

Summer Camp with Harry Whitney

By Lasell J. Bartlett



A perceptive, kind, and clear instructor fluent in the language of horses, Harry Whitney sees things from the horse's point of view.

In June 2005 I hauled my eight-year-old Morgan gelding from Vermont to Tennessee for a week-long adult horsemanship camp with Harry Whitney. What a great opportunity: living there, learning there, having my horse and a bunch of horsey friends for company and support.

I went to this clinic with the hopes of finding out how to help my horse, Rusty, to feel better deep inside himself. He's a fine horse, gets along pretty well in most situations, still young at eight, bright, curious, and full of opinions but willing to give them up without much of a discussion. Despite all of his good qualities, he is busy in mind and body, has a worried look to his eye, and seldom comes to a full rest while around people or out among other horses.

I've learned that self-awareness is at the core of improving one's horsemanship and building a stronger, cooperative relation-

ship with one's horse. Harry Whitney encourages a rider to gain insight about her current habits, good or bad, while at the same time guiding her to help her horse feel better about their relationship.

At the camp

On Monday we worked in the round pen, with Harry directing me step by step as I learned to wait for Rusty to make a decision on his own. Allowing a horse to make a decision increases his self-confidence, his sense that he is competent.

My intention that morning was for Rusty to come "hang out" close to me in a relaxed and friendly way. Harry asked me to resist the urge to move him around while he was trying to figure out what I wanted. He encouraged me to refrain from using body language to influence Rusty to come to me.

So I stood in the middle of the round pen watching Rusty and, when directed, waved briefly shook a "flag" (a lightweight rod with a noisy piece of plastic or fabric attached to one end) in the air over my head. Unlike other times when I shook a flag to make a horse move off or face me, this time my activity was purely to get Rusty's attention and stimulate him to wonder, "What does she want?" Each time, I shook the flag for a few seconds, long enough to see that Rusty understood he was to try something new, then waited and watched what Rusty did.

I have come to believe that horses can use their cognitive abilities to problem solve, and given a dilemma, they will look for an answer, and that morning, Rusty started to mentally search, wanting to know why I was shaking the flag. I was acting in an unpredictable way in his eyes, purposely doing something I'd not done before. After he figured out that I did not want him to move away or face me, his curiosity grew. He began to try something different after I shook the flag signaling him to look for something else because he had not found the answer yet. He trotted off to the left, he walked off to the right, he stood with his head over the round pen panels looking off, and he stopped half way across the round pen from me and cocked a foot. These were some of the things he did in response to my shaking the flag. Sometimes it was obvious to me that he was paying attention (an ear turned to me or looking directly at me) and other times it was not obvious, but I never doubted that he was aware of my presence there in the pen with him. When he eventually made the choice to walk quietly toward me, stopping to stand near me in a waiting frame of mind, I figured our time in the round pen was a success. He had done what I wanted, in his own time frame after trying other actions, and I let him rest as his reward for searching and finding.

I learned much about Rusty's subtle (and not so subtle) facial expressions that day – a twitch of a nostril, a glance to the side, an extra wrinkle over an eye – and noticed that his face and body relaxed more and more as he discovered he could try out his own ideas, and by the end he was more willing than ever to stand calmly near me without fidgeting, nuzzling, or glancing off.

Tuesday I asked for help with Rusty's hind feet. He is usually helpful when lifting a foot for me when I trim, but sometimes when he is worried, he will move his leg like he's trying to shake off my hand. I was confident that Harry would help me help Rusty feel less worried and defensive when I was working with his hind feet. Harry did, guid-



Who is supposed to be on the mounting block?! Enjoying a moment of foolishness in the hot, humid weather

ing me to handle Rusty's feet, one at a time, with a thick, soft braid rope about twenty feet long. My goal was that Rusty would remain calm when he felt pressure from the rope, and feel certain that if he yielded in the direction of the pressure, the pressure would lessen. What we experienced that day changed not only his comfort when I have since trimmed him, but also his comfort when horses approach from behind when we are riding on a trail.

