

Published in Horse Tales in October, 2003

Dennis Reis, "The Day of the Horse"

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Dennis Reis, "The Day of The Horse"

By Elois Shackelford

Soft spoken, a gentleman and a scholar. In a new generation of horse trainers these attributes describe



"Dennis Reis at I-90 Expo Sherburn, MN"

Dennis Reis, an equine clinician from Penngrove, CA who recently made his personal debut in Minnesota at the I-90 Expo Center at Sherburn in September, 2003.

Reis accompanied by his wife, Deborah, three clinicians and eight horses held the crowds attention as he demonstrated the key concepts to his Reis Ranch Universal Horsemanship Program. His program is dedicated to improving the horse - human relationship through the sharing of age-old methods and knowledge.

Dennis respects good old-fashioned horsemanship, but he is by no means tradition bound. He combines old-time savvy with high-tech convenience and a clear understanding of what riders expect now days of a clinician. In plain horse jargon, he teaches his students and his audience what makes a horse tick

(horse psychology) and how to gain a horse's confidence through using proper knowledge and body language. "In my early years, I was trained in



"Dennis and Beau as seen on RFDTV"

ways that I don't need anymore," says Dennis.

Dennis' soft voice, gentle mannerism, and his knowledge of horses not only captivates his aud-

ience but it gains the respect and confidence of his equine partner in the arena.

"In Universal Horsemanship we learn what motivates a horse, how he looks for a leader, and to whom or what he looks for for his safety. The outward expressions of what is going on inside of your horse are its body language - a lowered head or licking and chewing", explains Dennis. "Your horse is an emotion with four feet. Work his feet and his mind will follow. A fearful horse isn't part of the program. Respect and even so far as to say dominance - without force and without expressions of anger, assertiveness, not aggression, is the key to

a healthy and "safe" human-horse relationship", Dennis said.

Dennis describes the escalation of asking your



"Dennis and KC"

horse to move forward as "ask", "suggest", "promise". You "ask" the horse to do something; then you "suggest", using more flamboyant body language. When a need arises you then leave the safety zone to spank the horse on the butt - that's the "promise". Then you go back to your safe environment or safety zone and just "ask". That's your goal. "You might have to judiciously promise your horse, to get him going, but that's with respect and without fear or force. You then become the dominant leader. When you put too much pressure on horses, sometimes they can't absorb or understand anything," he said.

"I want to put a horse in a position where he can't help but win, where he can't help but make the right

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move and do the right thing. I want to build situations where it is easy for him to be right and difficult to be wrong," Dennis added.

"I want my students to be able to do everything that I can do with the horse, what's the use in having a horse that only your trainer can work?" Dennis said.

In addition, he wants to give his students the tools to cope with every situation that could come up on horseback - most importantly, the unexpected ones.

"What good is it," he asks, "if someone can only ride his horse under perfect conditions? Things happen all the time when you ride - dogs run up and bark, trucks go by, somebody's horse gets loose and gallops by. Why not be prepared ahead of time to deal with those situations confidently and safely?" One must learn to prepare yourself and your horse to a position of transition," Dennis admits that most of the things he has learned were based on his own mistakes.

The students in Dennis' classes practice exercises on horseback that are built on exercises they first taught their horses from the ground. When they can perform these movements in a safe environment they can move on to another challenge.

Ground school also introduces horses to a variety of obstacles, such as a bridge and also passing through hanging flaps similar to that in a car wash. Another required maneuver is for each horse to push an inflated 6-foot ball along a fence line. Two assistants on foot behind the ball move it back, away from the horse as the rider encourages the horse to go the ball and drive it away. This all helps to desensitize horses to potential trail obstacles. In a short time even the greenest and youngest horses will accept the challenge and will not be afraid of the obstacles.

Despite the enthusiastic efforts of trainers such as Dennis many people have not heard about the kinds of training methods he employs.

Unlike many western trainers, he didn't get the majority of his horsemanship experience from riding in a show ring, instead, most of his time horseback was spent in rodeo arenas. He competed in the National High School Rodeo Association from age 13, and rodeoed with the PRCA after his 18th birthday. After riding horses for a local trainer, he eventually started and still does shoe his own horses.

The person who impacted his career the most was Pat Parelli. He rodeoed with Pat for years. Dennis liked Pat and respected his work for a long time and thought he was doing some pretty neat stuff in the round corral, but it wasn't until four years later after watching Pat that he became involved. "What he was doing with horses just blew me away and his methods worked," commented Dennis.

When Parelli offered Dennis the opportunity to accompany him on a clinic tour, Dennis jumped at the chance. They worked clinics in Australia, Hawaii, Wyoming and North Dakota, and while working with Parelli on a daily basis, Dennis realized that this is the kind of work he wanted to do full time.

Today, Dennis is happy doing what he enjoys most: conducting clinics and demonstrations, training and riding for pleasure. "I enjoy working with my own horses, that is why we travel with them. For me it is rewarding to help people enjoy their horses more and make it safe for them. People get into horses to have fun, but for most, their horses are beyond them and they are missing the fun. I want to give the "fun" back the them, that makes me happy."

References, Western Horseman, July 2001, the New York Times, October, 11, 1993 and his website www.reisranch.com