

Pass the Torch

By Barbara Molland

In 1954, Ronald Duncan wrote the following quotation for the Horse of the Year Show in England:

"Where in this wide world can man find nobility without pride, friendship without envy or beauty without vanity? Here, where grace is laced with muscle, and strength by gentleness confined. He serves without servility; he has fought without enmity. There is nothing so powerful, nothing less violent; there is nothing so quick, nothing more patient. England's past has been borne on his back. All our history is his industry. We are his heirs, he our inheritance. Ladies and Gentlemen – the Horse!"

The history of people and horses goes back a long, long way. Often, in this modern world we inhabit, a world in which horses are no longer "necessary," I think about the way that having horses, riding horses, and spending time with horses provides people with a broader landscape, a glimpse into everyday life that offers more than concrete, cars, and other human beings. This rich historical connection to living things outside of, but complimentary to, the world of people is vitally important to us in ways that psychologists are just beginning to understand. Interacting with horses forces us to "get outside ourselves," a common therapeutic suggestion directed toward ego-driven individuals...and there are many of us.

Of necessity, to be truly successful, the good trainer or horseback rider must "think like a horse." In other words, he must move outside his human mind by getting into the horse's mind. This essay will try to explore these ideas to show why horses provide elements, ancient in their origins yet increasingly missing in modern life, that are critical to our emotional and mental health – and why our children, especially, can benefit from this.

Like most consuming human passions, love of the horse oftentimes begins in childhood, when impressions are most vivid and the human mind



Photo by Andrea Whiting

Love at first sight

and heart are open to experience. With population growth and a disappearance of rural life, coupled with the rise of industry over agriculture, people have begun to abandon the natural world. Inevitably, this characteristic of our economy makes exposure to animals harder to find. Another direct link to our shift in culture from a once agrarian civilization to an industrialized nation is lifestyle choices. For instance, if a child who lives in suburbia has never spent time around horses on a daily, weekly or even monthly basis, where does an interest in horses develop? Despite this apparent lack of daily opportunity, something curious happens when children are given riding lessons or when they are exposed to horses in other ways. It's as though some bell goes off inside them, something that resonates from deep within their psyches, and they become forever passionate about horses. Give a child a pony ride at the fair and the pilot light has been lit, meaning that whenever the opportunity presents itself to give that spark a bit more fuel, the fire once

again starts to roar. That time might be after college, might be in the forties when income allows, or it might be after retirement, but it never seems to die out completely, simmering there on the back burner of life. Entire families can follow this pattern. It sometimes skips generations, but the hidden interest is always there, ready to flare into being.

Clearly, something unusual is going on here. This isn't like an interest in collecting stamps or doing crossword puzzles or playing video games. It's beyond that, almost as if our subconscious is anchored in an earlier time. A former world, that can't be forgotten, in which horses and their partnership with people represent powerful elements from the past, a memory. Similar to an indelible image, such as the primitive horses painted on the cave walls of Lascaux, France, a story of the horse exists and it has been handed down through the ages, reappearing again and again in artistic expression from prehistoric times until the present. It is certainly possible that

horses kindle in humans a reminder of the nearly forgotten ties that human beings share with not only other animals but with a living landscape – a landscape that at one time was more in harmony with itself. Perhaps, this ecological explanation, one that benefits everyone, derives from



Paleolithic painting discovered at Lascaux, a cave of southwest France, in the Dordogne River Valley

a human desire for landscape that resembles the Kentucky Bluegrass region, or the western prairies of our country, more than it does Fifth Avenue in New York City or Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles.

The child's interest, however, often moves beyond this to a more complex understanding, revealing the strength and power in the relationship between human and horse. This is especially evident in the case of a horse like the American Saddlebred, a horse which connects us both energetically and thrillingly, providing a spark of shared vitality between horse and rider. It is that evolved partnership that makes both rider and horse more than either could ever be separately. Can children sense this? I think they do, and I believe it is one reason why they remain so courageous in their relationships with horses. Witness a Five-Gaited juvenile class at Louisville –it's like a Roman chariot race! This discovery of courage that a child finds in herself or himself will in future years play itself out in many scenarios beyond the horse/human partnership as the child matures.

For myself, even as an adult there is that moment when, placing my left foot in the stirrup, my right foot leaves the ground, and in that very moment, I am no longer just a human being but something much greater. As I settle in the saddle, I leave my "self" behind. I give

myself over to the trust between horse and human, the trust that forces me to get outside myself in this partnership, a partnership found in really no other way with another animal. It is that thrill that resonates with every rider of a spirited horse, reminding us of a much earlier time when we were not so detached but closer to the pulse of life.

