



Out of the Spotlight

Calling All Hands....

by Gwynn Turnbull Weaver

Daylight is short and the nights long. It is winter-time in North America, that time in which Mother Nature drives us into ourselves. I'm sitting on a bleacher watching a horse trainer describe the mechanics of "the what and the how" of getting his horses to execute a particular maneuver. His body is becoming geometry, positioning his hands, feet, head, and weight in complex combinations so that all angles converge the way he wants them to. His voice is talking algebra to me. I'm back in the 8th grade for a moment, struggling once again to grasp the concept of why a long string of seemingly unrelated letters equals X.

The trainer is relating all commentary to winning.

This trainer happens to compete in the reined cow horse world, but the nature of the competition is unimportant. It might as well be any competitive equine discipline. Dressage, cutting, western pleasure, racing, show jumping... the list goes on.

There are thousands who enter such contests, a small percentage of those who enter are considered competitive and an even smaller percentage win. Of those who win, those who do it consistently are fewer still.

The indoor barn I'm sitting in is cold. I watch the trainer loping circles below me and my eyes struggle to stay focused in the flickering blue shadows cast by the halogen lights above us. He's talking about the small scoring deductions for the various imperfections of each run. A half a point here, a point and a half there. The horse he is riding is beginning to lather as he pushes on. By my standards, the colt has had enough. But my standards don't matter and the show records prove it so. I've never won

what this man has won and I never will.

So I focus on the only thing I have to offer: the perspective of one so far removed that the picture is clear. I am invisible in this moment and like so many who watch from the sidelines, the big picture comes plainly into view.

I realize what I have felt for so long but could never put into words. Of the percentage who own horses, and those who enter, those who compete, those who win and finally those who win repeatedly, I study their relationship with their horses, and I note that the further up the ladder they go, the further most individuals get from a balanced relationship of mutual respect with their horses. Many would argue this point, claiming that they have the most respect for the horses they have ridden who won for them, earned the most money for them, tried the hardest for them...for them, for them, for them. The words ring in my ears.

I notice little things. I notice the further up the ladder a trainer climbs, the less he uses his horses' names. Blame it on numbers if you like, but I choose to believe it's more than that, a tiny indicator of true intent. The further up the ladder, the more compromises have been made, the more the trainer asks. He asks things of the horse that he knows are not fair, that he knows are not right for the age and the stage of the colt, but he asks them just the same and distances himself emotionally from the horse. It somehow smacks of thievery, and like those who have stolen from you, they can no longer look you in the eye, or call you by name.

He asks these things of the horse so he can win. He tells himself that he must ask, that he must win; to generate customers...to gain credibility in his field...so that he can garner more trainable horses...so that he can win more

and secure his income...that he needs to feed his family...that it is all justified...any level of pressure, and in many cases cruelty, is justified because he has to feed his family. We think about feeding our own family and we forgive him for it...a little.

But the truth lingers in the blue shadows of the halogen lights. I see the colt mechanically doing what he is expected to do, and the trainer stops to visit with us about his victory. The colt's heart is thumping away as he stands, pounding up through his withers as he catches his air. The trainer has felt it a hundred times as we all have when our horses have gone the distance. No harm done. But I know that this trainer does not feel that heart for anything more than the machine that pumps the blood around.

I listen half heartedly, my gut telling me that there is something missing here. I know it like I know my name. I know that I have shared this feeling with thousands of horsemen and horsewomen, silently standing side by side watching it all take place. Rarely is anything said between us. There is just the slightest raise of a brow, the shake of a head ever so subtly, the telltale drop of our eyes, embarrassed in that moment for what human beings are capable of while stoking the raging, insatiable fire of their ego.

The worry wrinkles in the eye of the colt tell all.

