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## The horse listener

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**Just north of Melbourne, a horse trainer is achieving astonishing results with abused and reluctant animals. His techniques are amazing and his legend is spreading.**

A rider once complained to Carlos Tabernaberri that he could only get his horse to do what he wanted it to do by raising a stick, defensively adding: "But I never hit it."

Tell me, Tabernaberri asked, does your wife cook for you? Yes, the man said. And she would cook for you if you waved a stick at her? Well, certainly.

So your wife would cook for you because she felt she had to - you would get your meal, but would you and your wife be enjoying the relationship?

This is what is happening with you and your horse, Tabernaberri explained quietly. It is doing your bidding only because it feels intimidated. What sort of partnership is that for the horse?

Tabernaberri grew up in Argentina, immersed in the country's horse culture. He witnessed frightened and frustrated horses being controlled by wranglers who would hit them across the head if they reared up. What struck him was the absence of kindness or sympathy in the relationship between man and beast.

For some reason that he attributes to a higher source, young Tabernaberri didn't become just another gaucho. Even though the horses were often nervous and wary, he was unafraid. He would walk into the pen and wander among them, patting, reassuring.

He thought that all horses would view men very poorly and wanted them to know that there was one human, at least, who wanted a different relationship.

He remembers being repeatedly surprised that powerful animals treated with such little empathy did not simply trample their minders and run back to the bush.

Young Tabernaberri began looking into the eyes of the horses, then through them.

In 1980, his father brought his family to Australia, believing there were no prospects under the military junta. Tabernaberri was 14.

He found the horse culture in Australia less brutal, but mired in traditional training methods. Tabernaberri is careful not to disdain other trainers, but he hopes others eventually see the benefit of modifying their behaviour.

"Resisting change is like holding your breath - if you succeed, you are dead," he says. That he

understand the horse mind is indisputable. Word of his training methods is spreading. Exasperated owners bring their horses to him and say the beast is beyond redemption. Frequently, his Whispering Acres property at Whittlesea is the horse's "last chance" before being sold or sent to the knackery.

He asks the owners what they want the horse to do and how they set about it. He hears all the labels - that the horse is stupid, or stubborn, or nervy.

Tabernaberry will invite the owner to return in a few days - maybe a little longer if the horse is seriously traumatised by mismanagement.

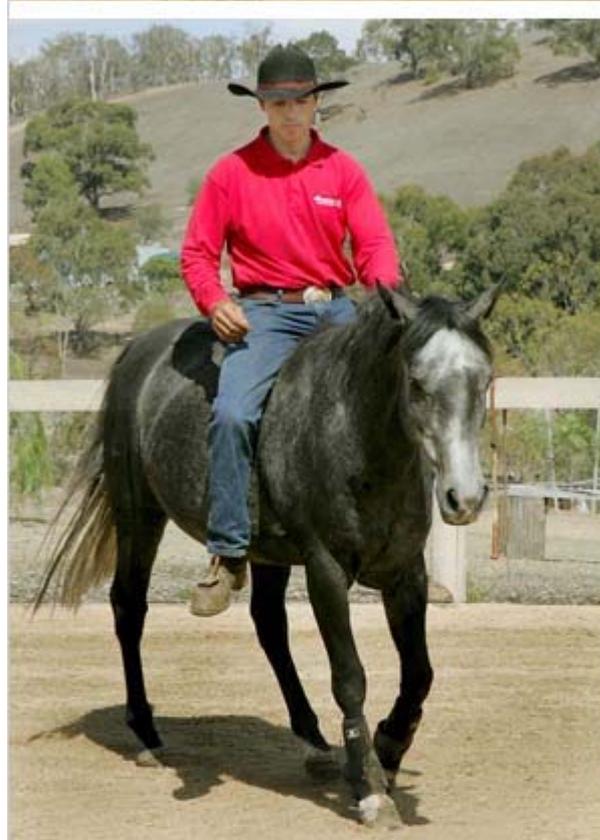
Almost without fail, the owners are stunned by the progress their horse has made. What is Tabernaberry's secret? It's not magic, he says - the horse is simply looking for a kind leader it can trust and respect.

He believes most owners are not deliberately unkind to their horses - it's just that the kindness horses need and appreciate is a good relationship based on trust, not fear. A friendship.

When we visit, Tabernaberry is working Sai, a five-year-old he has trained from a young age. He does not use the term "breaking in", because it sounds as though the relationship between man and animal is going to be one of oppression.

Tabernaberry describes himself as a "starter" - if you start a horse off well, almost all behavioural problems can be avoided.

Resisting change is like holding your breath - if you succeed, you are dead. He wants to show us the possibilities of a symbiotic relationship. He jumps up on the horse. No saddle, no bridle, no bit, no stirrups.



