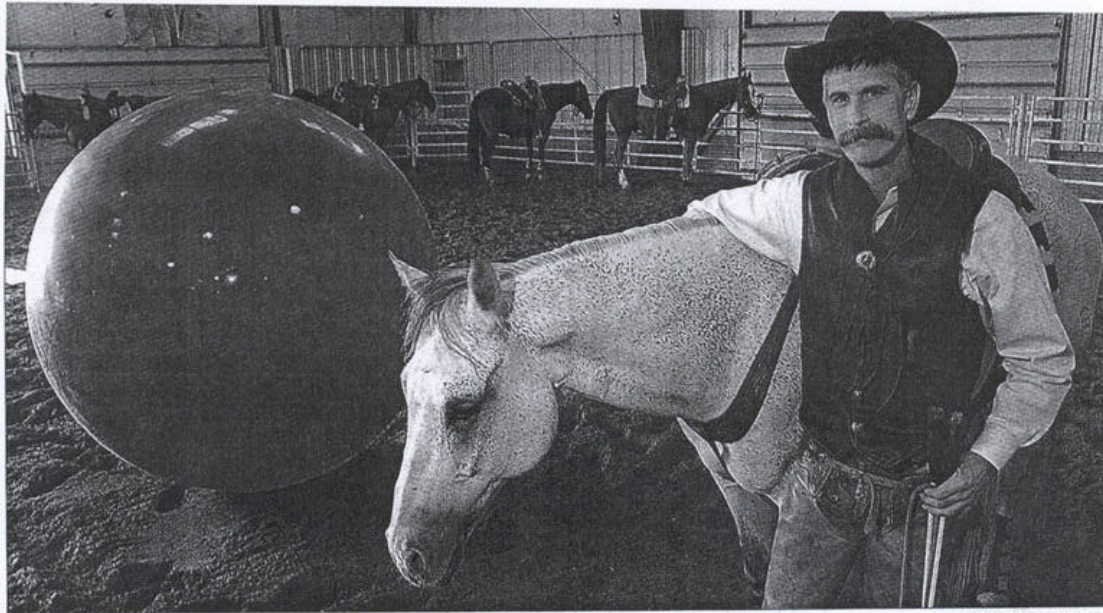


Published in Lincoln Journal Star on September 10, 2003

Horse Whisperer Favors Subtle Style

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ERIC GREGORY/Lincoln Journal Star

Horse whisperer Dennis Reis was on hand at the Saunders County Fairgrounds in Wahoo on Tuesday night for a seminar on communicating with horses through body language.

Horse whisperer favors subtle style

Cowboy shares his technique at a stop in Wahoo.

BY ART HOVEY
Lincoln Journal Star

WAHOO — Dennis Reis looks the part of the trail-riding cowboy.

Long and lean. Fringed leather chaps. Leather vest. Red bandana. Black felt hat. The resemblance ends where his style of horsemanship begins.

Promotional materials from Reis Ranch portray California cowboy Reis as "the world's leading horse whisperer."

A literal interpretation suggests that he resists the impulse of the more traditional cowboy to box a horse's ears and wins a war of wills instead by whispering sweet endearments into an attentive equine ear.

Actually, success in turning stubborn horses into willing riding partners has more to do with nonverbal communication.

A subtle nudge of the knee as opposed to a punch to the side of the head.

"My primary objective," he said here Tuesday, "is to show horsemanship and to share a better way to communicate with horses."

Reis, who preaches the virtues of humility and patience with horses six days a week on RFD-TV, came to the Saunders County Fairgrounds to demonstrate his technique and to promote the establishment of "A National Day of the Horse."

He sees a successful petition drive as a salute to horses' \$100 billion impact on the U.S. economy. He's headed for Iowa today as the next stop on a multistate tour.

Beth Gilbert, 32, competitive rider and owner of three horses back at North Platte, came all the way to Wahoo to get a firsthand look at the kinder and gentler approach.

An audience of about 100 was still growing as the show began.

"If you were to bring an old-time cowboy in here, he would call this guy a quack," Gilbert said as she awaited a five-hour demonstration of nonverbal cues. "That's how they think, but that's not the case."

Gilbert is completely convinced that "it's better to ask your horse to do something than to make him do something."

So is Dawn Kottke of Avoca, Iowa. "I'm just here to further my education in natural horsemanship," Kottke said, "because I believe in natural horsemanship."

To her, that means no fear, no intimidation, no gadgets and no gimmicks.

Before mounting up for some show and tell, Reis talked of an association with horses that began at age 10 and of a career in horse-whispering clinics that goes back to 1968.

"I think you're a horse lover first," he said. "You've given a desire and a love that's beyond belief. And with that passion, you gain the skills to be a good horseman, a good cowboy."

Communicating with horses is more

about paying attention to the technique he was taught over and over than it is about natural ability, he said.

"If you put in the perspiration, you can have this," he said.

Reis, 15 years into teaching that technique to others in his California classes, said his typical student is "a well-educated, pretty, middle-aged housewife who's afraid of her horse."

He doesn't want a fear factor in either horse or rider.

Part of success is making a horse feel 49 percent in control of what's going on. "I want to be 1 percent the leader, but I've got to lead."

Give him a mustang from the open range, a horse that's never been ridden, Reis said. Give him a half an hour to speak to the horse one on one, mostly with body language.

"I can get up on them and go in the first half an hour."

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