

Published in Press Democrat on April 7, 1996  
“Horse Sense”

Please click Print or choose Print from the File Menu to Print this Article.

# Life

Santa Rosa, California  
Sunday, April 7, 1996

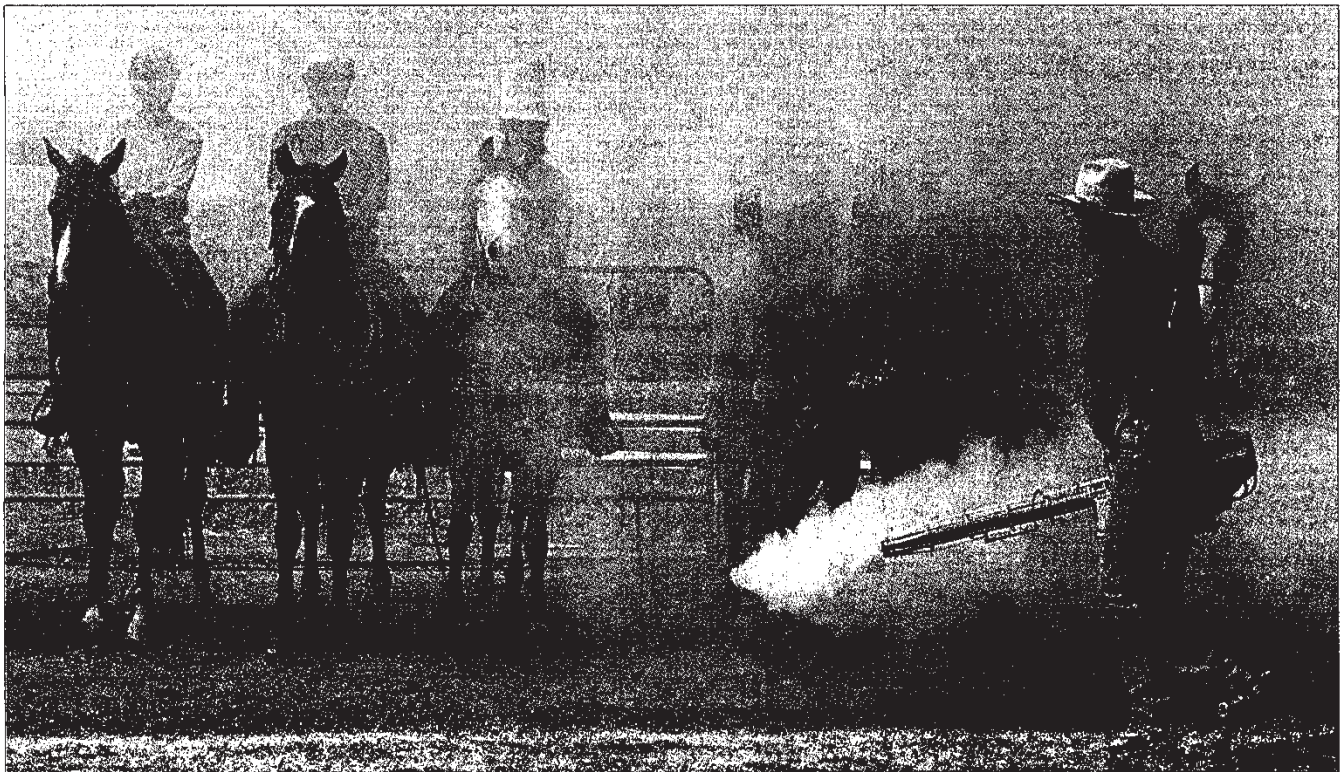


*Horse trainer  
Dennis Reis works  
with Sterling to get  
the horse to gently  
bend its neck  
toward him during  
a recent clinic at his  
Penngrove ranch.*

*"I finally began to realize it wasn't the  
horse who had to change — it was me."*

**HORSE TRAINER DENNIS REIS**

## HORSE SENSE



# Penngrove man understands the art of gentling

By CHRIS COURSEY  
Staff Writer

**D**ennis Reis never met a horse he couldn't ride. Rodeo rough-stock, wild ponies, "problem" horses, horses that introduced themselves with snapping teeth and flashing hooves — he's been on them all.

But while once his tools were big bits and sharp spurs, today he uses communication and understanding. He doesn't break horses; he "gentles" them.

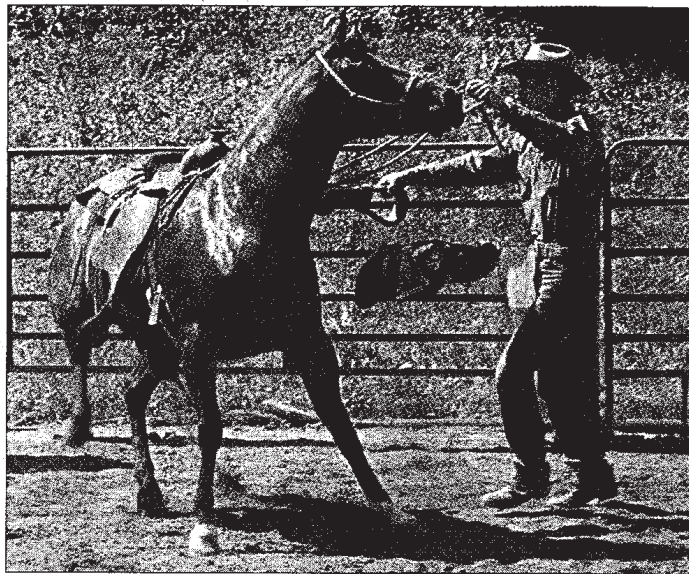
The 37-year-old Penngrove resident is at the forefront of a new philosophy in training horses.