Something is missing. Perhaps it is just the blue shadows of the halogen lights making this colt's eye look vacuous, like the empty eyes of a wife bartered away in an arranged marriage, giving her body to her husband and nothing more, or the husband bound to a woman he does not love, handing over



his paycheck year in and year out, his labor, his life, but never his heart. The look is the same. The empty, distant look of those resigned to their fate.

I go home awash in a mixture of feelings. Amazement at what a horse can be made to do and equally amazed at our willingness to ask such a feat, often without conscience. I question myself, my motive for my rejection of a large percentage of the show world. I wonder if I am just hiding behind a cooked up morality—wondering if I am merely trying to justify an inability to show and win.

I dream that night that I am alone in a large arena in a circle of light. Something is moving in the shadows around me. I hear a thundering of hooves and am jolted awake as our own horses roll off of the hill above the creek and sweep down to the protein tubs by the house, bucking and blowing with rollers in their noses.

That afternoon I am doctoring a foot rot steer by myself. I have taken my coils with me and see that I have become fouled in them, clumsily dropping a few, as I struggle with the big calf. My hand moves, trying quickly to remove the coils from my ankle, coils that lead to the rope, up and around my horn and crossed up, to my 1250 lb. gelding. As I move to clear myself, a flash of fear cracks through me like lightning. I look to my gelding, instinctively, my gaze going directly to his eyes, looking, hoping he is with me. His eyes are big and full and liquid, his expression soft. In that instant he is there for me; there in the way a mare is there for her colt when the lion leaps. He is not leaving. My fear vaporizes, a quiet kind of humility taking its place. My gelding

cocks a leg and I know by his expression that he is amused, but solid, and most of all, with me in that moment. His powerful body stands quietly as I untangle myself from the rope. I look into his eyes when it is over. Though it was only seconds, my heart swells with appreciation and respect.

In that moment it all becomes clear to me. There is something missing in this picture as well. There will be no large winnings check at the end of this performance, no spattering of applause. Ink will never dry upon the pages of the show records with our names. We will be forever invisible to the world at large. But missing, too, is the empty stare of a horse used beyond the balance of fairness.

Will any of those trainers who subject their horses to the repeated injustices of most world-class showing ever put themselves in the position to truly test the relationship they have built? Most instinctively will not. Their gut tells them otherwise. Sadly, most could test the horses they have crucified and many would come through it unscathed, such is the incredible Godlike measure of forgiveness present in most horses.

Some unconscionable trainers will deny that their lack of respect and subsequent lapse of ethical treatment to their horses will ever come back to haunt them. They claim that they are above it, that they do not give it any thought. Perhaps. But the seed of doubt, be it ever so small, thrives in the shadows...and grows.

But just as it is unwise to use fear to truly motivate the horse, it would be equally wrong to expect fear to truly motivate those who could otherwise be the greatest of horsemen. Running from the idea that a horse will one day exact his revenge will never be enough to promote ethical training.

Everyone knows that all trainers, some to a greater degree than others, have a list of gimmicks to use when the ethical exercises they usually employ fail to work. These gimmicks are often cruel and unusual punishment. They are the last cards they pull out of their sleeve to ensure a greater chance at victory. They know that they can win with them.

What we don't know is how to win without them.

There are a scattered few great horsemen in our recent history who understood the challenge and strived to that end. They knowingly sacrificed their pocketbooks and show record in an effort to try to achieve the same incredible results while maintaining a higher level of personal and professional integrity. They understood that the relationship between man and horse was more than a mathematical equation.

And so the call goes out to those who seek fame and fortune; are they strong-willed enough to go against the tide and discipline themselves to try to achieve it with purity? Can they be handy enough to get it done ethically? Most do not have what it takes. Most will succumb to peer pressure and insecurity. They will settle for a few overrated buckles, a few dollars and a show record only a decade or two long and miss their chance at history.

My mind drifts back to the flickering lights in the arena and I send a prayer up to the heavens, that this man might step from the spotlight long enough to use his incredible talents to a good end, to truly win, and carry us with him to a new level, as horsemen and as people.