

Horse Love

On a recent trail ride to Mt. Humphrey near the San Francisco Peaks in Flagstaff, Arizona I was accompanied by nine women who all loved their horses. There was a lot to love. Every color and breed was represented from paints and palomino quarter horses to a bay Thoroughbred, a black Morgan, and a little gray Icelandic that took two smooth steps to every pace my old mare could muster.

After breakfast the first morning I watched one lady hop after her horse with one foot in the stirrup as he moved away while she was attempting to mount. After about ten hops she'd stop and rub his neck to calm him and then start hopping again. This went on for some time causing the other horses to fidget and swish their tails, bob their heads, and prance around impatiently. Eventually she cornered him at a tree and jumped on before he could figure out how to avoid her.

That night around the campfire the lady asked how she might train her horse to stand still while she mounted. A "group think" broke out with training techniques flying back and forth across the fire so fast the lady began to shrink before my eyes. She took notes, asked questions and listened attentively as each one of her friends knew exactly what to do. Finally Mona, the trail cook, stood up, stretched, and groaned, "If it were me, I wouldn't be petting on no horse that showed me no more respect than that. But then, that's just me" she mumbled as she walked off in the dark toward her tent.

A moment of silence broke out. Everyone stared at the fire. One lady shrugged. Another poked the embers with a stick. "I think she means your horse doesn't respect you," she offered.

"I don't think that's what she means. I mean, my horse loves me. You should see how he likes me to rub him and how happy he is when I come into the barn in the morning. I really have a beautiful bond with my horse. I really love him. Almost as much as my kids."

Horses do not love in a sentimental way. For them, love is respect. As herd animals they always need a leader. Someone they can trust to make them feel safe. The leader must show strength, demonstrate dominance, and have the herd's best interests at heart. When your horse begins to trust you because you act like a leader, he will respect you. His respect for you is his way of loving you.

I encouraged my riding companion to reestablish her relationship with her horse by going back to the beginning. She began to lead her horse along the fence in her arena, insisting that her horse's neck remain adjacent to her shoulder at all times. If the horse lagged behind she would tap him on the rump with a lunging whip. If he charged ahead, she would circle him inward and go on as if nothing happened. After a while, her horse began to get the feel of her leadership and now, when she mounts, stands still until she asks him to move off.

Never believe anyone who says they love you when they show you no respect.