He talks softly and taps the horse's flank. It walks calmly in that direction. He taps the other side of the neck and Sai changes direction.

He mutters a few words and gently nudges the horse's front legs with his heels. The horse moves around a little, selects a nice spot and lies down.

No saddle, no bit, no bridle, no stirrups: Carlos Tabernabberri takes five-year-old Sai, an Appaloosa cross, through a session at his property, Whispering Acres. Sai might not like the experience - particularly the whip being cracked within a metre of his head - but he seems to trust Tabernabberri. "He knows I mean no harm."

Pictures: *John Woudstra*

There have been no barked commands, no whips. And, to Tabernabberri's way of thinking, no magic.

Sai allows Tabernabberri to lie on him as though he is a bodyboard. Then Tabernabberri walks around Sai, cracking a whip within a metre or so of the horse's body and head.

Sai stands impassively, as though this was the most normal thing in the world.

What is going on here?

The horse might not like the experience, but it trusts me completely, Tabernabberri says, because it knows I will not hurt it.

He jumps back on the horse, then stands. The horse gives him a quick look but does not budge.

Again, Tabernabberri says, the horse doesn't really want him standing on his back, "and he knows he can buck and send me on my arse, but he doesn't. He chooses to tolerate me because he knows I mean no harm."

In 2004, Melbourne rider Marty Schiel turned to Tabernabberri in a last-ditch attempt to save her horse. Ruby had undergone basic training but her development had been hampered by a couple of bad experiences with people.

Looking for something more holistic, she typed "natural horse training" into Google. Of the three trainers in Australia, only Tabernabberri was in Victoria.

Schiel emailed him and he responded promptly, asking her to outline the problems with Ruby. Tabernabberri took Ruby (and Marty) on.

"I was so gobsmacked by what he achieved with her in such a short time, I said he had to write his methods down," she says.

She offered to help, and the book *Through the Eyes of the Horse*, was published last year.

In his neat shed, Tabernabberri says he feels blessed to wake every day, pull on his boots and

get to work improving a horse's existence.

On a wall is a photo of Tabernaberri with a horse that was brought to him, even though the owner believed that, at 14, it would be too set in its ways to relearn.

"You and I know the horse is 14," he told her. "But the horse doesn't. The trick is to make the horse feel four."

He says time is a human limitation we place on horses. He tells clients to take off their watches and "get into the horse's time".

That is part of developing the relationship, but Tabernaberri believes horses are demonstrably capable of taking some responsibility for the bond - you just need to know what the horse needs, and share the load.

"I want the horses to be more like me - to think. And I want to be more like them - to feel."

Tabernaberri says he learnt early that horses are very forgiving animals, considering how they are sometimes handled, but they have expectations, too.

The message he gets from horses is: "I'll make the good things easy and the bad things difficult." Don't mistreat me, and you will see just how good I can be.

"It's a feeling like, 'I'll do everything you say, but you have to ask me nicely'," Tabernaberri says.

A fundamental part of his training is to get the horse's attention. Owners complain that their horses seem distracted. He tells them the animal is doing what its instinct dictates, which is to constantly monitor its whole environment.

He gets horses to focus on him. He knows they respond positively to consistency, which is a hallmark of his methodology.

His equation is: CCKL = TOR. Confidence, consistency, kindness and leadership result in trust, obedience and respect.

For instance, those who find horses hard to catch probably have not earned the animal's trust. "The horse doesn't know whether he will get a carrot or a stick," he says. "Much as our horses may follow us and enjoy our company, humans still look like predators - not like another horse or prey animal. Our eyes face front and our ears are pinned to our heads. That can look pretty aggressive to a horse.

"Add the occasional slap, jerk of the rope, kick in the ribs, spearing of the spur or sting of the whip, and you've just reinforced your horse's instincts that you are as intimidating, inconsistent and untrustworthy as you look."

When a horse leaves Tabernaberry's property, he wants it to be proud and confident - "relaxed, but with its chin up". He shows the owners what he has done and hopes they can duplicate it so that the horserider relationship is mutually happy and satisfying.

If the human can abandon his or her ego, the horse will respond, he says.

Now in his early 40s, Tabernaberry has three decades of horsemanship behind him. He doesn't believe in "natural" horsemanship, only good horsemanship.

"I hope when I'm 90 and walking past leaning on a stick, I will see people working with horses the way I am now," he says.

Perhaps his children - Jesse, 13, and Paris, 9 - will inherit his intuitive style.

As word of his extraordinary gift spreads, there are more demands on his time. His monthly clinics are booked out quickly, but he resists taking on more horses than he can confidently work with.

"I'm not trying to impress you, but to impress *upon* you how good your horse is," he tells grateful clients.

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