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***Horse Sense***

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# horse sense

Horse whisperers say to understand horses, take time to listen

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The secret to horse whispering is that it's not about the horse. Whispering is about people learning to watch, listen and understand the subtle body language of horses, according to Dennis Reis, a mild-mannered, lanky cowboy and self-proclaimed whisperer.

"I've got a mare that I can't touch," said Joyce Edwards of Rocheport. "Can you tell me what I can do?" Edwards and about 75 others were at the Midway Expo Center Tuesday night to watch Reis in action. He was conducting the final clinic of his national tour, teaching what he calls Universal Horsemanship.

"Yep," Reis said to Edwards. He leaned over the rail next to his horse, Beau, and smiled reassuringly. She breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Good."

"I'd have a hundred horses if I could," said Mercedes Hoffman of Glasgow. "I just love them."

Between the two of them, Hoffman and Edwards own 14 horses. That might explain how it is that Missourians now own 200,000 horses, more than the residents of every other state except Texas and California, according to the Missouri Agricultural Statistics Service.

"Horses are mystical and they're healing, and the list goes on and on about why people love them. But they're also misunderstood," Reis said.

Like the title character of the novel and movie "The Horse Whisperer," real trainers such as Buck Brannaman, Pat Parelli and Reis train people in natural horsemanship.

"It takes time," said Casey O'Bryan of Rangeline Stables near Columbia. "People

don't want to hear that they have to work at it." O'Bryan has been working with horses since his childhood on his family's ranch in South Dakota.

"People think they're buying a pet," O'Bryan said. But horses have distinct personalities, complete with fears and horse-sized willpower. Both Reis and O'Bryan seem to remember the quirks of every horse they ever met.

"All of these guys like Reis and Parelli and Craig Cameron are exceptional horse-men," O'Bryan said. "They're also in the business of selling entertainment."

Reis says natural horsemanship is rooted in traditions as old and diverse as the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, Austria, where dressage was elevated to an art form, and the Mexican "vaqueros," or cowboys. What these traditions have in common is an understanding of the nature of horses and a willingness to use body language in working with them rather than brute force.

The contemporary movement toward natural horsemanship stems from Tom Dorrance, who many people call the "grand-daddy" of modern horse training. Dorrance's 1987 book "True Unity: Willing Communication Between Horse and Human," took people through the process of getting to know the nature of horses without brutality.

"Every five minutes there's a horse-related accident," Reis said, adding, "Where knowledge ends, brutality begins."

Most of Reis' clients have been horse lovers since childhood, have grown and had families, and now have time and money to realize their dreams of horse ownership.

"Maybe it's the size of them, the majesty," said Hoffman, "that something so wild as a mustang can be such a friend."



Dennis Reis, a horse whisperer from Pennngrove, Calif., teaches gentle horse-training techniques.

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**DENNIS REIS**  
Self-proclaimed horse whisperer