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FOREWORD

Having been involved with Tellington TTouch Training (www.ttouch.com) for 30 years, the use of various kinds of groundwork and obstacles when working with horses is not a new concept for me. I, my sister Linda Tellington-Jones, and the thousands of practitioners who use the Tellington Method frequently work with horses around and through obstacles, often without a halter, and so the concept of “Horse Agility” makes perfect sense to me.

When I heard about Vanessa Bee and what she was doing with Horse Agility, I made a point of contacting her when I was in England. As it turned out, she was doing an agility demonstration at a local horse event, so I had the opportunity to see her concepts in action. Later, as I approached her information booth, she was talking to someone about Horse Agility—and horse handling in general. I was impressed with her attitude towards horses and the relationship that she was encouraging people to build with their horse as they were doing agility.

Her attitude and belief in nurturing a relationship with your horse comes through in the pages of *The Horse Agility Handbook*. She explains a step-by-step process: first, developing your relationship with your horse

so it can be a win-win for both of you, and then continuing in your work together to build confidence and cooperation.

Horse Agility as an activity and a sport provides a venue for those people and horses who may not wish to, or be able to, work under saddle, but who still want to compete—or maybe just find a social circle with like-minded people.

In addition, the competitive nature of Horse Agility is framed with the horse in mind. Obstacles are scored not only on how the horse does them but also how the handler responds to the horse in situations that might be challenging or unfamiliar. This is a rather unique concept in most areas of equestrian competition.

I think Vanessa Bee’s book will give people many ideas about exploring new ways to work with horses, in and out of the competitive arena, while further developing their relationship.

Robyn Hood

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HOW YOUR HORSE KNOWS WHAT YOU WANT

This is possibly the most powerful chapter in this book because it discusses bravery. What do I mean by “bravery”? It’s all too easy to say a horse is “brave” because he does what you want, and then call him a “coward” when he doesn’t. *Horse Agility it’s not about being brave or scared, it just is.*

What a statement! What I mean is this: When doing agility, just take the behavior the horse offers you and deal with it. Don’t judge him as brave or cowardly—he’s a horse and he’s looking to survive. A brave horse who tries to fight a lion won’t be around for very long. Look at your horse’s reaction to new obstacles as *interesting*.

Every horse is different. Your friend’s horse may happily jump a log but that doesn’t make him brave; it just means he can do it. This is all about the *partnership* between you and your horse. Become interested in the weak bits and try and work out if they can be strengthened. If you are this generous to your horse, he will be generous in return.

How can you show him that you are “open” to his reactions, whatever they might be? Be yourself—you cannot lie to a horse. If you become *interested* in supporting him when he is fearful of a new obstacle, it takes the pressure off both of you. This is all about

your horse reading your body language: when he should run, when he should stand still, and when your movements are instructions that are meant for him.

THE TWO-HORSE HERD}

Whenever you and your horse are together, you are essentially a two-horse herd, so who is going to make the decisions? Who is going to decide when it’s safer to stand still than run? I’m afraid this is not a 50/50 partnership—most of the time, the human needs to make the decision as to what is safer: to run or stand.

Think of a tractor coming towards you on a narrow lane leading off a major road. A worried horse will run first and ask questions later, but you know that is likely to be the most dangerous course of action. The safest thing to do is stand still in a gateway and let the tractor pass by. To even think that the horse could be part of the decision-making

process in this situation is just not safe. Humans *know* that it is safer to stand still; the skill comes in convincing the horse that you know best in this “life-or-possible-death” scenario (FIGS. 8.1 A & B).

Rather than risk life and limb to prove your worthiness as a good decision-maker, set up your own less dramatic scenarios in the safety of your arena and paddock. This is where Horse Agility comes into its own as a training tool. You don’t want to push the horse near terror and then dive on in like Superman and rescue him. That is totally unnecessary. Instead, a gentle escalation of “scary” situations will get the horse to look to you and be part of actively deciding whether he should be frightened or not.