Tall and lean with the unmistakable gait of a horseman, Reis looks like he stepped off the set of a cowboy movie. In fact, he's worked plenty of cattle and he's had some success as a pro rodeo rider. But the boots and Wranglers and cowboy hat are "just a costume now," he says.

Underneath the hat is the head of a teacher, a psychologist, a spiritual guide into the world of horses. He's Sonoma County's own "horse whisperer." And like the character of that best-selling novel, Reis has a way with both horses and the people who ride them.

"I call him 'Sensei,'" says Dave Disbro, using the martial-arts term that means so much more than "teacher."

Disbro, a mountain of a man who works in "special enforcement" for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department,



*Reis progressively desensitizes Stinger to loose stirrup leathers by moving toward the horse and flapping the leathers against the saddle. Eventually the horse calmed down and became used to the noise and movement.*

says Reis has helped him not just to change his attitude about horses, "but he's changed my attitude about life."

Reis asks his students to forget the "conventional wisdom" of riding horses.

"People are told three things about horses: 'Just get up on them and ride.'

'Kick them to make them go.' And 'Pull back on the reins to make them stop,'" Reis says. "That's all wrong."

He believes riders must learn to communicate with and understand their horses long before they climb into the saddle. And, once there, he teaches riders

to use body language rather than force to direct their mounts. He still wears spurs, he says, "but I hardly ever use them, and I never use them as a weapon."

Horses, he says, are docile, vegetarian, prey animals that "smell like hay." They are afraid of humans — predatory meat-eaters that "smell like McDonald's." So before a human can ride a horse, he must teach the animal to trust him.

"I want to show you a better way," says Reis on one of a series of instructional videos he offers for sale. "If you're looking for 'control' of the horse, you've got the wrong attitude. Before anything else, a horse has to have the opportunity to be with you on his terms."

At the heart of the Reis method is the concept that a rider needs to think like a horse.

"Make the wrong thing difficult for the horse to do. Reward the horse's slightest try. Set it up so what you want to do becomes the horse's idea," Reis recites, mantra-like.

"Yeah, I thought it was a bunch of touchy-feely crap when I first saw it," he says, noting that his method has more in common with Eastern philosophy than it does with the Old West. "But it works. It's better for the horse and it's better for the rider."

At the nine-acre ranch he shares with his wife, Lianne, an audience of a dozen students sits on bleachers and watches Reis as he works. He's on foot in a round pen with a 3½-year-old horse that has once been saddled, but never ridden.

Waving his arms, he catches the horse's attention and soon has her cantering around the ring. Quickly he gains control of her pace, and within 10 minutes "Chante" is approaching him each time he

*See Horse, back page*

*Continued from Page D1*  
allows her to stop her work.

Gently but deliberately, he saddles Chante, speaking softly and rubbing her neck as he works. Meanwhile, he instructs the students, offering small pointers that can keep a horse calm without need for restraints.

Chante stands quietly as Reis saddles her. But as soon as he asks her to move, she bucks around the ring, trying to get the saddle off her back.

### Taking his time

"Some people would put her away now. If I wanted to make a bucking horse out of her, I'd put her away now with a bucket of grain," he tells the students. "But I've got time. There's no clock here."

He rubs the horse. He talks softly. He gets her to run around the ring with the stirrups flapping against her flanks. And 15 minutes after their attempt to buck off the saddle, Reis climbs into that leather seat. A few minutes later, Chante is cantering around the ring with Reis on her back.

"It's like magic, except it's not a trick," says Kathy Tresch, Chante's owner. "He just understands the horse."

Reis makes his living passing on that understanding to other riders whether their goal is to ride dressage or to cut cattle, whether their horse is a nag or a thoroughbred, whether their saddle is a heavy Western or a tiny English. His clients range from what he describes as "middle-aged housewives who are afraid of their horses" to cops like Disbro, who need to "get a macho-ectomy" before they learn to become a team with their mounts.

Reis calls it "universal horsemanship." Regardless of the name, this gentler approach is winning converts.

He is not the style's only practitioner; he learned it from horsemen like Ray Hunt and Pat Parelli and Tom Dorrance — the 85-year-old "teachers' teacher" who wrote the book on the subject, "True Unity: Willing Communication Between Horse and Human."

But the media-savvy Reis has become a kind of Johnny Appleseed of the method, taking his training seminars on the road six months of the year, teaching in Hawaii, Arizona, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Nebraska, Wyoming and Wisconsin.

