

PLAYING WITH HORSES In the Dargle Valley

Heard the whispers that there is a woman in the Midlands who can communicate with horses? Penny Milner-Smyth went in search of her and found a “natural horsewoman” who makes no attempt to maintain an air of mystery about her talents. In fact, Carlene Bronner’s mission is to pass her skills and knowledge on to you.

I’ve been terrified of horses for as long as I can remember. As a child I recall praying for a safe end to a ‘berg horse trail when a staid steed turned into a missile on the descent. Years later, a skiing accident that left me with an armfull of metal pins provided what I thought was a perfect excuse never again to engage in dangerous downhill activity.

So when I recently found myself running and sliding down a hill surrounded by the proverbial thundering of hooves and feeling exhilarated, you have to know that it was an experience made possible by only the most remarkable of interventions.

It had begun raining just as a morning spent under the guidance of Midlands natural horsewoman Carlene (Carl) Bronner ended, and we had run up a hill to fetch a herd of grazing mares and foals that needed to be taken down to their stables.

At Old Kilgobbin farm in the KwaZulu Natal Midlands’ Dargle Valley, Carl introduces small groups of visitors to the internationally acclaimed Silversand method of natural horsemanship. Here, over the course of three to four hours, you will acquire the basic knowledge and skills required for engaging with horses on the ground, rather than on their backs. Your first task could be to lead the horse allocated to you in a figure of eight around two of the barrels in a paddock that resembles a giant playground. As you soon realise, no amount of tugging and pulling, or whispering for that matter, is going to get a suspicious 600 kg Friesian to do your bidding.

By the end of the training, you will be standing in the centre of an arena with your horse “at liberty” (without halter), successfully instructing it to circle, stop, change direction, come to the centre, walk backwards to the perimeter and circle again – using only body movement and gesture.

In the few intervening hours you will learn that communicating with horses (rather than coercing them) has got nothing to do with whispering and everything to do with horse play!

As you work with your horse, Carl teaches you to think like a horse. In a uniquely expressive way, she teaches you about its genetic and emotional make-up, about the structure of the horse brain and visual system, about what motivates a horse.

Central to an appreciation of the psychology of the horse is an understanding that it is a prey animal, one that sees humans as the ultimate predator.

You learn that by playing with a horse in the same way as its mother would, you can establish a trust relationship that enables you, with gesture and body movement alone, to direct the action of a horse.

Through the practice of a series of games based on prey animal logic (with intriguing names like the friendly game, the porcupine game, and the yo-yo game), you learn to convince your horse through your behaviour that you are not a predator.

The techniques used in the games then become the tools that you use to get your horse to perform whatever task you give it – without the use of force or intimidation.

As a horse attaches meaning to your every movement, success at the tasks requires that you become aware of what you unwittingly communicate through your body language. You have to learn to match your expression with your intention. And in this way, you learn about how you come across to others.

When Carl is asked what aspect of offering the “HorsePlay” sessions gives her the most satisfaction, she describes the reward of seeing self-awareness develop amongst participants. The personal insights that some have are so profound that Carl regularly runs leadership courses on which groups learn the skills of motivation and persuasion through groundwork with horses.

I left Carl with that feeling of wonder and accomplishment that only comes from succeeding at something one could never have imagined doing. And for the first time I understood what Winston Churchill meant when he said, “There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man”.