



The Myth of Natural Horsemanship

by Tom Moates

Editor's Note: This is a chapter excerpted from Tom's recently released book, *A Horse's Thought - A Journey into Honest Horsemanship*, available through the Eclectic Mercantile. This chapter was chosen by the LRGAF (LRG Academic Foundation) to begin a new "Horsemanship and Training" section to their academic website: <http://www.lrgaf.org/training/training.htm>

Before going further, I'm compelled to clear the air regarding the term "natural horsemanship" for my own peace of mind, especially since it is pretty much unavoidable given the subject of this book.

I must inform you that natural horsemanship is a myth—it does not actually exist. I know that sounds odd coming from the author of a book and countless articles on the subject. So, let me explain what I mean, and shed some light onto the true nature of those two words strung together before I tackle anything else.

Natural horsemanship is a term that casts such a wide net that it means, at most, very little, and very likely nothing at all. It apparently came into usage when the clinician, Pat Parelli, coined it to try and describe what he was doing with his horsemanship program, and later wrote a book by the same name. The public, which always seeks to categorize people, places, things, and everything else under headings to try and make it all conform to some sense of law and order, scooped it up and lumped a huge spectrum of stuff under it.

On the other hand, it hasn't hurt a whole slew of clinicians and practitioners of every sort to have some umbrella under which to tell the public that what they are doing is new, different, correct, valuable, and basically an innovative deal—whether that was actually the case or not. The "natural" association in the name easily aligns itself with increasingly popular environmentalist ideas, so it grabs the attention and quick endorsement of a growing and financially secure group of people already recycling, driving hybrids, and buying earth friendly dish soap. It is without question the spearhead of a marketing coup with a great many millions of dollars spent to its credit annually. It was so successful that it swiftly and firmly became established in the global marketplace as well.

It reminds me of the term "organic." Some years ago, a few folks coined that phrase to mean that the food they produced was free from pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and other potentially hazardous ingredients. Today, largely due to the fact that organics became such a desirable marketable item fetching high prices and developing wide consumer confidence, the term has been hijacked by big business. These days, thanks it seems to the lobbying efforts of corporations, one may even legally label food "organic" that includes some non-organic

ingredients, which is nowhere close to the original usage. As a descriptive term, it is so diluted now that in fact food must be labeled "100% organic" to actually mean what used to be (and is probably now misunderstood by the buying masses today as) "organic."

Or, take the term "free." I remember when something was free, it meant there was no cost for it. These days, I've got 2100 free minutes on my cell phone that cost me \$120 a month. That's just not the true meaning of free...but here we find ourselves and our language altered by marketing and new usage. So what do we do now? Do we need to say 100% free to mean free?

Back to natural horsemanship. It is just such a misnomer. First of all, there are numerous clinicians that I know that do not call themselves natural horsemen, and loathe the term being used to describe them. However, they get lumped under the heading anyway by their pupils, authors, journalists, and public at-large that externally force the label upon them. Shouldn't they know best what they are and what they do? Then there are also many clinicians that go out of their way to make certain they are associated with natural horsemanship.

"Horse whisperer" is another interesting and very closely related example. Because of the wide audience of the Hollywood film by that name, non-horse people in particular like to apply the term to many horse folk that also are lumped under the natural horsemanship heading. However, to a much larger extent, horse whisperer for some reason developed a somewhat negative connotation among horse folk. It seems generally politically incorrect to use it in horse circles, and one who does use it to describe himself instantly denotes himself as an outsider, even to many natural horsemanship enthusiasts. Perhaps it has to do with one of my all-time favorite clinician quotes from Buck Brannaman, who said something like, "If someone comes up to you and calls himself a horse whisperer, put your hand on your wallet and get away as quickly as you can!" It seems that the general meaning has shifted now, and one who calls himself a horse whisperer is thought to be an obvious fraud.

Then there is the question of the term itself. Just what whispering is actually a part of horse whispering? Maybe some, maybe none. Who knows? It's all very quiet and mysterious.

Natural horsemanship as a compound phrase suffers terribly from this problem. It clearly seeks to describe subjects in the realm of horsemanship, but what is natural about it? I've heard clinicians that didn't like being lumped under the heading argue to distance themselves from it, saying things like, "If you put a halter or saddle on a horse, there's nothing natural about that, is it?"



photo by Terry McCoy



photo by Pam Talley Stoneburner

Good point.

There's another one as well. Many people think the most completely "natural" horses in the world are the mustangs of the American west, but they aren't the least bit natural either. The best book I ever read on that subject is Paula Morin's compilation of 63 interviews with all kinds of people that have extensive personal experience with the wild horses of the Great Basin titled, *Honest Horses* (University of Nevada Press, 2006). She makes an outstanding point that is true but few people seem to realize:

Only the plain and stocky Przewalski's Horse of Mongolia fits the scientifically rigorous definition for a bona fide wild horse.... Regardless of how many generations horses have lived on the range [the American west], feral is the accurate description for them. They are domestic animals that have returned to live in a wild state.

And the fact that horses were re-introduced to North America by the Spanish only a few hundred years ago after a millennium long disappearance from this continent puts them at odds with the natural ecosystem here. It is a relationship thus wrought with difficulties as the horses' grazing habits

destroy the natural balance of the ranges where they populate the regions. They are like kudzu, or starlings, or any other foreign and therefore unnatural visitor to this country that has profound, lopsided, and potentially devastating effects on the truly natural and native species here.

