

Natural Horsemanship: A Hoax of Near Mythical Proportions

by Jaime Jackson (March 24, 2010)

Some people say that I am a 'natural horseman' because I practice certain philosophies and techniques. Others say I'm not 'natural' (oddly enough) for the very same reasons. If you ask me, I say that it seems pretty dang hard, if not impossible, to be - or not be - something that doesn't even exist in the first place. [Mark Rashid, All Things Natural]

The rise of "natural horsemanship" in recent years as an equestrian discipline and philosophy has its origins, at least in good measure, in an understandable revulsion many horse owners possess for blatantly violent training and riding methods. And, for that matter, denigrating and abusive relationships with horses, generally speaking. Not that this sentiment is new, for the human behavioral instinct to be kind to the horse can be traced to treatises written by horsemen of Ancient Greece.* Most advocates today would agree that natural horsemanship is a humane way of working with horses that integrates the natural abilities of *Equus Caballus* with reasonable equestrian goals that facilitate communication and trust, and, very importantly, do not cause harm.

Yet, in almost the same breath that the term natural horsemanship first began surfacing from disparate sources worldwide in the 1990s, with countless horse owners, clinicians and advocates for humane horse care quickly embracing and interpreting it, a backlash of naysayers emerged. Natural horsemanship is a misnomer, they would argue, as the practice, no matter how interpreted, is simply a gimmicky, if not self-deluding, way to promote oneself as a horse trainer or riding instructor to the unwitting. There is nothing natural about a horse carrying a human on his back, therefore, there can never be such a thing as "natural horsemanship". Simple as that. In sum, natural horsemanship is a hoax of near mythical proportions.

This counter argument to natural horsemanship has never made any more sense to me, personally, than those detractors who make the very parallel claim that there is no such thing as natural hoof care. We are all to believe that anything humans have to do with horses is inherently unnatural because, ostensibly, we are not horses ourselves; indeed, only in the wild, free of all humanity, is the horse truly natural.

In one sense, their logic does have some merit. Because in the horse's natural world (i.e., in his wild state) things are strikingly different than we see among most domestic horses, like his "wild" foot. My own books testify to this: horses live naturally in the wild, they are neither caged nor deprived of each others company; they have naturally shaped feet, they do not suffer the foot problems we cause them; they eat naturally and are healthy, and they are not overfed the wrong things ending in colic and laminitis at epidemic levels; they move freely and athletically, they do not suffer damaged backs, joints and other consequences of forced unnatural movements. It is true, horse care and horsemanship have not been very natural, and horses could be a lot better off, if, somehow, this weren't the case.

*Art of Horsemanship [also translated as On Horsemanship], Xenophon, 350 b.c.; Xenophon makes reference to another writer and trainer, "Simon", whose works did not survive into the modern era.

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But, here, precisely is the opening door to understanding "natural horsemanship" (and natural hoof care). It's not that natural horsemanship (or natural hoof care) are, per se, "natural" in the sense that they occur in the wild; rather, they are models for natural care that "mimic" the animal's natural life in the wild. Why do this? Because advocates have learned that such mimicry can make for a healthier and happier horse. Here's an important, and proven, example:

AANHCP practitioners learn how to simulate natural wear patterns in the feet with their tools and equipment. These wear patterns, as a consequence, precipitate natural growth patterns (size, angle, proportion -- as studied and quantified in the wild), which, in turn, facilitate more naturally shaped hooves. Hooves so shaped then support more natural movement. A repeating and reinforcing "cycle" of "form-and-function" ensues, contributing to an equilibrium, called biodynamic hoof balance. The latter is a confluence of locomotive forces, the animal's unique conformation and temperament, and the environment. In part, this is a mechanistic process, achieved largely through what we call the "natural trim". When natural boarding conditions, natural training methods, and natural diet are integrated and factored in, biodynamic hoof balance is further enhanced and reinforced. In this sense, "natural hoof care" is a broad, holistic endeavor, not simply a trimming process.

Natural horsemanship, by definition then, is an integral part of natural hoof care, and vice versa. At least when so recognized and practiced by the two disciplines. After all, it should be, if what we are talking about is mimicking the natural world of the horse. Recognizing this, surely, is an important step forward for all concerned, most of all the horse. So, in the same way that natural hoof care practitioners do what they do (in keeping with the principles explained above), natural riders should operate under the same guiding laws of nature. It isn't enough simply to say, "I'm a natural rider" or a "natural trimmer" and not really know what this encompasses, and then proceed to act in a vacuum, ignoring or not caring what the other is doing. The integral, holistic processes and forces of nature will eventually make trouble for both.

It is astonishing to me that any horseman or horsewoman would ignore the laws of nature that define the very essence of *Equus Caballus*, and attempt to have a relationship with the animal. It isn't logical or very smart for that matter. My observation is that such negligence often ends in disastrous results for both horse (foot lamenesses and sore backs) and rider (broken bones and sore backs). Working with nature -- becoming a natural rider or a natural hoof care practitioner -- seems like a much better strategy. Denying that such a "nature based" relationship between our species can be authentic or even exist, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary, raises the question of who is actually being "gimmicky" here with the horse.

Natural horsemanship is no more a myth or hoax than is natural hoof care. Nor do I think it is a matter of semantics. Clearly, many disciplines of horsemanship and hoof care are not natural at all. They cause harm because they violate the laws of nature that reasonable, considerate people -- as I cited at the beginning of this message -- would never think of doing. It would seem to me that advocates for the "natural way" need to speak out in defense of horses. Quietly residing in the penumbra of mainstream equestrian opinion, which favors the naysayers, doesn't seem quite bold enough. I think a more gallant, measured and unified effort to raise awareness of natural horsemanship in relation to its proper context -- the horse's natural world -- is long overdue.

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