

A HORSE NAMED MELANIE

by Shea Stewart

I once met a horse named Melanie. She was a five year old Arab mare I encountered at a horsemanship clinic. This mare was trained for halter shows, and her owner, Sue—having never been exposed to a gentle type of horsemanship before—knew only how to ask her to stand parked out with her head up high. Sue came to the clinic on a recommendation from a friend, expecting a quick fix to some issues she had with her mare.

Their session started with Sue leading Melanie to the round pen where she removed Melanie's halter and began lunging her at liberty. It was immediately apparent that Melanie had no intention of acknowledging Sue. She just ran around with her head held high in the air, looking anxiously outside of the pen. The only thing Sue knew to do was to crack the lunge whip and keep Melanie moving. The clinician noted that Sue and Melanie had no connection. He explained the importance of proper ground work; how it teaches the horse to focus on the handler and respond off that person's feel, with the goal of establishing a communicative connection between the two.

Clearly Sue and Melanie were missing this vital foundation. Sue had no feel for the horse, and Melanie was focused on everything *but* Sue. The clinician asked Sue to put Melanie back on the line so he could teach them some basic ground training that would make sense to them both. Stepping in to demonstrate his approach, he picked up the lead rope and immediately Melanie took a deep breath, relaxed her neck, and followed the clinician's hand on the lead line. Within 10 minutes he had the mare walking in a soft circle, doing forehand yields and hind quarter yields, lining up on the fence, and leading softly. He handed the lead rope back to Sue, and right away Melanie's head flew high in the air. Within seconds, Melanie lost her focus and began pushing against Sue.

The next day, it was the same thing. When the clinician took the rope, Melanie instantly relaxed. Then, when he handed the rope back to Sue, the mare almost looked aggressive. She pushed harder, resisted more, and was locking up against Sue. The clinician was trying his hardest to coach Sue through a simple exercise of stepping her horse's shoulder over, but nothing was happening... except that Melanie and Sue were falling apart.

On the third day, they tried some liberty work. Sue really struggled with getting Melanie's attention. Melanie ran the fence line on one side of the round pen while the clinician coached Sue on which steps to take. Sue did exactly what the clinician was suggesting, but there were no changes. However, when the clinician walked into the pen and smacked the ground once

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with the rope, Melanie came right over and took a deep breath. The clinician worked her at liberty and it looked as though they had known each other forever. He then put her halter on and worked her on the line. She softened to the point where she seemed like an entirely different horse. I started to wonder what would happen after the mare returned home.

After that session, Sue led Melanie to her stall, and began grooming her. However, rather than enjoy Sue's attention, Melanie became increasingly agitated. Suddenly, Sue screamed. Apparently, Melanie decided to express her pent-up frustration by biting Sue on the shoulder. Sue stormed out and declared that she'd had it with this horse and didn't want her anymore.

Later, after Sue had calmed down, she joined the other clinic participants and me, and we shared our thoughts about what took place. Although Sue expressed feelings of inadequacy, we assured her that what happened by no means implied that she is. It was a very enlightening learning experience for all of us. We came to the conclusion that Melanie had lived a life of dark-



ness up until this point. She was highly intelligent and assumed that people had nothing good to offer her. Therefore, she mentally checked out and ran around robotically with her head high in the air as demanded. When Melanie met the clinician, she found that there was a better way to be. She discovered that she can relax and let down in the presence of a human, and that it felt good to be listened to. Once Melanie saw the light, she had no intention of stepping into that darkness again. And she had made that point loud and clear.

This was a very profound experience to witness. It showed me that a horse is only as "good" as her handler. As the clinician is fond of saying, "horses know when you know, and they know when you don't." That quote really sank in at this clinic. I saw a troubled horse who came from what I consider an abusive training background (*see box*). However, with supportive handling, within minutes this horse transformed. A lesson learned... we can't blame past experiences for a

present circumstance. I have an Arab gelding who came from the halter show world, and ground work has always been a struggle for us. I blamed that struggle solely on the halter training, which is in itself a legitimate explanation. However,

NOT SO PRETTY A high head and tight-backed body posture in a horse represents a fearful emotional state. It is what a horse's body does when he becomes worried before fleeing. To train a horse to assume that braced body posture is not fair or kind to the horse. Many people think it looks pretty. However, once they understand what the horse is feeling, they find that it's not such a pretty posture after all.

I realized that, at the time, I wasn't quite offering him a better place to be. We are all only as "good" as we are, and we are all on different levels of understanding. Each year as I improve, my Arab and I find a better place. As long as we are committed to learning and trying to do what is right, our horse will be better for it. I truly believe that they understand our intentions.

Sue discovered that she had inadvertently contributed to the darkness Melanie had been living in, and acknowledged that a significant change was necessary in order for her and her mare to get along. With a whole new perspective that it's not about winning the blue ribbon, but instead about developing a relationship and offering a better place for her horse to be, Sue vowed to never expose Melanie to the halter show world again. Realizing it would take more than a three-day clinic—there's no quick fix—she has since trained consistently to learn good horsemanship skills, interacting with Melanie in a communicative and respectful way. Today, they enjoy a true partnership, reveling in each and every step of the journey they are on.

**EXCERPT FROM HORSE NATION MAGAZINE, FALL 2007
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gentle and in-depth approach. Learn more about Shea at her website: www.stewartranch.net.