

Active Work with Horses: Explorations in Authentic Power

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

As everyone who has spent time around horses knows, one of their most noticeable attributes is that they are just so, well... *physical*. And *powerful*. And at times, *willful*. These elemental qualities of our equine friends allow for very intriguing self-exploration. How do we own our power in relationship to another powerful being? How do we discern when to use physical strength, and when to use finesse? When to take action, and when to be patient? And when we do take action, how much action should we take?

In building right relationship with horses, we learn that conflict can be both safe and productive. Learning to do conflict in creative, skillful ways is one of the cornerstones of balanced relationships, with horses or with humans. While we are all eager to move away from the old ways of horse-breaking and forceful resolution (or escalation!) of conflict, the fact remains that to have a respectful relationship we must find ways of owning our power. Here are some principles that can help guide you in your exploration.

Discern varieties of authority

There are two kinds of authority: the authority to take decisive action (which must be owned by the authority and also granted by the subordinate partner), and the authority of superior knowledge (as when we say, "She's an authority on the subject"). Ideally, these two attributes occur together: we usually appreciate leaders who are both persuasive and knowledgeable. All too often – at our jobs, in politics, and even at the average boarding stable – we see strength and power substituted for knowledge and judgment. Have you ever been under the direction of a boss who liked to wield power but had little knowledge of the challenges you faced in the job?

Some situations, such as getting a horse to change leads in the canter without interrupting her stride, call primarily upon the rider's superior and detailed knowledge of the task. A rider who is unable to lead the horse through the task (successfully changing leads) and then becomes more forceful is not expressing any kind of authority – merely venting frustration over her own inability to send the horse the right signals, making the horse a convenient scapegoat instead of examining her own skills and ability.

Some kinds of misbehaviors, such as bucking when picking up the canter, can be either a sign of the rider's lack of skill (and can also reflect issues of balance or physical pain), or can be testing the rider's resolve. Such situations demand discernment of the causative factors before resolution will take place. This gives us a chance to practice becoming more authoritative, but backing down gracefully if increased assertion does not appear to be the answer and only escalates a conflict. In fact, this is one of the most important conflict resolution skills, to let go of our position when we see that it is not serving us in moving toward a good solution.

Simple ground exercises are the best way to establish the horse's confidence in our leadership. For instance, if you ask a horse to move out and travel around the round pen, a horse that respects your right to do so will move off promptly to the best of their ability. A horse that does not respect your request will not only not move off, but may overtly challenge your authority if you continue "bugging" her. In between is the horse that delays, and then moves off in a sluggish fashion, dragging her feet or even crowding toward the center with her shoulders (body language that any parent of a teenager can recognize!). This says, "I am testing your awareness to see if you recognize that I do not completely accept your authority."

When the situation calls for it, let your feelings show

Emotions have their own language and it is the language of meaning. Laura is a horsewoman who studied at HEAL in order to improve her relationship and riding performance with Gypsy, her 5 year old warmblood mare. Laura combined natural horsemanship with lower level dressage and trail-riding. As I watched Laura work with Gypsy in ground exercises, I observed that Gypsy was slow to respond to Laura's signals. In fact, Laura would repeat each cue as many as ten times, waiting for Gypsy's response which was invariably sluggish. Gypsy's swishing tail signaled her irritation with Laura's demands. Although Laura increased the intensity of cues appropriately, the missing ingredient turned out to be Laura's communication of her *emotional response* to Gypsy's lackluster response. Laura was being more or less "blown off" by Gypsy – and impatience, or what I like to call righteous indignation, was an entirely appropriate response. In the absence of an emotional context for the escalating force of her signals, Laura was in essence conditioning Gypsy to become tolerant of repeated and heavy cues, rather than teaching her to be more responsive.

Use posturing and drama before physical force

Learning to be more expressive of her feeling state did not come naturally to Laura, who had worked many years at a job which demanded a universal and artificial politeness. With practice, Laura was able to dramatize her requests with sudden surprising sounds, and quick, expressive movements. Laura learned to act out feelings in ways that were demonstrative but non-violent – "Hey friend! I'm really annoyed when you neglect my requests!" Horses themselves always precede physical force with increasing dramatic posturing (this is usually effective in preventing conflict among horses from actually coming to blows).

The first few "outbursts" that Laura practiced caused Gypsy's eyes to fly open in a way that even a high-pressure physical cue could not. It was as if Gypsy suddenly realized, "Oh my! I didn't know you felt so strongly about it!" and then she performed the requested movement with a cat-like quickness that belied her draft horse origins. When Laura saw how responsive Gypsy could be, her face illustrated the "light-bulb" quality of the moment. "Ah!" she exclaimed. "So that's what everyone means when they talk about 'lightness' in the horse!"

Your spectrum of expression should include physical touch when appropriate

Watch horses in a herd, and you will see the natural progression that they use in asserting their authority with another horse. They have no trouble owning power (that is, when they actually have the power!). Their body language moves smoothly from a request, to a warning, to physical contact which enforces the request. When physical contact (i.e. a bite or a kick) ensues, it is carefully calibrated to the amount of response desired. Like a gentle but effective nip, it is entirely possible for a person to gently remind a horse with a touch of the longe whip that a response is expected and required. In fact, horses consistently show us that they are comfortable when we wield our authority in such a natural progression.

In our highly civilized (one might even say "overly civilized") society, we are conditioned to be polite instead of being authentic. Countless clients express to me their discomfort with the whip (we try to assuage our discomfort by calling it a wand, or a carrot stick), and are reluctant to pick it up even when it will increase not only our authority, but the clarity of our signals to the horse (holding some sort of whip increases our visibility to the horse and allows a much greater range of clarity in signaling than our arms alone).

Nina had come to HEAL to work on issues of assertion. She felt that people walked over her and called herself "the doormat". As she mastered the reflective work of self-awareness and moved on to active round pen work, she found herself in the pen with a big pinto gelding named Jazz. Jazz benignly tolerated Nina's first attempts to direct him around the pen, sniffing the ground and nibbling at the sparse blades of grass here and there. As Nina became more emphatic with her requests, Jazz began to show some irritation, showing her his butt as he turned away from her, swishing his tail as Nina moved closer in her attempts to get him to move. Nina resisted my suggestion that she pick up the longe whip that was within easy reach. "I just feel that it would be much better to do it without the whip", she said. "I don't want Jazz to see me as a person who would be cruel."

Why are we afraid that asserting ourselves in the physical realm will automatically disqualify us from our horse's affection? The force of this conditioned belief comes from the human world, not the equines themselves. The nuanced language of touch is an important part of the vocabulary between horse and human, in both affection and impatience, as a soothing gesture or a call to heightened attention. Neither holding the whip nor touching the horse with it is in itself cruel, what matters is our sensitivity and judgment about when or how much or why. And sensitivity and judgment rely on the other kind of authority – an abiding understanding and interest in the well-being of the one that we expect to be the 'following partner' in our chosen activities.

Perhaps the most important thing to recognize about either type of authority is that it must be *granted* by your equine partner. Your horse's response will tell you

when you have effectively established your authority. When you are able to effectively combine both your power of persuasion, and also be a knowledgeable authority of the work you are requiring and how to help the horse feel safe and comfortable in his work, you will earn and be granted his trust. Ultimately, you will learn that the moments of friction, even conflict, are resolved quickly and to the benefit of the relationship. Giving you an even more durable framework for friendship, affection and cooperation.

About the Author:

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