The contemporary British poet, Ursula Fanthorpe, expresses in her poem, "DNA," lost nobility in horses as well as in people:

*Sometimes, in a foal's crest,
you can see
Some long-extinguished breeding.
So in us,
The high-rise people
and the dispossessed,
The telly idols, fat men in fast cars,
Something sometimes reverts to the
fine dangerous strain
Of Galahad the high prince,
Lancelot the undefeated,
Arthur the king.*

In those words we have an adult appreciation of the way in which the nobility of the past can be seen in



Brooke MacKenzie in Wasilla, Alaska, with Triple Latte

both horse and in the human willing to ride and become one with it. It is our willingness to participate in that shared world that goes to the heart of its importance. Just as the willingness to partner with the horse once gave advantage to cavalry over soldiers on foot, today that partnership serves as a reminder of the shared genetics of living things. It is recognition of our own wildness, so fittingly paired with that of our horse, fearsome in its power, and at its best when there is trust and a

lively respect on both sides. Invariably, I must trust my horse as much as he trusts me, and if after many hours, weeks, and months of riding the trust is there, it is not far different than my relationships with the people in my life. Family and friends also must trust and depend on me, but not in the same mysterious way that transcends the barrier between such radically different animal worlds as the one between human and horse.

This longing, this hunger for a more complete and balanced world extends obviously beyond the immediate partnership between a horse and its owner. It requires its own dream of place or the landscape in which that partnership exists, and in this place it becomes the salve, the ointment to cure the topsyturvy world that humans are capable of creating for themselves. Just look at the popularity of the movie *Seabiscuit*, a film in which the horse represents victory against all odds. Was it that people related to the characters escape from the dashed hopes of depression-era economics, or was it the recovery and freedom from the addictions of alcohol? Indeed, it was both and it was *Seabiscuit* that served as the catalyst for such celebration of honesty, hard work, and courage in the face of intimidation and perseverance.

Look at the attraction of the American West to American men. They will abandon their high rise offices on Saturday for the chance to be a part of it and risk learning to ride at fifty if it gives them the right to wear a cowboy hat, boots, and chaps – those symbols of a time and a place when all appeared right with their masculine world. Europeans feel the same way. On any given weekend, our local western saddle shop in the little village of Pt. Reyes Station, California is literally crammed with German speaking tourists, all there to buy a Stetson hat, boots, and a slicker. When I recently attended a concert in London, England, the European audience went absolutely berserk when the song "Desperado" played, complete with scenes on the overhead video screen of dusty streets, cacti, and the American West in all its glory. As Americans, we may not be the most popular people these days, but put us on a horse and all is forgiven; barriers are removed

Tied closely to this is the horse as a symbol of freedom. The wind-battered ponies on the wild moors of Scotland or the fluent moves of a startled herd of mustangs in the Ruby Mountains of Nevada, speak to the human admiration of freedom, to a human desire to participate in the wildness represented by those scenes. When the view of the Sierra Nevada or the Grand Tetons is enhanced from the back of a horse, it reflects the freedom and serenity we cherish.

If any of this is true, it has far-ranging implications for those of us who wish to keep horses in our lives and in the lives of our children and



Best friends from the start

grandchildren. You may ask how this applies to the show ring, to show pleasure horses, to country pleasure horses, to dressage, and jumping horses. It applies because in some ways, this is one of the last places to express in front of others the electricity between rider and horse. When the crowd roars for an extraordinary gaited horse in the show ring, that is a celebration of freedom; that is a celebration of the spirit of horse and rider found perhaps nowhere else these days. Vanity? Maybe for some, probably for most, but we all understand when we witness the music and the art between horse and rider. When the crowd cheers for the juvenile rider in total harmony with her energetic mount, that is a celebration of freedom and beauty. When the horse is as alive and finely tuned as the human on its back, when it is lightly shod, ears forward, stripped

of artificiality, fearless, comfortable – that is a thing of greater beauty in my mind than when a thoroughbred outruns its track mates at Saratoga. Why? Because this partnership is the story of everyone, the story of every child, the one that has come down to us through the ages, the story of the potential and the magic of a human being and a horse, together.

We have a great responsibility before us to honor the horse we have inherited and to continue to encourage the children in our lives to pursue their dreams. The world they both inherited is in as much danger of disappearing as the riding trails that once connected the far flung ranches of the county where I live in California. I also believe that each of us fundamentally recognizes what we need to do. We must protect the places where horses are raised, used, and shown by being active in our communities when it comes to zoning regulations. We must make it possible for children to be exposed to the joys

of being around horses, not just for the thirty minute lesson on Saturday but for grooming horses, cleaning their stalls and paddocks, and handling them more from the ground than from their backs. We must work and help to sponsor programs to support trails for horseback riding, keeping our national, state, and county parks open to equestrian use. This and these places are where most people will be exposed to horses, and it will be in these familiar ways that young people will learn the ways of horses and gain the courage to recognize that the spirit of a horse does not run counter to the heart of its rider, but is a freedom and a power to be shared. Yes, the American Saddlebred horse, as we say in our marketing, will take us to this special place, wherever we wish to go, to the mountains, to the show ring, to the dressage arena, to the hunt course, but most importantly, it will take us to our dreams. It will take us there...if only we pass the torch. **as**



Photo by Christy Huffman

Sharing Secrets