

## **HorsePlay** by Petra Vandecasteele

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"Do we bring our helmets?" I ask Carlene 'Carl' Bronner, our host and trainer, as I book a "HorsePlay" session at Old Kilgobbin farm near Howick.

"No", she says. "You're not going to ride any of my horses".

"Oh," I mumble.

Silence. I wonder what else we could possibly do.

"You will spend the whole morning playing with the horses at ground level, and you won't even notice you haven't ridden them," Carl assures me. And indeed, I'm in for the experience of a lifetime.

In Natural Horsemanship you appeal to the instincts and herd mentality of the horse, using body language and other forms of gentle pressure with increasing escalation to get the horse to respond. The method results in a great partnership between the horse and you.

Our lesson is planned for 09h00, but we're all ready by 08h00. We have spent the night in one of Carl's delightful cottages and Enya, our daughter, can't contain her eagerness, so I decide to take a chance and see if we could perhaps start an hour earlier. I knock on Carl's door, but am immediately sent away with a polite, but firm, "We start at nine." This woman is determined and the energy I feel emanating from her pushes me backwards and out of sight. Little did I know that I've just received my first lesson in leadership...

Carl's farm is immaculate. Even Prudence, her unbelievably fat potbellied pig, is as clean as a pin. Her black coat is crisp and has a pleasant, fresh smell. On the way to the horses, we come across two ponies. "Can we ride them?" Enya wants to know. Carl distracts her by telling her how she brushes their thick fur at the end of winter. "Quite a lot of hair comes off, but when we go to collect it the next day, it's all gone. The birds have used it for nesting."

As soon as Enya and James see the four gigantic Friesian horses that we are going to be 'playing' with, they forget all about the ponies and run to meet them. Each weighs about 750kg and I urge the children to put on their boots. We each get a horse and she introduces them all to us individually. I will be playing with Willow. "Have a good look at your horse and identify a feature that will allow you to recognise it," Carl says. As far as I am concerned, they're all black, so what now? She helps me find a distinctive feature, like a bigger head, and also makes sure we know their gender, something the children find utterly amusing.

"Horses know that you eat meat. When you work with a horse, remember that it is a different animal from you. They are the prey, we are the predators," Carl says. I never thought of it like that. "What do predators do in the wild?" she asks Enya, who replies: "They run, jump at the throat and bite to kill".

“And how do most humans approach a horse? By touching its head,” Carl continues. She tells us that we shouldn’t invade the ‘private space’ between their shoulders and their mouths and instead just touch their sides or their backs.

“Dealing with horses is really all about good manners. You don’t walk up to someone, grab them by the collar and make them work for you. The same applies to horses. You greet them and ask them to follow you. You ask permission to touch them,” she continues. I realise that I’m an awfully ill-mannered horse lover. Carl teaches us how to recognise if your horse likes you and if it’s comfortable with you. We are told to caress our horses all over, including their tummies. “Lift the tail. If it’s nice and loose, it means the horse is relaxed. You can also see if your horse is comfortable with you from the relaxed position of its legs”. Part of the tail lifting is to check if there are any ticks around the anus and to remove them. And, yes, it’s my lucky day. I have the pleasure of removing two ticks, but also the opportunity to discover how clean horses are.

Obviously horses need guidance, but until now I haven’t understood the real meaning of being a leader. “There can only be one leader. In a group of two, either the horse or you, are the leader,” Carl says. I ride once a week and only now realise that I’ve never really paid attention to my horse. If I did, I would have noticed how its ears turn to monitor a worrying sound, or how its eyes follow something that moves in the background. Horses have 360 degree vision, but to be a good leader, I need to spot potential hazards first.

“The leader must always anticipate danger and be aware of everything that happens around or behind them”, Carl explains. “With horses, there are no grey areas. You’re in control or you’re not, and your body language says it all. And your horse is quite correctly going to check you out. It will be thinking: ‘There are lions all around us. Is this person going to save me or are we going to die? I need to be sure I can leave my life in their hands. If not, better run for it and save my ass”.

I love Carl’s use of plain language; it enables me to tune into her common sense. “Enya’s horse will think: ‘This thing here is tiny, but she seems to be in control. There’s no-one else to save me from the monsters but she seems to be okay. So let’s trust her and follow her to escape a certain death.’ Or ‘That guy seems nervous, surely there’s something to worry about. Let’s run!’ “

Natural horsemanship is really about horse psychology. So we learn how to behave as horses would. If one horse wants another to move, it will push it from the back, not pull it from the front. We also learn to clearly show the horse what we want it to do. The technique will not only get a horse to move, but also improve your results with people. It’s like the difference between saying ‘Would you mind moving’, or ‘Step aside, you’re in my way’.

Natural horsemanship is like working with an invisible rope. The rope is your body language and the energy you use to let the horse know what you want. To make a huge horse like Willow move without touching him is a very empowering experience. I never expected Willow to accept my invitation to come to me or to walk backwards, just by showing him what I wanted from him, let alone make him step on a box, walk around it or jump over barrels, all of which I achieved before the end of my first session with Carl. It just shows that voluntary participation works so much better than enforcement.

“You shouldn’t spend time with your horse only when you want it to do things. Take the time to just be with it without always wanting something,” Carl concludes.

Carl doesn’t want to be called a horse whisperer. “There’s nothing mystical about horses; they are too grounded,” she says. She also doesn’t believe that horses talk to you or react to the colours that you wear. I like that too. I find too often urban people have a romanticised view of nature.

Carl bought the farm and her first horse in 1996. “ I wanted to breed one horse for myself, but in no time things got out of hand and we had more horses than we’d anticipated. This is partly because people don’t buy foals , they want three-year-olds.” But an adult Friesian costs around R50 000. Carl has worked out an interesting formula, however: buy the horse when it’s a one year old for R25 000 and leave it at Old Kilgobbin until it’s three years old. The horse will pick up the social skills of the herd and you can book training sessions with it. In this way you can spread the total cost over two years and be part of your horse’s early life.

I look at Enya and can read her mind...would her pocket money be enough for a deposit on the foal she’s fallen in love with? In just one morning, I have learnt so much. Not only about horses, but also about dealing with people and about my leadership skills. There are many analogies with social and working environments. We need to be more straightforward if we want to be understood, and see things happen. Now I also understand the dynamics of leadership. It’s not about imposing your will on subordinates, but about answering their need for guidance.