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California Trainer Draws Crowd at Fancy Hill

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California Trainer Draws Crowd At Fancy Hill

By DEBORAH SENSABAUGH

The crowd, for horse folks, was surprisingly eclectic. Cutting horse riders rubbed shoulders with eventers, and foxhunters hobnobbed with Western trail riders. They'd all come to Fancy Hill Farm to see a California horseman who has had surprising success communicating across the disciplines.

Dennis Reis, a native Californian and former rodeo rider, presented a six-hour clinic at the farm on Friday evening. And he truly had something for everyone, from desensitizing spooky horses, to lessons on herd behavior, to how to use body language to teach horses what humans want them to do.

"We had between 75 and 80 in attendance," said Keith Puttress, one of Fancy Hill's owners.

Reis, who changed his profession from bronc rider to sensitive trainer, has helped extend methods popularized by Ray Hunt and Tom Dorrance, the old West's original "horse whisperer."

In fact, after experiencing back problems that railroaded

his rodeo career, Reis studied the methods of Hunt and Dorrance, as well as other modern trainers. He tried the techniques, combined them into a presentable comprehensive format, and came up with his own brand, christened "Universal Horsemanship."

Reis also spent time changing his own outlook from horse breaker to horse gentler, incorporating yoga, psychology, relaxation techniques and stretching exercises to quiet the beast within before attempting to communicate with the beasts in the round pen.

And while Reis' methods may not be anything new, his background with Western horses and training has enabled him to reach a market that might not respect anything less than a lean mustachioed cowboy who took up riding at age 10 and grew to straddle broncs.

In California, Reis' methods have worked wonders on mounted police horses, teaching their riders how to steady them for exposure from everything from fires to helicopter landings. He's worked with dressage horses, too, everything from grand

prix to lower levels, and has a refreshing knowledge of frame, bending, collection and engagement.

In answering questions during intermission on Friday, Reis stressed that people need to be on horse time, rather than the stepped-up stressful rush of "human time" when teaching their horses. "You get stuff done when you're not looking at the clock," he said.

And continuing with his theme of teaching the rider in order to teach the horse, Reis stressed how to watch, evaluate and deal with herd behavior. Turning four of his own horses loose in the arena at Fancy Hill, Reis worked the horse herd in the giant "round pen" situation with his horse, Rocky, illustrating principles he had taught earlier in the evening — using the eye and body language to communicate with the horses.

He also stressed the need for horses to play as they warmed up. "I don't like to get in the way of their play," he said as the horses bucked and kicked and gradually settled into a working lope around the ring.

He then placed the herd in the center of the arena and brought in a sixth horse, working it easily to keep it away from the herd and moving in concert with his own horse.

Reis stressed that people need to be on 'horse' time rather than 'human' time.

Local trainer Terry Whitmore said she thought the evening was "very informative."

"I don't think what he was saying was all that different from what other trainers in the area are saying, but he uses simple terms that laymen can understand, and he explains why."

Whitmore said she liked what he had to say, especially his teaching about the horse's blind spot, two sides and herd mentality, and also the importance to the horse of crossing over with its hind legs.

She said an amazing group of local professionals and trainers, as well as a number of lay riders and owners gathered. "Everyone seemed very interested and

it says something for Dennis Reis that he pulled that many trainers in. There were a lot of top-notch people there."

She said she appreciated Reis' honesty. "He doesn't make it look too easy, or tell people they can do something with their horses that they aren't capable of doing, he really did a great job."

Carol Atwood, who was the first to sign up for the clinic, helped with its organization. "I enjoyed it; I had watched Dennis Reis on RFD-TV," she said.

Atwood, who is an avid foxhunter, said Reis' predominantly Western style made no difference to her. "My grandfather always taught me that you hide the horse not the saddle. I thought Dennis was excellent in his communication and organization of the material and techniques he presented."

Reis tours across the United States, offering the clinics and workshops on site as well as offering horsemanship schools of varying lengths at his ranch in California. He is also promoting a National Day of the Horse to be set aside by federal resolution, and distributed petitions



CALIFORNIA trainer Dennis Reis, of "horse TV" fame, makes himself available to answer questions during intermission at his clinic at Fancy Hill Farm on Thursday evening. (Deborah Sensabaugh photo)

for it.

Reis stayed as late as he had to on Friday to answer everyone's questions.

In fact, at 2 a.m., he and his team were still packing to leave.

More information about Dennis Reis can be obtained from his Web site at www.reisranch.com.