

Horsemanship – the elusive art of learning to speak horse
Chris Picken

What is Horsemanship? Is it the 'art of riding horse', as stated in most dictionaries? I doubt it as it hardly describes the complex relationship that is required between two such disparate creatures – human and equine. For me, horsemanship is communicating to your horse through your body language in such a way that they are physically balanced, mentally happy, and understand what is required of them. Chris Irwin (<http://chrisirwin.com/horsemanship>) describes this much more eloquently than me: "The language of horses is body language. Therefore, it's not just WHAT we do with a horse that is important but **HOW we use our bodies** when we do what we do with our horses that should be kept first and foremost in mind. How relaxing and enjoyable the training is for any breed of horse of any age, or, conversely, how stressful the experience is, depends entirely on HOW the trainer behaves with his or her body language.'

As an older rider, I find horsemanship incredibly difficult to master, frustrating most days, and utterly wonderful when I get it right.

Horsemanship is difficult as it requires subtle movements that must be executed with synchronicity. It is 'inside-leg-to-outside-reign-sit-up-and-ride-leg-on-get-into-position-3-and-wait-for-your-horse-and-don't-climb-up-her-neck' all at once. During competitions, I find it difficult for my ageing, imperfect body to remember all these subtle physical cues and I am lucky if I can remember to just 'sit up and ride'.

For a novice rider like me, horsemanship can be inconsistent. You can ride wonderfully in one lesson and then everything goes to pot in the next. Horsemanship requires that you ride the horse that shows up in the lesson or in the moment. In the ring, I have started out with a horse that seems to need motivation to bring wind, never mind break into a canter, only to find that by the eighth jump I am half halting for all I am worth so that I do not become a projectile over the next X-rail. In this sense, horsemanship is akin to being a Girl Guide whose motto, Be Prepared, sums up the approach one needs to succeed in this sport.

Horsemanship is patience and relaxation. When I am tense and anxious my horse senses my dark emotions and the lesson goes accordingly. In November, I acquired a beautiful mare called Monday. Monday was out of shape and had not been ridden for quite a while so jumping tired out the poor girl. I remember a particularly frustrating lesson when I could not motivate her to get over the jumps. She sensed my frustration and lesson did not go particularly well. While venting to my husband after the lesson he told me I needed to ride like a man. Men, he told me, can be terrible at a task but afterwards, they strut away thinking they conquered the universe. At my next lesson I decided I would be positive and encouraging no matter what happened. Monday sensed my new frame of mind and since that day, our lessons keep improving. It is not only my responsibility to communicate to Monday with my body language, I must bring a calm mindset as well.

Horsemanship sometimes mean you trust the horse and take a back seat. We have all found ourselves in a situation where we make a mistake, like having the wrong approach to

a jump, and somehow these wonderful creatures forgive us and tell us, "it's ok. I know what you want." They jump and although it doesn't look pretty, we are eternally grateful to them for saving our backsides.

Horsemanship is magical. I have run marathons, I hold a second-degree black belt in Taekwon-do, and once upon a time, ran close to a 4-minute mile, but nothing compares to the moment when my mind and body matches my horse's, and everything works. At a horseshow in August I had a disastrous round in the hunter division. Bailey refused several jumps and we were a complete gong show. Knowing that 99% of the fault was mine, I asked the judge afterwards for her feedback. She commented that my upper body was too stiff and rigid, and I wasn't moving with the horse. The next day in the jumper division I decided that my only goal was to relax and jump **with** Bailey. Bailey loved the jumper division and was excited to get into the ring. When the whistle blew, I relaxed my shoulders and asked Bailey to canter. She responded with joy in her step and approached every jump with confidence. While our round was not perfect from an equitation perspective, we enjoyed the experience together. The next two rounds were the same and when we got to the jump off, I even managed a fancy roll back over a jump – a difficult manoeuvre for an old lady with a gimpy leg. I felt euphoric after our final round and when I dismounted, I knew Bailey felt the same way. She kept head butting me asking for pets and cuddles. It was her way of telling me, "I told you I am a perfect horse". We even managed to collect a few ribbons that day although they really didn't matter to me. For a moment I had managed to display horsemanship and worked with Bailey as a team. It is an experience I will never forget.

Finally, horsemanship never ends. That is the challenge and joy of the sport. Every new horse and every new situation requires different skills and approaches. I am never going to find myself in the Olympic ring, but I can always learn and improve. For me, that is enough.