So, if mustangs in the wild, almost universally considered the most natural of all natural horses by the masses, aren't natural, then what in the world possibly can be natural about any modern human horse interaction? Especially those that involve man-made tack, fencing, and tools like flags or crops?

The "natural" derives from Parelli's initial usage of the term, and in particular in his book, *Natural Horse*Man*Ship*. His reason for coining the phrase, he states in that narrative, had to do with describing the method of communicating he was working on between human and horse. He believed his games and pressure-and-release methods were, as he says: "native, instinctive, inborn, inherent, and intuitive." Now therein lies an interesting use of natural. The term natural horsemanship is basically meant to be synonymous with something along the lines of natural communication with horses, or speak Horse, or interact with horses the way they interact with each other in a herd and get more done with them more gently than most other humans do. That I can begin to follow, but in practice now there are such variations out there that still it hardly nails down anything specific. Is Californios style vaquero traditional horsemanship natural horsemanship, for instance? What about someone who trains with a natural horsemanship program and then goes and competes with that horse...can that still be considered natural horsemanship in the incredibly unnatural show ring? You get the idea.

Another misconception that runs rampant, and is eagerly proclaimed by some, is that natural horsemanship is brand new.

First of all, as I said at the top, natural horsemanship doesn't exist.... What is it? Seven games? Switching to a rope halter? Riding a Wade saddle? Pressure and release? Using a

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irritations, particularly noting any time an eye is irritated, tearing, or squinting.

Horses with ERU are at risk for repeated episodes during times of stress, which can include routine vaccination, trailer trips, a heavy clinic or performance schedule, or disease. Any stress compromises immunity, and since this disease is related to the immune system, it can be exacerbated by stress.

Vaccine

There is no approved leptospirosis vaccine for horses, though approved vaccines are available for cattle, pigs and dogs. It is hoped that the incidence of abortions in the Thoroughbred industry might prompt more funding and research toward an equine vaccine. In the meantime, ask your veterinarian if vaccinating your other domestic animals is indicated.

Veterinarians recommend that horse owners minimize contact between wild animals and their horses, including keeping animals away from horses' feed and water sources.

Isolating affected horses, and disinfecting after infected horses, is advised.

Prognosis

Many cases of ERU will respond to aggressive medical therapy if initiated early in the course of the disease. The results will vary depending on the structures affected and on the reversibility of the damage. A delay in treatment is likely to have serious consequences, including blindness, and even blind eyes can continue to have acute painful episodes. Horse owners should treat any eye condition as an emergency and call their veterinarian.

Recognition to Heather Smith Thomas "Moon Blindness" (2007), Erin Ryder "Increased Leptospirosis Abortions . . ." (2007), Barton Rohrbach, et. al. "Effect of Vaccination Against Leptospirosis . . ." (2005), Andrew Matthews "Equine Recurrent Uveitis - An Update" (1999) and Linda Kuhn, DVM.

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round pen? Using a flag? It is indefinable because it isn't static. There is a lack of concrete rules that define natural horsemanship. Working in the most beneficial way with horses possible (if that pitiful turn of phrase puts us somewhere in the realm of natural horsemanship) is a moving target. No two horses are the same. Any one specific method will have incredibly different results between different individuals. Presenting it as A THING that can be understood, defined, and taught, is just wrong. It is, if anything, an overarching kind of approach under which can fall whole ranges of methods, and even some rather harsh ones might be natural horsemanship by some standards if used by the right person at the right time on the right horse.

Second of all, the idea that many of the methods commonly boxed and sold to the public as innovations created recently by some clinicians comprising a totally new revolution in working with horses is likewise misleading. Really exceptional horse folk have existed at times since humans began working with horses. The main difference today is that the discussion about how one gets that good is at an entirely new level. It is a global discussion, and the language of horsemanship is morphing to meet this challenge. But many examples exist to show how the ideas so often now packaged and sold as original breakthroughs have been around for ages.

I was recently watching a PBS documentary on the incredible English upper-class woman turned Montana pioneer,

Evelyn Cameron, when suddenly they mentioned a quote from one of her diary entries that I recognized instantly as what today we would call "desensitizing" a horse. I looked it up. She wrote exactly this on March 26, 1895 (the grammar is forgone a bit in this entry, but the meaning is clear):

"Took the foals down to water. They were frightened of the clothes on the washing line blowing in the wind, therefore I made them go round & round the length of the line. Little grey [foal] was awfully willfully threw itself down & skinned my fingers so I tied them up, put gloves on & broke one at a time. Had hard battle with Figs (iron grey) to get her to go under the line, but got both finally so that they let the clothes flap all round them."

Ultimately, what natural horsemanship is if anything, is a shift in the language of horsemanship. How people change the language of horsemanship at large and share ideas as an attempt to impart ways of improving the horse/human relationship is where some consistency may be found under this heading. But, the frequent application of the term "natural horsemanship" to all kinds of people and methods muddies the waters.

It might be best for those of us seeking a better way to get better with horses to narrow our focus to a clearer understanding of what individuals are really doing with horses. Specifics are truly telling, and it's perhaps best to leave the enormously broad über-headings out of the arena.

I just really needed to say all that once and for all. So back to other stuff.