

A revolution in horsemanship

by Izak Hofmeyr

In the final decades of the twentieth century, a revolution began in America and spread throughout much of the world. It wasn't the usual sort of revolution. No shots were fired, no government was overthrown and no geographical boundaries were changed.

There were casualties, however. Ignorance and injustice, and behaviours born of them, died just as surely as if pierced through the heart with a broadsword. In their place arose new ways of thinking and acting, informed by enlightenment and empowerment. When the dust settled, the revolution had dramatically improved relations between millions of people ... and their horses.

This is the introduction to a remarkable book on the development of the so-called "Natural Horsemanship" phenomenon. It is called *The Revolution in Horsemanship and what it means to Mankind*, written by Robert E Miller and Rick Lamb, and published in 2004 by The Lyons Press in Guilford, Connecticut. The book is about a new approach to horse handling, and about the people who were at the forefront of developing these new methods.

But to talk about a "new" approach is strictly speaking incorrect. As Pat Parelli, one of today's most inspirational teachers of this new approach and the man who coined the term Natural Horsemanship, put it, "Natural Horsemanship is so old, it is new again". Such good horsemanship, he points out, has been around since the days of Xenophon (365 BC) but we have somehow got lost along the way.

The revolution in horsemanship had at its heart a simple theme: that horses can be controlled more effectively without the use of force.



Tamasine Smith, Natural Horsemanship practitioner with her horse Tamboree

And that is precisely what natural horsemanship is all about. The late Tom Dorrance, generally regarded as the father of the revolution, said that true unity between man and horse is about effective communication. It is about making the right thing easy for the horse, and the wrong thing difficult. It is about presenting oneself in such a way that the horse will respond correctly to what might be asked of it.

Today there are many proponents of this "new" approach to horsemanship. After Tom Dorrance and his brother Bill came Ray Hunt,



Robyn, a three-year-old Boerperd, is crossing the “tipping bridge”. This is an obstacle used in Western Riding trail classes, but it is also excellent to get young horses used to things moving under them and it helps them gain confidence when introduced correctly. It is ideal for preparing a horse of any age for trailer loading – giving both the sound and movement of the ramp

Pat Parelli, Monty Roberts, Richard Shrake and John Lyons, to name but a few. These men are regarded as the older generation with people such as Clinton Anderson, Buck Brannaman, Craig Cameron, Leslie Desmond, Linda Parelli, Mark Rashid and Dennis Reis considered to be the “next generation”.

What all these people have in common is a fundamental understanding of the psyche of the horse and a deep desire to use this understanding to build a partnership with the horse.

It is noteworthy that all of the “older generation” of natural horsemen were working cowboys hailing mostly from the rodeo arena. They all, at some stage, came to the realisation that they wanted more from the relationship with their horses than one based on domination and brute force. In their search for a better way all of their paths crossed, directly or indirectly, with those of Tom or Bill Dorrance. They all were able to pick up on the subtle cues these two “horse whisperers” pointed out to them as to how horses communicate.

The basis of this communication is the fact that a horse is a prey animal, with flight as its only defense mechanism, while man is the ultimate predator. To successfully communicate with a horse, man has to alter his instinctively aggressive approach and adapt to the way horses communicate with one another. It is based on this approach that this generation of natural horsemen, in one way or another, developed their own systems of training horses.

“Today,” says Tamasine Smith, Natural Horsemanship practitioner based in Robertson in the Western Cape, “we are trying to break down the prey-predator barrier by using a form of communication based on the horse’s natural body language and how they relate to each other in the wild.

“By helping the horse to see the human as less of a predator and by the human learning how the prey animal thinks, we can achieve a level of partnership with the horse that causes him to have the heart and desire to do anything we want – whether it is jumping, dressage, reining, trail-riding or any of the myriad activities we can do with our horses.

“When we achieve this, we no longer need force – bigger whips, bigger spurs, stronger bits, in fact, we don’t need any of these things at all! By learning all the basic skills on the ground to a high standard, we can easily transfer this to the saddle when we get mounted. Natural horsemen learn to ride with one rein, a natural rope hackamore and also without saddles and bridles – so great is the relationship with their horses.”

Ultimately, she explains, riding becomes really refined, but even in the early stages, many people find that they achieve more with their horses in a few months than those who have ridden all their lives.

Tamasine has been using Natural Horsemanship methods for several years now, first in the UK, and then here in South Africa. She teaches the Silversand Natural Horsemanship programme, created in Australia by Steve and Irena Halfpenny.

Their programme is based on a model developed by Philip Nye and they spend many months of the year travelling to bring it to interested students around the world. They have developed an easy to follow self-study programme, which, in Tamasine's opinion, goes far beyond what some of the other NH study programmes are offering.

"Steve has a wonderfully gentle and understanding approach to the horses that his students admire and it rubs off on them," she says.

The Silversand Programme retains the original sentiment of Natural Horsemanship, Tamasine feels. Quoting Steve, she says it is more about "who we need to become as people" than about training methods.

"At Natural Horsemanship ZA," she explains, "we feel that this is a fundamental point, We therefore also run other courses that help to develop this attitude, which in turn helps us to become better horse-people. The Silversand Programme is about 'awareness' and asks us constantly whether what we are doing is 'for' the horse rather than 'to' the horse. We need to be mindful of how we are with our horses in order to understand why they do the things they do or

why they react to things in the way they do.

The programme helps us to help our horse 'think his own way through problems' and to avoid confrontation as much as possible. It is about having a dialogue with our horses and giving them options that help them make their own decisions. This makes for a far better relationship with our horses than in other programme." Steve, she says, likens this relationship to that of a friend who you greatly admire, whose opinions you value and who you hold in high regard.

"This person has your total respect, and if they were to ask you a favour, you would not hesitate to do it for them – in fact you would respond without question. This is the relationship, the partnership, we want with our horses. This is 'true' harmony."

Having spent time in Australia with Steve and Irena Halfpenny, Tamasine is now a Silversand Associate (the only one in South Africa) and will return there regularly to keep up with the latest in NH. Tamasine gives one on one lessons and conducts clinics around the country, helping people improve their relationship with their horses. Contact Tamasine Smith on 023 626 6836. SAH

THE NATIONAL HORSERACING AUTHORITY
www.horseracingauthority.co.za

The National Horseracing Authority maintains the integrity of horseracing by :

- Maintaining the breeding and pedigree records of the Thoroughbred racehorses in the Stud Book.
- Microchipping and parentage testing every Thoroughbred foal born in Southern Africa.
- Registering Owners, Trainers, Jockeys, Breeders and Officials.
- Scrutinizing all races.
- Investigating all cases of alleged misconduct and imposing penalties on anybody found guilty of contravening the rules.
- Testing urine samples of randomly selected racehorses for the presence of any prohibited drug.
- Taking strong action against anybody in the horseracing industry who ill-treats a horse.
- Issuing a passport identity document for all Thoroughbred horses.
- Employing veterinary surgeons to treat any horse which might hurt itself during a race.