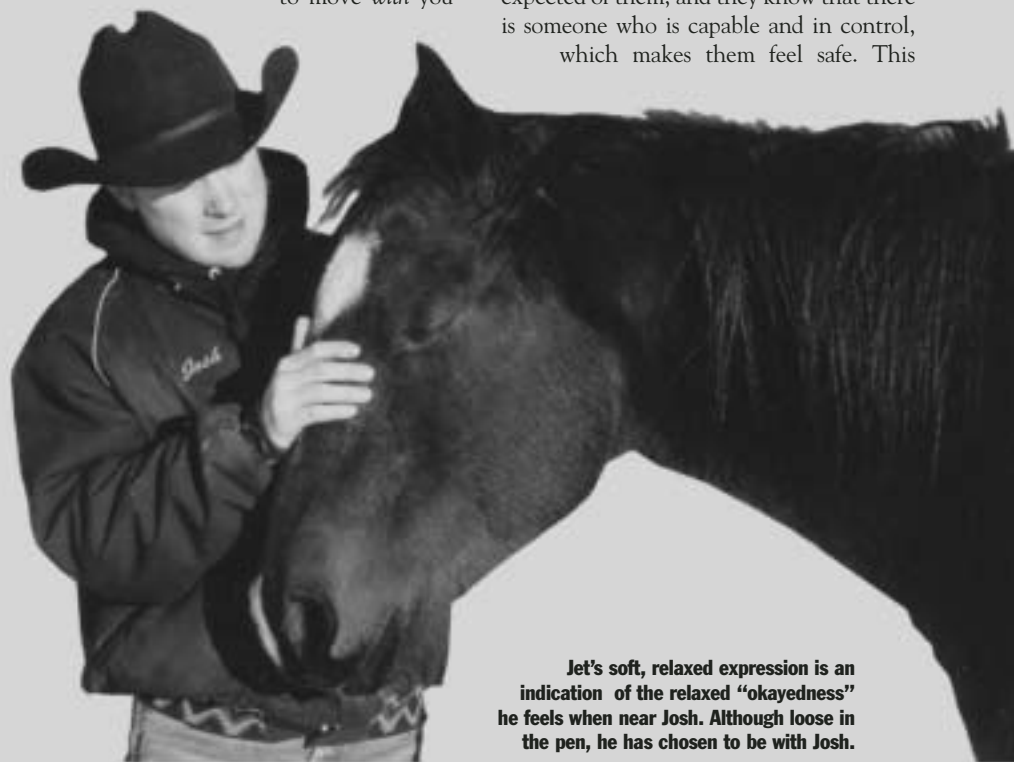
Trying to work with a horse who doubts your leadership can lead to all kinds of trouble, because a horse without a clear leader will feel forced to look out for himself in order to survive. Placed in such a vulnerable position, the horse will believe he must make *his own* decisions about what he needs to do and more than likely, they won't be at all what you had in mind. Your attempts to direct a horse in these circumstances only add pressure to an already stressful situation, making the horse far more likely to be reactive and fearful. This is the most common way that people

find themselves getting injured by their horses. Think of it this way: when the horse feels that the best option is to follow his own thoughts, yet *your* thoughts keep getting in the way, he will feel the need to try to push your thoughts aside and follow his own. This can lead to things like bolting, bucking, pulling, head tossing, resistance to the aids, refusals, and evading the bit. We often interpret these actions as defiance, laziness or stubbornness, when in the horse's mind, they are merely acts of self-preservation – or attempts to take his feet back to where his brain is.

Many people, when confronted with such behaviors, try to address them by either “getting tough” with their horses, or by using gadgets such as draw reins, tie-downs, flash nose bands and so on. Neither method will ultimately correct the problem because both are addressing the *symptoms* – the bucking, high-headedness, etc. – instead of the real issue, which is that your horse's mind is not with you, you have not become a leader to your horse, and therefore you create resistance instead of softness.

No matter how much resistance you are experiencing in your horse, rest assured that softness is possible. Every horse will soften, as that is the natural state every horse wants to be in – but it first requires a change in you. Once you begin to see life from the horse's point of view, you will come to understand the horse's need for a leader, his desire to be okay and his deep longing for a truthful relationship.

In the next article in this series, we will focus on things you can do to draw the brain of your horse, which is the beginning of the journey towards true softness. Some basic applications of this foundation will also be described to show you how having that brain present gives you the directability of your horse's feet. Until then, spend time with your horse, attempt to be a leader, but allow your horse to be part of the conversation. Your horse is ultimately the best teacher, and if you take the time to really listen, you'll find that he's got a whole lot to say.



Jet's soft, relaxed expression is an indication of the relaxed “okayness” he feels when near Josh. Although loose in the pen, he has chosen to be with Josh.



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