THE HORSE’S “GUIDE”

If you want a human analogy here, think about being in an alien environment—let’s say the rainforests of Borneo. If you are on holiday there and decide to hire a “guide,” you would expect him to be able to look after you. You might ask for some proof of his ability to show you the ropes and protect you. (A horse would see if *he* could move *your* feet—and if he could, he wouldn’t hire you!)

Once you determine that the guide is qualified, off you go, into the forest with him. There are many strange sounds in that forest: If they are far away you probably ignore them, but what if there is a blood-

curdling screech so near that it deafens you? You look at your guide—you look at his face and body language—to gauge his reaction. You don’t need any more than that; his facial expression and body position tell you what you need to know in a second: Do I run or do I stay?

This is *exactly* what you want to train your horse to do with you. The horse should look to his handler, at her expression and body language, and ask himself: Do I run or do I stay? He must learn to trust that you will make the right decision to keep you both safe. However, trust in a guide does not happen overnight.

You, as a tourist in a foreign land, looked for some evidence of training and hence competence in the form of official-looking certificates and accreditation by the local tourist board before hiring your guide. It’s what we do the world over, isn’t it? We look for some evidence of competence before we entrust our safety to another person.

What evidence can we show a horse of *our* competency?

START WITH “SMALL SCARY”

The easiest way is to set up *slightly* scary situations and demonstrate, through your body language and calm behavior, that you understand the situation and can keep the horse safe. Eventually the trust this instills becomes so strong that even in the



{ ABOVE } FIG. 8.1 A - { BELOW } FIG. 8.1 B



(OPPOSITE) 8.1A & B If Ollie had a choice in this scenario, he'd rather leave **(A)**. I remain reliable and supportive until he decides to stay, then I go soft and release more rope **(B)**. You can see Ollie's hind leg stepping underneath his belly as he turns to face me.

8.2 A & B Ricky is braced and ready to run, but I remain loose and confident next to the obstacle, giving him time to make a decision as to whether to run or stay **(A)**. He decides to stay and walks over the small "bridge" on a loose lead rope **(B)**.



FIG. 8.2 A



FIG. 8.2 B

most bizarre events—where the horse has never seen a decidedly frightening object or anything like it in his entire life—he will look to you and absolutely rely on your judgment (FIGS. 8.2 A & B). As handlers, we'd better get it right, then, hadn't we?

Don't set up situations that are too "big" for you to cope with initially. Better to start,

for example, with one umbrella neatly furled than to introduce five open umbrellas all at once (and in the process find that your horse has a real phobia about them). Enough *unscheduled* frightening moments will come along without you setting them up! Keep early training sessions short and safe so that you are able to stay calm and in control.

STRETCHING THE COMFORT ZONE

As mentioned before, your aim is *not* to terrify the horse so that you can “rescue” him and look like the “good guy.” In fact, once the horse is frightened to the point where he is leaping about, you’ve done too much. Never push the horse to the point where he has to flee. Get him *just outside of his comfort zone* so that he can start learning, but not so far out that he’d rather leave.

The psychology of this is easy to understand if you go back to pretending you are a tourist in Borneo (see p. 69). The plane lands at the airport and you manage to get a taxi to your hotel; there a porter takes you to your room. Once in your room, you immediately create a “home away from home” by unpacking and putting your bits and pieces around. You feel safe in that space and it becomes part of your comfort zone; however, you will not learn anything about Borneo from the safety of that room. You now need to leave it to learn.

After unpacking you head down to the bar and dining room for a bit of refreshment. You leave your new comfort zone and weave through the unknown corridors of the hotel—you are now in your “learning zone” but feel fairly confident because at any time you can return to your room. After a good meal and maybe a glass of wine you soon feel relaxed in the dining room, too: You return to your room quite confident that venturing

out to find breakfast in the morning will be easy. After breakfast you decide to go for a swim. Again you leave the comfort zone to find the pool and how it all works. (Do you need to put a towel on one of the lounge chairs at daybreak to reserve it?) By the end of Day Two you are totally at home within the hotel environs—your comfort zone has “stretched” to include the whole area.

