

Holistic Training for Horse and Handler: Foundation Notes

What's 'holistic'?

The holistic approach to training means recognising that both horse and handler / rider (we will say 'handler' from now on) are basically comprised of five separate functional aspects, all of which must work in harmony together to get the best results. They are:

- Body
- Heart
- Mind
- Soul
- Spirit

Of these, it's easier to separate the function of the 'body' aspect than the others, as it's so much more obvious! However, never forget that they *all* interact and inter-react. Anything which affects any one of these areas, for good or bad, has a knock-on effect on all the rest of them, for horse and handler alike. Anything which affects the horse affects the handler; anything which affects the handler affects the horse. Handler and horse should be one holistic unit, working *together*.

Body

Accept that no horse and no handler has a perfect body. Obviously some are much better than others, but no-one's perfect. Also accept that any body - horse's or handler's - can almost always be improved. (They can also be damaged!)

There's a limited amount that can be done to change the *skeletal* structure of the mature horse or handler for the better, and a huge amount that can change it for the worse! So be careful with the body - it's the only place you *have* to live.

Muscles, tendons, skin, hooves / nails, general health etc. can pretty much always be improved. It's not always *easy*, but it's always *simple*. Don't confuse the two.

Illustration: getting out of bed in the morning. A simple procedure in terms of movements and co-ordination, but not always easy. Another: getting to sleep. Simple: shut eyes, switch brain into neutral, relax body, go to sleep. Easy? Not necessarily.

Things which affect the body:

- Structure / conformation
- Suppleness / flexibility
- Fitness
- Health (injury / disease)
- Co-ordination
- Balance
- Readiness for work / action (warmed up and stretched)

Never forget the importance of 'readiness for work'. No sportsman will give of his best without enough warming-up and stretching exercises before performance. Educated competition riders will always spend time warming up their horse before competing. So don't expect your *in-hand* animal (of any age) to give of his best in the show ring without warming up and stretching first. The average in-hand animal will need *at least* 20 minutes warming-up and stretching before going into the ring.

You, too! If the handler isn't also warmed-up and stretched, the handler's performance will adversely affect the horse's performance. In fact, not only "you, too" but "you, *first*." The handler must be 'warmed up' (in body, heart, mind, soul, and spirit) *before* warming up the horse. Don't expect the horse to deal with *your* 'issues' - it's *your* responsibility as a handler to make sure your own bases are covered before you start work on your horse's. (Once you have a true 'give and take' partnership with your horse, your horse *can* help you deal with your own issues. Not only *can*, but *will want to*. But that's for later.)

Heart

'Heart' is where the simple emotions are. Love, fear, anger, etc. They're *simple* aspects of the whole, but often not *easy* to deal with for the basic reason that they *are* 'simple' - you can't easily break them down into bite-sized pieces. It's important to recognise them, and to accept how they affect the whole horse (and handler.)

Heart is one half of the basic communication foundation of heart-and-soul. Communication starts in the heart and soul, and only then progresses through mind into body. Do not attempt to lie to your horse! For a horse, deception means untrustworthiness. If your body language, movement, words and 'aids' don't match what's in your heart and soul, your horse is *likely* to view you as a potentially dangerous psychopath, because he knows he can't trust the sincerity of your communications. You might well get *compliance* (you're possibly holding a gun to his head, in human terms), but you're unlikely to get *trust*. Contrariwise, what's in your horse's heart and soul *will* be accurately reflected in what his body language is telling you. Learn to recognise your horse's body language - it's a highly complex language with tiny clues which horses recognise in each other instinctively, but humans have to learn.

Illustration: my youngster frequently responds to a 'friendly contact request' (crest-scratching, shoulder-scratching, neck-hugging, body contact [cuddle]) by tipping his ears slightly back and swinging his quarters round to me. There's no wrinkling of the skin above the nostrils, and there's no suggestion of 'pre-kick' tension. So, he's not being either aggressive or rejecting. All he's doing is telling me he has an itchy tail and would like it scratched, please! It's a kind of 'Yeah, yeah, I can do all the lovey-cuddly bit, but for God's sake, woman, scratch the itch first!' (Horses are a little like men ... mostly uncomplicated and with clear-cut priorities.)

Mind

'Mind' implies thought. Mind is about the 'basic smarts' that your horse has - his learning ability. Some are naturally smarter than others, but a horse *is* a thinking animal, although where there is any suspicion of danger he's likely to go 'flight or fight' rather than 'think' as a first option. Most horses learn *much faster than you think*, so make sure that he's learning what you *want* him to learn, and not how to avoid doing what you want! If you have the slightest suspicion that what he's *actually* doing is sussing out how best to evade, immediately distract him by switching to something else - preferably something you both enjoy doing. Horses are easily distractable - they live in the 'now'.

Most domestic horses have far too few challenges and games. You can encourage your horse's thinking abilities by presenting him with 'toys' and challenges in an environment he's happy with and considers basically safe. A challenge can be an obstacle or series of obstacles placed across one of his usual trackways around his grazing area. For basic challenges, smooth branches or tree trunks placed at stride intervals or multiples of stride intervals will encourage mental and physical agility. For more complex challenges, criss-cross the branches so he has to *assess* the obstacle and *think* about what to do with his feet.

Take time to watch your horse in his natural environment. Do remember that a horse's natural environment is not a stable. Nor is it a flat stretch of immediately accessible ad-lib (junk food) 'improved' grass-and-nothing-but-grass. The best of all natural environments will present your horse with challenges such as 'how to reach the blackberries right at the top', 'how to get back out of the bramble patch again', 'how to deal with bog', 'how to climb up and down slithery or loose stony surfaces'. *Watch* how he thinks; *watch* what he can do when he has a reason for doing it. *Remember* how he thinks; *remember* what he can do. (Read up on the 'paddock paradise' system of grazing. If you possibly can, get that type of grazing going. Your horse will benefit massively in many ways.)

