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Horse Whisperer teaches a subtle art

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DENNIS REIS
TAKES FIVE



Dennis Reis, an internationally recognized human trainer and horse whisperer, is at home on his horse.

Horse whisperer teaches a subtle art

Dennis Reis has spent the better part of his life astride a horse, so he knows a thing or two about how to handle them. What's more, he is determined to see them get the respect they deserve. Reis, an internationally recognized horse whisperer — who trains humans, not horses, at his California ranch — is crossing the country staging seminars and promoting what he hopes will become a National Day of the Horse. Supporters have collected about 10,000 signatures so far, he said. Reis, who brings his Day of the Horse seminar to State Fair Park today, spoke with Journal Sentinel reporter Annysa Johnson.

Q. Horse "whisperer" seems to connote something mystical. What's the trick to getting a horse to do what you want?

A. Horses are perfect in their nature, and you don't train something that is perfect. I teach a technique built on herd psychology and body language — this is how horses communicate with each other. But it's very subtle. That's where the term horse whisperer comes from. It's so subtle, you can't really tell what they're doing. But the horse is so sensitive, they can feel a fly land on their backside.

You learn to lead the horse, like the dominant mare in the pasture, by your body language. The mistake most people make is trying to force their intentions on a horse, and the horse rebels. All horses will challenge you for leadership. But once a horse sees that you are a fit leader, that you can cause movement in them, they'll trust you. Once you adopt this philosophy, it's so obvious Ray Charles can see it.

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Q. You tell your audiences that the same techniques you use with horses will also benefit their human relationships. In what way?

A. If you look at your relationship with your boss, your husband, your friends, the philosophy is the same. If we are clear about our intentions, if we always reward the slightest try, and let the rest be longer than the work, then we're going to have better relationships. I've seen a lot of abusive things done to horses — and to people, for that matter. And it's caused by ignorance, by trying to control a situation instead of getting along with it.

Q. What is it with Americans and our fascination with horses, particularly among girls and women?

A. They're large and they smell good. They're healing, almost mystical, and so forgiving in their nature. It's true that the majority of the horse business revolves around young ladies. I can tell you if a man tells his wife, "Pick me or the horse," I can guarantee it will be the horse.

Q. You do some women-only seminars. Why is that?

A. Teaching men and women is so vastly different. Men don't want to ask for directions or talk about their feelings. Women are a whole lot more emotionally tough than men. They're willing to learn, be truly humble. They're willing to be vulnerable.

After doing these (women-only seminars) for years, I understand ladies less — but I know what doesn't work. You can compare it to horses. There are stallions, mares and geldings. If you asked, the majority of cowboys would rather ride a gelding. But a mare will give you her guts. And, like a mare, you can go ahead and try to force a lady to do something. They'll do it for a while, but then it becomes like a slave relationship.

Q. Why should we celebrate a National Day of the Horse?

A. Horses contribute \$112 billion annually to the U.S. economy. I owe everything I have to the horse. It's my living. It's what I do, and I think it's time we acknowledge everything the horse has given to us. We have Groundhog Day, for God's sake.

Readers can sign an online petition for a National Day of the Horse at www.reisranch.com. Tickets for Reis' Day of the Horse Tour seminar at State Fair Park are \$65, with discount coupons available through some area riding clubs. For more information, call (800) 732-8220.