But let’s say on Day Three you decide to catch a bus outside the hotel and go to the beach. After a while you become aware that you are not on the right bus and that it is heading for the “wrong” side of town. Perhaps there are some fairly “hard-looking” youths on the bus. You are now not only out of your *comfort zone*, you’re also well out of the *learning zone* and entering the *fear zone*. You do not learn anything when you are in the fear zone—you are in *flight mode*, and your sole aim is survival.

Where do you want to get back to? The comfort zone, of course, and once there you will quickly calm down and feel safe again. The further you perceive yourself to be from your comfort zone (in other words, the greater the pressure), the greater the wish to return to it. You may well reach a point of being ready to do just about *anything* to get back there.

This is just how it is for a horse. If you watch a group of horses spy something new and unrecognizable in their field, they will establish a comfort zone some distance

from it. They then make little forays towards the object, passing into the learning zone, and gradually expanding it. But they *never* willingly put themselves into the fear and flight zone.

Because horses are naturally curious, they will continue to move backwards and forward towards the new object until they can eventually rest their nose on it and satisfy themselves that the object won't eat them. You can use this very same principle when showing a horse that you are a good leader: Do not push him to a point of panic, but allow him to return to his comfort zone whenever he feels overwhelmed.

SETTING UP SLIGHTLY SCARY SITUATIONS

The following very simple exercise prepares the horse for Horse Agility obstacles—and ultimately the real world. You want the horse to start to look to you as a strong person who can look after him when he's scared, and you want him to learn to follow your lead, looking to you for reassurance.

For instance, if I approach a large tarpaulin spread out on the ground, I want my horse to be curious, interested, and to look at me to check that he is responding appropriately. He will see that I am curious and interested and *not* frightened. If he sees me as a good leader, he will *synchronize* with me (see p. 56).

However, if I grab his halter and urge him forward in a voice that sounds nervous,

EXERCISE

Find out how your horse will react to a new situation by placing a safe but unusual object in his arena or field. Turn your horse loose in the space and watch. Note how he explores the object.

he will perceive that the tarpaulin, which previously he was only curious about, may be dangerous. His curiosity may change to fear and in turn initiate a flight response.

In early training exercises, the aim is for the horse to behave calmly, *not* “frozen,” while ropes, flags, plastic, and umbrellas are moved around him, or as he walks amongst unusual obstacles. The stimuli can become more scary and imaginative as the horse gains confidence in you. But remember, it is important not to get too scary, too quickly! Keep your body language still and soft and almost detached from the obstacle.

“PLAYING” WITH THE LEAD ROPE

Your horse needs to know the difference between you just throwing a lead rope about (amongst other things) and using the rope to ask him to go backwards. For example,

if you wave a fly away from your face while holding the rope in that hand, the horse may not be sure whether that's an indication he should back up or not. He needs to read the intention in your body language to decide what he should do (FIGS. 8.3 A & B).

Before beginning this exercise, I suggest you first practice throwing the lead rope around *without* the horse being there. The last thing you want to do is accidentally hit the horse with the rope. The rope is just a handy thing to start with, not to mention worth getting the horse used to as he'll be on the end of it a fair amount of time he's with you.

1 Ask your horse to stand still and safely bent around to you (see p. 62) while you first throw a lead rope *around* him (not touching him), then along the ground, over his back, round his legs, and swung like a helicopter blade (FIGS. 8.4 A & B). Note: There are two reasons why the horse needs to be bent towards you. First, he needs to be a part of the process and aware of what you are doing; and second, if the horse moves, his hindquarters will step *away* from you rather than in *towards* you. Throw the rope *carefully*: You need to take the "life" out of the throw as it leaves your hand, otherwise the end of the rope may slap onto the horse's body and hurt him. This is also why I cut any leather straps off the end of my lead ropes.