Wednesday we rode, and at this moment, I don't recall what we worked on!

But Thursday I recall. Three of us plus Harry were planning to ride in the arena, and all four of us started with some ground work. It was hot, I wanted to ride, and I felt I "should" do some ground work first. I told myself I was checking out how Rusty was listening, but on some level, I already knew. Whatever I asked of him, he dove for a bite of grass in response. I was angry but working hard not to show it. I got more and more bothered. Rusty was getting bothered, too.

I mounted, thinking "OK, things will get better because I'd rather be riding than messing with groundwork right now." But nothing got better, and in fact, I felt progressively frustrated, disappointed, and unsure of what I could do differently. I struggled to figure out what was at the center of the difficulties I was having.

Harry was aware of what was going on even while he was riding a horse and instructing the others in the arena. He kindly offered that if I had any questions, just let him

know. A while later, he directly asked if I wanted help with anything.

At that point, I told him, "Yes, but I didn't know what my question is!" I was aware things didn't feel right (NOT AT ALL!) but I hadn't figured out what was the core issue here. I knew all the detailed questions that came to mind were superficial, like "How can I get a quicker response when I ask for..." forward, back, turn, you name it.

I was growing increasingly aware that I was finding no enjoyment whatsoever in my relationship with Rusty, and that was distressing. I value good relationships. I try to focus on thoughts and activities that support people, and people and horses, to feel good together. And here I was in a hummed-out state with my favorite horse who was NOT at that moment my favorite horse by any means. Nor was I my favorite me! And from all indications, Rusty was as displeased as I was.

So I "sat with the distress." I rode around aimlessly, silently asking myself, "What is going on? What do I really need help with?" Nobody tried to rescue me from my angst, or change how I was feeling. It was all mine



Harry relaxing with auditors. He smiles and laughs a lot.

to figure out. I think the impact was greater because of this. I know Harry trusted me to figure it out, and his trust helped me trust myself to define my elusive question. Once I slowed down and felt how bad I was feeling, how "off center", cranky, and impatient, I was able to find words that described my condition, and then words to form a question so Harry could help.

I wanted to know how to keep it fun and feeling good, even when I had a goal in mind – a problem to solve, a lesson to teach my horse, some expectations for us to fulfill together. For example, backing up with "life" (impulsion) or an effortless transition from halt to a lively walk – really basic stuff that I was struggling with that day in the arena.

Hoof Clinics

Pete Ramey

Farrier, Author, Clinician, AANHCP Instructor

HOOF REHABILITATION SPECIALIST

Learn how to unlock tremendous healing powers in your hooves while avoiding the sensitivity usually associated with barefoot transition. A wealth of information for Veterinarians, Farriers and Horse Owners.

Learn healing methods for:

- Founder & WLD
- Navicular Syndrome
- Underrun Heels
- Brittle, Splitting Hooves
- Thin, Flat Soles
- Hoof Sensitivity

For more information go to www.hoofrehab.com

2005-2006 CLINICS

- Sept 17-18 Ludlow, VT
- Oct 15-16 Minnesota
- Nov 12-13 Mt. Airy, MD
- Jan 28-29, 2006 Gainesville, TX
- Feb 11-12 San Jose, CA
- Feb 25-26 Denmark (closed)
- March 18-19 Melbourne, Australia
- March 25-26 Tasmania, Australia
- April 1-2 Perth, West Australia
- Apr 22-23 Jacksonville, OR
- May 27-28 Helena, MT
- June 10-11 Ontario, Canada
- June 24-25 UK
- July 1-2 UK-Exmoor
- July 22-23 Palmer, AK
- Aug 5-6 Michigan
- Aug 19-20 Boise, ID
- Sept 2-3 Malibu, CA
- Oct 14-15 Harrisonville, MO

Find an AANHCP trimmer in your area at aanhcp.org



Lasell and Rusty enjoying a quiet ride

And in my struggling, I was so intensely focused on trying to do something perfectly, that I lost the pleasant connection I often enjoy with Rusty.

