

Bob King, our mentor and the man who started our journey of discovery. One of the few real horsemen who still practices "the old ways"



Past to present:

The legacy of horsemanship (Part 1)

by Eben Barlow

Almost a decade ago my wife and I embarked on a journey that would lead us to different continents and countries to study “western” horsemanship. The first small step of our journey was on the Dryhead Ranch in Montana, USA, where we trailed a herd of about 500 cows out of the Pryor Mountains across the state line into Wyoming.

During this 100 mile cattle drive, we became friends with the trail boss, Steve Cerroni. Over the coming days Christina, Steve and I would talk horses and horsemanship to shorten the long days in the saddle. Our second visit to the US led us to the one man who had arguably the greatest influence on us – an old Arizona cowboy by the name of Bob King.

Bob inspired and motivated us to learn as much as we could about these magnificent, yet greatly misunderstood creatures. Bob was and still is the owner of the US-based Cowboy School. Soft-spoken, kind and dedicated to his horses, Bob spent his younger years learning as much as he could about horses. He gladly gave us many days of his time, teaching us whatever he could. We were good students even if, in Bob’s words, we spoke “funny”.

The old ways

On a small ranch near the sleepy little town of Arvada in Wyoming, we worked with Bob from sunrise till sunset, soaking up whatever he had to tell us. Whether it was riding the trail or working horses or cattle, Bob impressed on us that the horse was our partner and we could do nothing without a willing and relaxed partner. He taught us the value of mutual respect, firmness, consistency, discipline – and the past.

Riding stirrup-to-stirrup with Bob, we realised the great importance of the past in order to understand the present. He spoke to us about “the old ways”: the Mexican *vaqueros* and *charros*, the Californios, the Spanish and the Moors. He told us that nothing is new when it comes to horsemanship – one only had to study the past. We suddenly became driven to find out as much as we could from these horsemen of the past.

Difficult horses

After our time with Bob, we headed back to the Dryhead Ranch in Montana where we were asked to help out with some so-called “problem” horses that the cowboys were having difficulty riding. Charlie had a habit of biting and kicking when being saddled. Once in the saddle, Charlie could buck – badly! In fact so badly, that no-one wanted to ride him. We became great partners and through sheer luck and effort, I soon had him working really well — so well that one of the cowboys asked me if he could get Charlie when we left the ranch. I obliged and soon after we left the Dryhead, Charlie bucked the unfortunate cowboy into hospital.

Christina’s horse, Banjo, was very forward-going and she had to let him realise that he couldn’t ride the front of the trail when he wanted to. She soon had Banjo as meek as a lamb, waiting to be told where he ought to ride. It was during this time in the US (1999) that we were introduced to the work of Ray Hunt, Tom Dorrance and Buck Brannaman.

Steve Cerroni, our friend and trail boss from the Dryhead, visited us in South Africa a few months later to learn about groundwork and our approach to working with difficult horses. Many hours were spent discussing groundwork and so-called problem horses with Steve. By now, we had modified Bob’s version of groundwork to include aspects of Moorish, Iberian and Mexican horsemanship.

Books, books and more books!

We continued to work our horses and study the writings of ancient and classical masters



Christina and I, high in the Pryor Mountains. My horse, Moon, was one no cowboy wanted to ride



Dryhead Ranch trail boss, Steve Cerroni, and I still talking horses – this time in South Africa

from Xenophon to De la Guérinière, Nuno Olivera to Alois Podhajsky and Baucher. We bought every horse-related book we could and studied its contents from cover to cover. Soon our book cases were groaning under the weight of horse books. Sometimes fortune really favoured us and we were able to find old cavalry training manuals and notes. We also obtained a very rare book on Mexican horse training techniques. Soon we realised that the more we thought we knew, the less we actually knew.

After many months of passionate theoretical study and trial-and-error application on our own horses, we decided to take the next small step in tracing the roots of ‘western’ horsemanship. This was much easier said than done, as we needed to get to those horsemen who really knew the old ways, applied those ways and were willing to teach us.

The Spanish way

Lady Luck smiled on us. We made contact with Doma Vaquera riders in Andalusia, Spain. Several miles outside of Seville, we spent time with an old man and his son who made their living training Doma Vaquera horses – the old way, part of the legacy left behind by the Moors. Despite serious language differences (I speak a smattering of Portuguese) we were able to understand one another. In a makeshift arena, I was given

lessons on the back of very highly schooled horses. In this remote part of Spain, they would not give Christina a single lesson (ladies do not ride astride and men are men!) so I had to give her a lesson.

The entire village was summoned to come and watch her take a lesson from me. I was rather intimidated when I saw men open card tables around the arena and start playing cards, while watching me trying to teach Christina. Undaunted by the village interest, Christina graciously took her lessons from me. We were both overwhelmed by the hospitality of this small village and in particular our father-and-son instructors. Even more overwhelming was their passion for horses. Despite being barely able to afford the necessities of life, their horses were their kings and no expense was spared to keep them healthy and well turned-out.

Then we were off to meet a man that our friend, Angel Garcia, had located for us. Angel told us he wasn’t sure if the man was a good horseman or not. Joachim Rodriguez is the epitome of a very good horseman. He was also the President of the Spanish Doma Vaquera Association, an international dressage judge, a bull-fighter, a classical horse trainer of note and he had been decorated by the King of Spain for his outstanding horsemanship abilities. Christina and I were in seventh heaven.

Joachim much prefers horses to people. We later learnt that he does not give lessons

to anyone – especially to “tourists”. He was, however, very warm and friendly towards us and spent many hours working with us, trying to make us understand the importance of working correctly with the horse. He discussed balance, rhythm, flexion, softness, control and collection – and above all, the need to treat the horse firmly and fairly. He also made sure we understood everything he was telling us. When we finally left Joachim, we were invited to become members of the Spanish Doma Vaquera Association. We proudly accepted.

A year or so later, our next step took us to Portugal in order to familiarise ourselves with in-hand work. Here too we were fortunate to meet with people who were willing to help and guide us. Once again, we were keen students and when we left Portugal, we left behind several new-found friends. We also left with a standing invitation to return and work with the Portuguese national bull-fighting team’s horses. This invitation was extended by Christina’s Portuguese fencing coach who happened to be a matador in the national team.

Learning from the past

Back home we realised that our travels and studies had done more than just teach us about horses. We had learnt about history. We learnt that there is a golden thread that links western horsemanship to classical horsemanship and that as horsemen, we ought to pay homage to the horsemen of the past who played such a major role in shaping the present.

Coming from diverse areas and religions the Moors, Mongols and Iberians left behind the “secrets” of working horses. To them, understanding the horse was as important – if not more — as riding the horse. The horse was their partner and companion. The horse would carry them into battle, allow them to show off their skills before princes and kings and worked with them in the fields when asked to do so. There was no distinction to them between the

so-called disciplines of today. It was all about the horse.

Many a time when we work our horses, it is almost as if some of these old horsemen from the past are sitting on the fence watching and guiding us. The many lessons and writings they left behind are there for all to read and use, if only we are willing to make the time and effort to do so.



Tired and weary in the saddle, Christina looks towards Wyoming – still about 60 miles to go



Christina and I with Joachim Rodriquez in Spain. Joachim had just finished quizzing us on the young Andalusian stallion behind us

In the next issue of *SA Horseman*, we will cover some of the horsemanship lessons we have learnt from the various horseman cultures we have been fortunate to encounter. SAH