Illustration: my ultra-smart and athletic youngster will stand on his hind legs to reach the top blackberries. He has a 'personal mega-reason' for doing so: an absolute passion for blackberries! This isn't 'evasive rearing', it's *constructive*, controlled, precise, balanced elevation and massive engagement of the hindquarters - and it's a delight to see. This is a good example of mind and body working together. He will have no *physical* problems in the future with jumping, piaffe, passage, flying changes, canter pirouettes, levade, etc. All we need to do is teach him to produce the elevation / engagement *on request*, when he's *ready* for it.

The mind of the *handler* is a much more complex issue. Most people do far too much *thinking* when handling animals, and not enough *observing, assessing, and acting*. You do need to use your own mind to make allowances for things in the environment which your horse is likely to react to, but try not to think so far ahead that you lose sight of what is happening *now!* Your horse lives mostly in the 'now'; strive to do the same. Wherever you are, *be there* - not in some virtual reality inside your own head.

Handling your horse while your mind's on totally unrelated issues is counter-productive. You will confuse your horse and lose his trust, because your body can't help reacting to what's going on in your mind, and your horse will read your *body*. If you're reacting to things which *aren't there*, as far as your horse is concerned your leadership abilities leave a lot to be desired. You're probably delusional - except that horses don't understand 'delusional'. The nearest they can get is: 'irrational, untrustworthy, psychopathic, maybe dangerous' - they *do* understand *that* concept, so beware.

Soul

'Soul' is where the *complex* emotions, responses, and horse / handler interactions are, and it's part of the 'communication foundation' of heart-and-soul. It's where trust / mistrust, resentment / acceptance, spiritual wellbeing / depression, etc. all have their roots. Not an easy one to categorise, but of vital importance in the 'whole' of both horse and handler. Soul is where your horse keeps his extrovert-introvert balance, and where his own balance of instincts lies. (If faced with a danger, most horses opt for 'flight' as a first option. Some will opt for 'fight' - not many, and it rather depends on current circumstances. Very few will opt for 'freeze' or 'fool about' as a response. Always be aware that some horses in some circumstances *may* opt for these unusual responses; be alert to 'soul reactions' in your horse.)

Spirit

All non-body energy starts in spirit. Sense-of-fun, joy, delight, showing off (and the reverse of all these) is in spirit. If your youngster consistently light-heartedly messes about, plays games with pretending to be scared of things, clearly 'laughs' at the idea of playing mind-games with you, don't be frustrated, be delighted! This kind of spirit is the sort which lets you in to the learning functions for all sorts of 'advanced training'. You can present any new lesson to the 'fun-spirited horse' as a new game to play - and he will learn fast and delight in the learning. (Tip: Using the right kind of music while you work often opens all the 'spirit doorways'.)

A handler who can laugh and have fun is a joy to teach. Fits of the giggles are constructive!

That's it, as far as 'holistic' goes.

Performance Fundamentals

'Performance' isn't simply 'competition work'. It's all about you and the horse learning how to 'do tasks' (play games, simple or complex) when you as the handler ask for them.

Throw Out The Trash: (things to delete from your mental vocabulary)

- ❖ "Outline"
 - Apparent shape is no good without *self*-carriage. So replace "outline" with "carriage".
- ❖ "On the bit"
 - It was a *mis*-translation in the first place! It should have been "on the *aids*" i.e. attentive to the handler's requests. It does NOT mean 'tied in by the nose / mouth', over-bent, and asked / coerced to adopt an incorrect posture. Replace "on the bit" with "in *self*-carriage, attentive, responsive" and you'll be moving in the right direction.

The performance fundamentals of the horse break down into three separate categories.

- ❖ The FAT Formula:
 - Flexibility (mental and physical)
 - Attitude (acceptance / attentiveness)
 - Trainability
- ❖ 'Basic' mode:
 - *Moving forward, free, straight and in self-carriage*
 - Your horse will never be able to excel in *any* discipline until he is capable of this!
The purpose of physical warming-up is all about ensuring that this 'fundamental' is OK before asking for 'work'.
- ❖ The CRSIB 'Working' mode:
 - Carriage, Rhythm, Suppleness, Impulsion and Balance
 - Mnemonic: CRSIB = "Clearly Really Super In Bed"

Every aspect of performance training of the horse, at every level, relies on the quality of these three fundamentals.

As far as the rider is concerned, we are also looking for *self*-carriage, co-ordination, and balance. The rider *must have* a truly independent seat. If you're using your hands and legs to hang on with, how can you possibly use them for subtle communication?

Your horse can feel a *fly* land on his head, his back, or his flank - he can sure as heck feel the effect of your hands, legs, back and seat. The 'unresponsive' horse, provided that the heart-mind-soul-spirit combination isn't badly affecting him, is almost always suffering from *too much input*. That's *your* fault, not his.

There's no need to 'shout' with your aids. If your horse *appears* to be 'dead to the hand' or 'dead to the leg', it's quite simply that your hands and legs have become *meaningless* to him, so he tunes them out. He *chooses to ignore you* out of simple self-preservation. To re-instate his responsiveness, all your communications must be *meaningful*. That means *intentional*, not accidental or incidental. As far as use of the aids goes, less is more, and small is beautiful.

Watch a performance of the Spanish Riding School, and compare it to any number of alleged-advanced-dressage tests. You'll see, in the latter, some truly atrocious 'obvious' riding, and (as a result) horses producing some really horrible stilted parodies of the genuine movements.

And, from here on in, it's all about 'hands-on' practical work.