2 If your horse moves as you "play" with the rope, keep going until he stands still. Then, stop immediately. It is important to stop when he stands still so that he is rewarded with your quietness for giving the appropriate response. If the horse becomes more and more agitated, reduce the pressure by just throwing the end of the rope only, but do not stop the rope action completely, or he will learn that when he moves, you stop what you are doing. Consequently, he may think you actually *want* him to move around.

3 When you feel your horse is ready to move on to something else, find another safe object—a ball to kick or bounce, or a plastic bag to shake—and practice the same skills while always keeping the horse safely bent around to you. Once your horse realizes that when something *slightly* scary appears, you are relaxed and able to look after him, he will begin to relax and actually *become* braver. Allow him to be curious about the object and watch his fear turn into fascination!

WHEN THE HORSE IS REALLY SCARED

Because you're going slowly and not overfacing your horse (or yourself), it may come as a surprise one day when you find that the horse has one particular item that just really frightens him. Don't worry. It may be that he was frightened by it as a foal, or he is just of a suspicious nature and isn't going

8.3 A & B Ollie steps back as I open the umbrella, but my relaxed body language and the loose rope tell him that I am not alarmed by either the umbrella or his reaction (A). A moment later he decides it may be safe after all—but notice that his mouth is still tight (B).



FIG. 8.3 A



FIG. 8.3 B

8.4 A & B Throw the end of the lead rope along the ground first (A), then over your horse's back gently (B).



FIG. 8.4 A



FIG. 8.4 B

to quickly “get brave” about something that he’s never seen before.

Let’s say that your horse shows a real terror of plastic bags. You’ve probably seen some people tie a rustling plastic bag on the end of a stick, and then wave it all around their horse’s head without a sign of worry from the horse. Meanwhile, you can’t even

walk into the barn with a plastic bag without your horse running to the back of his stall and refusing to come out. You have two ways of dealing with this.

- The first way is easy: Just don’t let your horse ever see a plastic bag. Then, he’ll never be scared, right? But one day, as you ride or



FIG. 8.5 A

(THIS PAGE & OPPOSITE) 8.5A-C Ollie and I play “advance and retreat” with the big ball—the key is for me advance with the ball, then pull it back before he decides to move away.

walk along the road, caught on the top of the hedge is a plastic bag. Now what? That’s the moment you wish you hadn’t “managed” the plastic-bag situation and instead had got on with *really* helping your horse. Although this book is not about training challenging horses, there are going to be some situations in which your horse is going to need you to help him, and fear of plastic bags is a prime example.

- This brings us to the second option, which is to help the horse overcome this fear. To do this you will use a method called *advance and retreat*.

Advance and Retreat Basics

The principle of advance and retreat is that the handler advances with an object then retreats *before* the horse does, so that the horse never enters the *fear zone* (FIGS. 8.5 A-C). To be good at this takes practice, but



{ ABOVE } FIG. 8.5 B - { BELOW } FIG. 8.5 C



essentially, it means you need to *read* the horse, *gauge* when he's thinking of moving away and *retreat* before he does. This gives the horse the confidence that you are not going to keep blundering by pushing him into flight mode, and that he will only be subjected to as much as he can cope with at that moment.

Note: Once the horse is in flight mode, you cannot communicate with him, so you might as well stop, and start again when he has calmed down: When a horse's adrenaline is up, he cannot learn; it is pointless trying.

- 1 Advance with the “scary” object until the horse is on the edge of moving away, and *just before he does move away*, retreat.
- 2 If he moves away before you retreat, your timing is not quick enough. You now need to observe the horse even more carefully so that you can see when he is *thinking* of leaving, and retreat before he does. If you miss the moment, don't take the object away—gently keep the pressure on until your horse stops leaving.
- 3 If your horse doesn't seem to be getting any better in terms of accepting the object, you are going too fast and need to do less. When the horse seems more settled, start again.