The seminars at his Penn Grove ranch draw riders from around the country, many paying as much as \$2,000 for an intensive, monthlong introduction to Reis' techniques.

### Brain over brawn

He admits it took time for him to be won over by the brain-over-brawn philosophy.

A native of Marin, he got his first horse at 10 and became steeped in the horseman's life when his family moved to the Penn Grove area when he was 12.

"I knew then that horses were my passion," he says. "I dressed like a cowboy all the time, even though I got teased at school. I was the only boy at horse shows. I tagged along with a veterinarian to learn more about horses."

He competed in high school rodeo and after graduation from Rancho Cotate High went on the professional circuit as a bareback bronc rider. He learned to use his spurs, a big bit and a tight rein to control a horse by force.

"I could get a horse to do what I wanted it to do, but I didn't always feel good about it," he says. "But I wasn't ready to change."

He continued to ride in rodeos and he trained horses for people who didn't have the time or inclination to do it themselves.

But there was little satisfaction. "In that business (training horses), you're only as good as your last ribbon," he says with disgust in his voice. Meanwhile, rodeo was destroying his back and he needed painkillers just to get in the saddle. "I was told (by doctors) to get a desk job," he says.

Instead of changing jobs, though, he changed his life. With the help of a Novato psychologist, he began to learn how to use his mind to relax his body. One who once laughed at the hippies attending nearby Sonoma State University, he now meditates and practices yoga every day. He goes through stretching exercises each day before climbing into the saddle.

And as he learned about his own mind and body, he began to apply the same techniques to his work with horses.

"I was never brutal or abusive, but my techniques were crude," Reis says. "What I finally began to realize was that it wasn't the horse who had to change — it was me."

Today, he doesn't train horses so much as he

trains riders.

Eight men and women on horses surround Reis as he stands in the dirt of his ranch's indoor arena. With a Garth Brooks-style wireless microphone, he conducts his class in a soft, confident voice amplified over a single speaker.

"You're not trying to 'make' your horse do something," he tells the students, most of whom are police officers. "You're trying to 'cause' your horse to do it."

Stan Buscovich has been the training officer for San Francisco's mounted police force for 12 years. He's worked in a mounted color guard at the White House; he'll ride at the opening of the Olympics this summer in Atlanta. He's been to dozens of riding schools and seminars.

"I'm learning stuff from Dennis that I never even thought about before," he says from atop his mount, Shorty.

### Laying the groundwork

"We didn't even get in the saddle for the first two days," he says of the five-day session. "For the first time, I'm learning how to be a team with my horse, rather than just a cop on a horse."

Reis' technique is to teach the cops what to expect from their horses in increasingly stressful situations, then show the students how to turn their horses' fear into confidence. He starts small, getting the horses used to bouncing balls, loud noises, a demonstrator waving a flag.

Each time the horses show they can handle the commotion, he turns up the volume.

By the clinic's fifth day, Reis' outdoor arena looks and sounds like a war zone. Smoke billows.

---

**"It's like magic, except it's not a trick. He just understands the horse."**

**HORSE OWNER KATHY TRESCH**

---

A squad car's lights flash. Sirens wail. Bright red flares sizzle in a line on the ground. Thousands of firecrackers explode, throwing bits of cardboard and dirt into the air.

The horses clearly don't like this scene. Their ears swivel, their eyes are wide, their steps lack rhythm. But remarkably, they are doing a credible job of marching in a column of twos. Through the smoke, the flares, the shredded blue plastic strips of the "car wash," they respond to their riders' commands.

"Keep a smile on your face," Reis tells the riders. "Your horse is a mirror of you. Your horse is only as brave as you are."

Mike Ferguson, a Sonoma County Sheriff's Department lieutenant, marvels as his horse, a 4-year-old paint named Desiree, calmly walks through the gantlet.

"We all thought we were pretty experienced horsemen when we got here," he says. "We found out different."

### **'Best in the world'**

"Dennis's program is the best in the world," says Disbro, the L.A. sheriff's deputy. He found Reis through an ad in *Western Horseman* magazine. His horse, Gray, was as fearless and macho as Disbro until one hot summer day in 1994. Disbro's mounted detail was escorting a South American soccer team into the Rose Bowl for a World Cup match when someone reached out of the crowd and stabbed Gray in the ribs.

"He freaked out," Disbro recalls. "I jerked him and kicked him before I ever realized what happened."

Gray survived, but "he lost all of his confidence," Disbro says. His eyes moisten as he recounts failed attempts to rehabilitate the horse. Then he heard about Reis.

"It was a last resort," he says. "I had to leave my attitude at home. I had to get out of the cowboy-cop syndrome and work to understand my horse and myself better than I ever had. I found out that I used to be a pretty angry person."

Today, Disbro travels to Penngrove on his days off to help Reis with his clinics, working for free for the chance to be around his "sensei."

He shows off pictures of himself and Gray in a crowd of other horses and riders, all braced against the hurricane created by the blades of a helicopter that hovers less than 20 feet above them — just one more "distraction" in one of Reis' recent riding clinics in Southern California.