



LEADING THE WAY TO A STRONGER BOND TOP TIPS FOR A TIP TOP PARTNERSHIP

by Sarah Clark

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1. FROM THE GROUND UP

We horse-mad folk know there's no riding without ground work first. But why is this? It's useful to look at the innate traits of your horse to answer the question. As herd animals, horses are **extremely sociable**. They love interacting. That includes interactions with their humans. You might not have four legs or a mane, but your horse still sees you as part of their herd! They are natural **keepers of the peace** (essential for herd harmony) so they (mostly!) willingly oblige. As prey animals, horses survive because of good herd communication, which makes them **body language experts**. This is why the way that YOU move around is also important to your horse.

You can liken ground work with horses to young children at school. They first need to learn their ABC and a bit of classroom etiquette, like no feet on tables (or no treading on toes!) to be ready for the lessons ahead.

Even 5 minutes of effective daily leading can enhance your communication and bond. It can even help in overcoming handling, riding or loading challenges! Here are some top tips:



- **Lead from the shoulder.** When a horse wants his horse buddy to move forward, he walks positively alongside his shoulder. It is a myth that horses lead from in front. It's also a misunderstanding that we should also lead them from in front. You being 'shoulder to shoulder' with your equine friend is naturally best.
- **Keep things interesting!** Your clever horse's brain will become stimulated by variety and games. Practice lots of transitions, make shapes like diamonds or ovals, and use step across and step back. Obstacles such as raised poles and (gradually introduced) flags, umbrellas or bin bags will build confidence. Allow him to approach one object at a time, giving a treat or a lovely wither scratch for each brave step he takes out of his comfort zone. Slow is best with novel objects, so remember: a snails pace wins the race!
- **Have a plan.** Your horse will have greater confidence in you if you have a plan. After all, how can your horse know what to do if you don't?

2. SIMPLY BE WITH YOUR HORSE

"LOOK DEEP INTO
NATURE and then
you will understand
everything better"
- Einstein.

In days of old, people relied on their loyal servant horses for their everyday work. That means humans and horses used to share even closer bonds. If you can, deepen your powers of observation one day by turning your phone off, heading into the field and simply being with your horse. Throughout the day, observe his Circadian rhythm; that is his physical, mental and behavioural changes. Notice tiny changes in his face and any energy level fluctuations. See what HE notices, who he interacts with and how, and when and where he sleeps. You may be surprised what you learn!



3. YOU GET OUT WHAT YOU PUT IN

I'm no nutritional or physiological expert (and I always recommend seeking professional advice), but I do know that diet massively influences horses' behaviour! When your equine companion is happy on the inside it shows on the outside.

Horses are designed to eat for 12-18 hours a day, which means that if your trickle feeding bestie is without forage for over 1 hour, it increases the risk of gastric ulcers. Frustration can also lead to aggressive behaviour.

Whilst munching time is good, horses' digestive systems have evolved to process forage from arid plains. Therefore, we also have to consider laminitis, obesity or anxiety through the WRONG kind of diet. Avoid feeding CEREALS at all cost, and sugar-rich RYE HAY/GRASS. Check with your friendly farm supplier to find the right variety of hay (mixed meadow and Timothy are good), and increase those grass varieties on your pasture by scattering mixed NON-RYE grass seed. (There are a number of firms which supply NON-RYE grass seed and some mixes also contain beneficial herbs and wild flower seed).

Your foraging friend naturally nibbles on horse-friendly branches, shrubs, herbs and berries. Cut willow, hazel, rosehip, nettles, cow parsley and cleavers, to name just a few and alternate your offerings to keep things interesting. Your horse will instinctively know what he needs most of!

4. YOGA

Personally, I feel that yoga (and Pilates too) goes with horses like strawberries go with cream! But no, that doesn't mean your horse has to start lowering into the Downward Dog pose. Oodles of dressage and eventing professionals wouldn't be without yoga in their lives, and there are plenty of good reasons why:

- **Flexibility.** We hay-hauling, wheelbarrow-weight-lifting horse carers may have strength, but yard work and riding can also tighten the muscles. Yoga stretches and softens everything, including the mind. (Ommm!)
- **Relaxation.** Being a highly sensory prey animal, your horse is hard wired to pick up on teeny cues in the environment AND from his herd buddies in order to stay alive! In fact, if horses' sensory radars weren't so strong, they'd most likely be extinct by now! Sensitive horses pick up on our mood (even if we'd rather they didn't!) and they can even sense our elevated heart rates!
- **Feel.** We naturally tighten parts of our body when riding, mainly to balance. And sometimes we tighten body parts unconsciously when we feel hesitant. Yoga allows us to be more conscious of any tightening. Being a sensitive flight creature, your horse FEELS this rigidity, and may become tense or adjust his movement accordingly.

Not only will yoga make YOU more bodily aware, relaxed and flexible, but your horse will reap the benefits too - win-win!

5. STAY CURIOUS

Your horse's behaviour reflects how he THINKS and FEELS. Are there foibles he's always had, such as 'grumpy' ears-back when you groom, 'naughty' kicking the door at food time, or 'angry' pulling faces over the stable door? We can ALL be in the habit of attributing human emotions to our horse's behaviour, but often there's an underlying reason for the behaviour that we're unaware of, such as discomfort, frustration or anxiety. Stay curious as to what these behaviours might mean, and if something is concerning you, seek the advice of a registered behaviourist.



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