Increase the Horse's Curiosity

Let's return to the plastic bag scenario. If this is the source of your horse's fear, squash the bag into a tiny ball and show it to the horse. He may look away at first, but if you stand patiently, his curiosity will get the better of him, and he'll turn towards the bag.

At that moment, smoothly take it away. By doing this you actually *increase* his curiosity so that when you offer the bag again, he'll be more ready to come and inspect the item.

When Scary Objects Are BIG

- 1 In the case of an object that cannot be moved towards the horse—for example, a heavy log—you need to get clever and you move the *horse* forward and backwards. When the horse sees the log he stops, maybe snorts, and his whole attitude might say, “What the heck is that?” Do not do anything, stand still and calm. Do not touch or talk to the horse. Ignore him unless you need to defend your personal space. Remember your body language and attitude tells him that the log is of no consequence.
- 2 As soon as you feel him relax—even a little—turn him and walk *away* from the log a short distance before turning back towards it. Now I know it may sound crazy, but the reason for allowing the horse to go back on his tracks and *away* from the scary log is to *let*




CASE STUDY


The Arabian Stallion and the Horse Trailer

I used the technique for handling BIG scary objects (see p. 78) when working with a young Arabian stallion that needed to be helped with leading and standing so he could go to shows the following summer.

We always worked in an arena in which the stallion was comfortable, and we were making good progress. One morning as we entered the arena we found that a horse trailer had been parked in the far corner. This was too much for this horse, and he became extremely agitated.



Rather than take him out of the arena or force him to approach the trailer, I leaned on the fence where we were, looked at the view, and waited for him to calm down, which he did after a few minutes. In that time I never gave him any attention. I just showed him with my body language that there was nothing to fear. When he was quiet I started to wander towards the trailer, and the moment I felt the stallion hesitate, I stopped and waited for him to relax, then I turned and we went back towards the gate. Note: I did not go back to the gate until he was relaxed.



I repeated my wanderings and each time I found I was a little nearer the trailer, returning to the gate only when he was relaxed. Within a few minutes we were standing next to the trailer. Not only had the horse never been pushed into his fear zone, he was totally relaxed. This would not have happened if I had put excessive pressure on him. The next day when we entered the arena, the trailer—which was still there—was of no interest.



FIG. 8.5 A



FIG. 8.5 C



FIG. 8.5 B



FIG. 8.5 D

8.6 A–D When you are really struggling to find a way to get your horse to even *consider* nearing an obstacle, don't be afraid to try a number of ideas: You can “shape” the behavior you want by, in this case, placing the horse's foot onto the tarpaulin (**A**); or use a lead horse (**B**); or use food (**C**); or, you can just wait (**D**).

him return to his comfort zone. You don't turn him away when he is scared; you turn when he's relaxed and accepting—thus rewarding him for being brave. Think of the opposite from his point of view: If he becomes relaxed and looks at the log in an interested way, and you ask him to go closer to it, he is being taken further away from his comfort zone and towards his fear zone for giving you quiet behavior—and *that* is not a reward!

3 Now move back towards the log, but do not focus on it. Look to where you want to go—maybe along the path past it. This time you'll probably get a bit nearer to the log before stopping, turning, and backtracking.

4 Repeat the steps above and you will get closer and closer to the big, scary object.

Note: Always make sure you are between the log and the horse, so that if he shies away from it, he won't run into you in his fear.

5 When it looks as if you're probably not going to get past the log during the day's lesson, it doesn't matter (FIGS. 8.6 A-D). Choose a good moment to stop and go back the way you came. Horses don't do this sort of thing to pull one over on their handler. You haven't lost the battle of wills; you will have dealt with the situation in a safe and intelligent manner. The person who growls and hits her horse whenever he gets near the log only tell the horse that logs do indeed create pain and fear and are therefore worth running away from—as soon as they come into sight!