

Learning Leadership from Horses by Suren Naidoo

The Mercury, February 4 2009

It may be a growing new attraction for the popular Midlands Meander tourist route of Kwa Zulu-Natal, but natural horsemanship- more romantically referred to as “horse whispering”- is becoming in vogue in different corners of the world in the corporate leadership coaching and team building arena.

While this may seem like horsing around or perhaps a bit whimsical, this is serious business for the people behind the programme at HorsePlay – a quaint Friesian stud on Old Kilgobbin Farm in the Dargle Valley. The venture- spearheaded by charismatic owner and horse breeder Carlene Bronner and the tomorrowtoday.biz consultancy – is situated just 30 minutes outside Pietermaritzburg.

Bronner partnered with friends and corporate coaching consultants Keith Coats and Barry Bramley, the directors of tomorrowtoday.biz, to bring the ideas and lessons of natural horsemanship to the South African corporate and business sector. Passing fad or not, the unique horse whispering experience has added to the extensive and growing tourism bouquet offered by the Midlands Meander, which is regarded as one of the most successful tourism routes in Africa.

Now HorsePlay is bringing dozens of big spending corporate visitors- from JSE- listed company bosses to entrepreneurs and professionals- to the midlands, with the economic spin off of boosting local cottage industries and hospitality establishments. Bronner has 55 horses on her stud farm after buying her first horse at the age of 32. Now in her forties, she never imagined an equine career, but when she and her husband decided to move out of the city into the country a decade ago, she decided to take up her childhood dream. She trains Friesians, a breed from Holland that is said to be once been William the Conqueror’s horse of choice, using methodology of Silversands Horsemanship, Jonathan Fields Horsemanship and Mark Rashid. Together with tomorrowtoday.biz, Bronner has developed a unique one-day programme, where corporates can learn more about Savvy Leadership skills.

Having studied under Steve Halfpenny, an Australian natural horseman, and Tamasine Smith, a UK born trainer, now living in Paarl, Bronner offers a unique opportunity to explore the connection between horses and humans, yielding amazing results.

“When I owned my first horse at 32, my dreams were huge and involved images of riding a magnificent horse at full gallop across a golden lit hayfield. The reality, however, was more along the lines of limping home in the dusty wake of my ex-racehorse who had decided to head off home without me. My dreams seemed doomed to never see the light of day until I met a horseman who told me to think like a horse, and my life changed as I started my journey towards becoming a natural horseman, a horse whisperer, “ says Bronner.

“I learnt to recognise the needs of my horse, that what is important to me is not necessarily important to my horse, that my horse was a prey animal and I was a predator. My human teachers, Halfpenny, Smith, Fields and Rashid, taught me a lot, but my main teachers are my Friesian horses,” said Bronner. “The human-horse relationship goes back hundreds of years but the lessons that can

be learnt from our equine friends from a leadership, people skills and communication perspective is only now being taken into the business environment. Natural Horsemanship at HorsePlay is an experiential, hands-on programme with a focus on leadership and team building. Participants get to experience and practise the techniques of effective communication, willing partnership, shared vision, skilful action and thoughtful decision-making. For a horse to accept you as its leader, one must earn its trust and respect, and do it quickly”, she said.

“Natural horsemanship is at the cutting edge of leadership development and training globally- from Australia to the United States and more recently South Africa; even business schools at universities are looking into such programmes, “says Keith Coats. “Robert Redford made famous the world of horses and the horse whispering techniques in the movie *The Horse Whisperer*. Our programme offers participants a new paradigm around leadership; one that is based on mutual trust and respect. By using savvy horsemanship, it is possible to get horses to perform amazing feats- and the same is true of a savvy leader. Horse whispering is based on developing a relationship with the horse, and the assumption that there exists a better way to work with horses than by demanding compliance and using force to ensure control and obedience. The metaphors of the horse whispering techniques can be amazingly accurate for business issues. Horses mirror people’s energy levels, leadership skills and they are brilliant at judging leadership qualities,” he said.

“Fifteen years ago, natural horsemanship was unheard of. Although the native Americans were probably the first horse whisperers, the formation of the technique was developed by individuals born with a gift for getting the best out of their horses. The more well- known international “whisperers” include Ray Hunt, Tom Dorrance, Ron Willis, Troy Henry, Ron Millar, Monty Roberts and Pat Parelli,” he said.