Harry's suggestion was simple. He suggested I alternate between expecting that my horse go along with my idea – essentially do or try to do what I was asking – and that I go along with my horse's idea – basically going along for a ride more as a passenger. I let Rusty be in charge for a short while, paying attention so he wouldn't get us both in trouble by approaching too closely to another horse and rider, for example, but as long as we were safe, he could decide the direction and speed of our travel. As it was extremely hot that week in Tennessee, our travel was slow when it was Rusty's choice. It might be after two strides or ten strides that I switched from letting him think he's in charge to directing him again. I started experimenting with doing this frequently, often, and many, many times. Rusty's idea, my idea, Rusty's idea, my idea.

Harry Whitney's perspective emphasizes that horses are thinking, feeling beings, and in order to get the best from our relationships with them, we need to acknowledge that they have opinions about what we do together, just as we do. When I was handling and riding Rusty with a serious, focused, and critical attitude about how he responded, I failed to give him a moment to enjoy our time together. My approach that day had been "this is what we're working on now and we'll work on it until it's really good." Rusty and I were more successful

– accomplished more and felt good about it – when I took many short breaks from my schooling frame of mind.

What a huge breakthrough for me! Suddenly I was ready to hear such a simple truth: do it both ways, a bit at a time. Not to go along with the horse all the time, nor to prevent the horse from acting on his own ideas all the time, either. I found a reasonable balance between the two – and it is making all the difference to our relationship.

Friday's session was remarkably unremarkable. I easily put into practice what I learned on Thursday. Simultaneously, I was contemplating some of the question and answer times we students shared with Harry after each meal. The lessons that stuck with me were related to some struggles I've had for years. Mentally, it all seemed to come together that day with these particular points from Harry:

Don't be critical of your horse.
Don't hurry your horse; give him time to think for himself.

I'm not sure those were Harry's words exactly, but the essence is what I took home from this week in Tennessee. Although I was sad to leave, the best part of the adult learning camp experience came later. Once home, I spent time with each of my horses, experimenting with the attitude and skills I'd learned.

After the camp

I started going out alone on Rusty for trail

rides, something I'd never dared before. In the past I had been fearful of his bucking and bouncing toward home as fast as he could when he got too worried about a rock or a bridge or a shadow across the trail. After my time with Harry, I practiced waiting for Rusty to feel OK about proceeding down the trail if he started to get anxious.

First this meant I had to recognize and accept when he was worried about something. I had to see and feel his worry (head up, eyes and ears and mind "glancing" back toward home, breath shallow, stride shortening, back tense) and allow him to stop and regain calmness before I asked him to move forward again. This required that I give up my hurry to get something done. In exchange I gained confidence that we can stay emotionally connected and ride down a trail together in a safe way. I let him decide for himself that he was safe, which helped him gain confidence in my judgment and in his own decisions.

I had to monitor myself closely (and still do) so I could develop these new habits to support my commitment to use what I learned from Harry, especially patience (don't hurry) and acceptance (don't be critical). Rusty still worries at times, but has many more times of peacefulness, walking along with his head low, body rhythmically swinging, willing to follow my suggestions in a relaxed manner. I'm confident Rusty would agree with my latest self-assessment of what I've learned: I'm a better horse owner! 🍷



Lasell and Rusty at a recent fundraising trail ride to benefit High Horses Therapeutic Riding Program in Wilder, Vermont

About the author:

Lasell Jaretzki Bartlett, MSW loves horses! She is a licensed clinical social worker and a therapeutic riding instructor certified by NARHA, and she works at a NARHA certified riding program. She believes it's our nature to get along, and does what she can to help horses and humans develop the best relationships imaginable. She lives in Vermont with her husband, their horses, and an array of farm animals. She can be contacted at lasell@lasell.org or 802 274 2380.

More information about Harry Whitney is on his website: www.harrywhitney.com. Most of his clinics are designed to be intensive residential learning experiences, with room and board on site, and mealtime sharing integrated with improving one's horsemanship.