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“Persistence Pays at Reis Ranch”

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Persistence pays at Reis Ranch

Local horseman teaches kinder, gentler approach



DENNIS REIS SITS atop one of his horses at Reis Ranch in Penngrove, where he teaches the fundamentals of Universal Horsemanship. (Community Voice photo by Janeen Belsardi)

By Janeen Belsardi
COMMUNITY VOICE SPORTS EDITOR

Animal training is typically a frustrating task. Many trainers use harsh or abusive techniques and expect instant results. A few, like Dennis Reis, know that a little patience, love and respect for the animal can go a long way in teaching permanent behavior.

That's what Reis has taught hundreds of horse trainers and owners nationwide from his base at Reis Ranch, located on a peaceful, rolling hillside just off Old Redwood Highway in Penngrove.

The traditional methods of breaking a horse involve the use of mechanical devices and rely on restraint, fear and intimidation. But frightened colts, who naturally resist being ridden, often respond with flying hooves and bared teeth. The Universal Horsemanship methods that Reis teaches are safer, and more humane, taking into account the nature of the horse.

"IT'S NOT THE horse that needs to be trained, it's the people," said Reis. "We train people to communicate with their horse in a gentle, non-restrictive way. It's a way of relating to the horse in its own language. Body language is the only language a horse can understand."

Reis' methods, which employ no mechanical devices, are such that the trainer is able to go back and reinforce a horse's behavior when needed.

"It enables the rider to become their own trainer," he said. "It benefits riders from all disciplines."

A former rodeo competitor,

riding eventually took its toll on Reis' body, and he was told he was to hang up his spurs. It was then that he was introduced to yoga, and realized that such techniques could be applied to breaking horses.

"It's so old, it's new again," said Reis, who is also able to apply his rodeo skills to work with tough horses. "You can call it yoga, New Age, whatever. It's just horsemanship."

Reis demonstrates the Universal Horsemanship method during frequent Colt Starting classes, in which he takes a wild horse, never before handled, arouses the curiosity of the horse, gains the horse's confidence and in a matter of a couple of hours is able to mount the horse.

"HORSES ARE HERD animals," said Reis. "A horse will size you up in a matter of minutes. They look for leadership. We teach humans how to be the 'dominant horse' in the herd."

According to Reis, horses are the second largest business in Sonoma County, yet many people don't realize the power of the horse and the instinctive fear they have of humans. Many riders may not be prepared for the responsibility the horse has given them. The Universal Horsemanship method allows for a safer, better relationship and more enjoyment in working with your horse, with the idea that the horse will learn more quickly when it is not stressed.

"You can't force it," said Reis, who has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Western Horseman*, and *Equus*, to name just a few. "You have to use horse time."