



Sadie was still young when this portrait was taken of us in 1986 -- she was 20, I was 34.

ON FOSTERING LONG LIFE: Five Rules of “Requisite Love”

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I read with some interest the piece in a recent issue of Equus Magazine entitled “Help Your Horse Live Longer.” The article discussed five areas that are especially important to the care and management of the older horse: see to his teeth, control parasites, feed him right, give him appropriate turnout, and have regular checkups from your veterinarian. These are good suggestions but, I feel, the list completely leaves out the most important things. I have some experience with keeping older equines – I joke with people when they ask what sort of horses I own, telling them, “Well, my *old* horse is 38.” “Wow!” they generally say. “Yeah,” I reply, “and then I also have a *young* horse – he’s 29.”

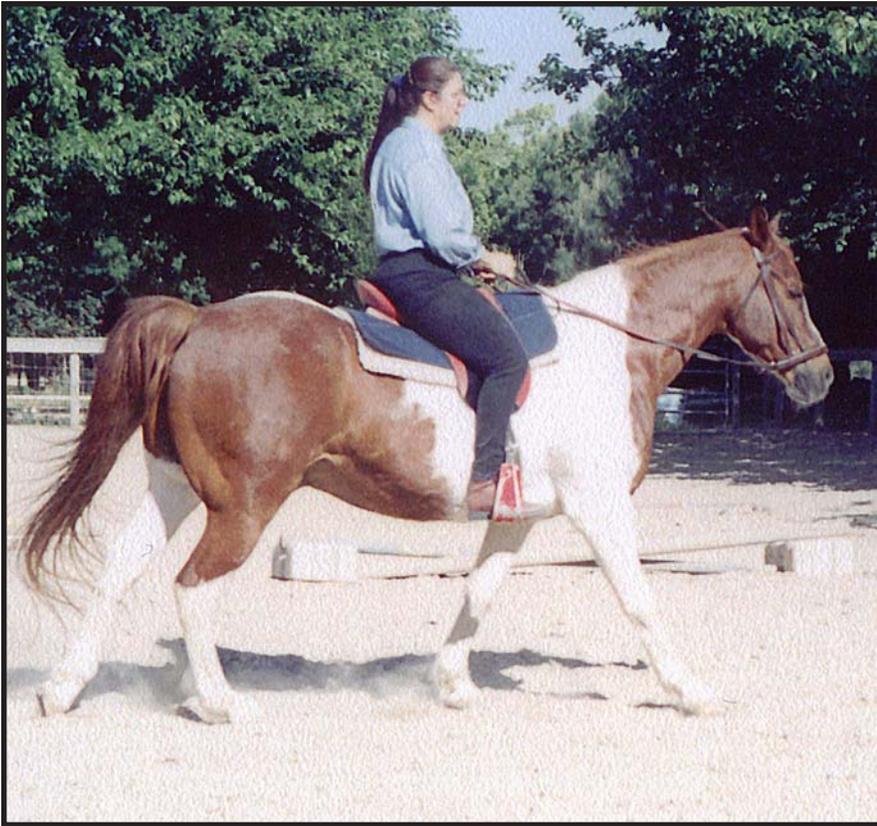
My “old” horse is Sadie. Some readers may remember her, an Arabian X

Quarter Horse mare, who stars in my conformation-study video and who was featured numerous times on the TV series “Living with Animals”. She frequently appeared in the pages of Equus back in the 1980’s.

My “young” horse is Painty, an American Saddlebred X Quarter Horse gelding. He has also graced Equus’ pages and is featured in “The Birdie Book”, my study of equine body language and emotion. Most recently, Painty appeared on The History Channel in a program on famous horse breeders.

As the photos make clear, Painty and Sadie are still alive and thriving — and it is certainly not due merely to adhering to five rules relating to good management of the physique. I haven’t neglected good management, of course, but I think that their ability and willingness to live on is primarily due to what I call “requisite love.” In a moment I will suggest five “rules of requisite love”, but first, let me give you brief bios on these two horses, my old friends, so that you may judge the results.

Painty is a highly-trained individual of the High School persuasion, a lovely, utterly balanced pleasure ride. He knows and performs over a dozen “tricks” – actually demonstrations of focus, willingness, good humor, and intelligence – in addition to all the lateral work ever invented, pirouettes, flying changes,



Painty and Dr. Deb at an easy canter in 2002, when Painty was 27. Painty's canter was just a joy to ride.

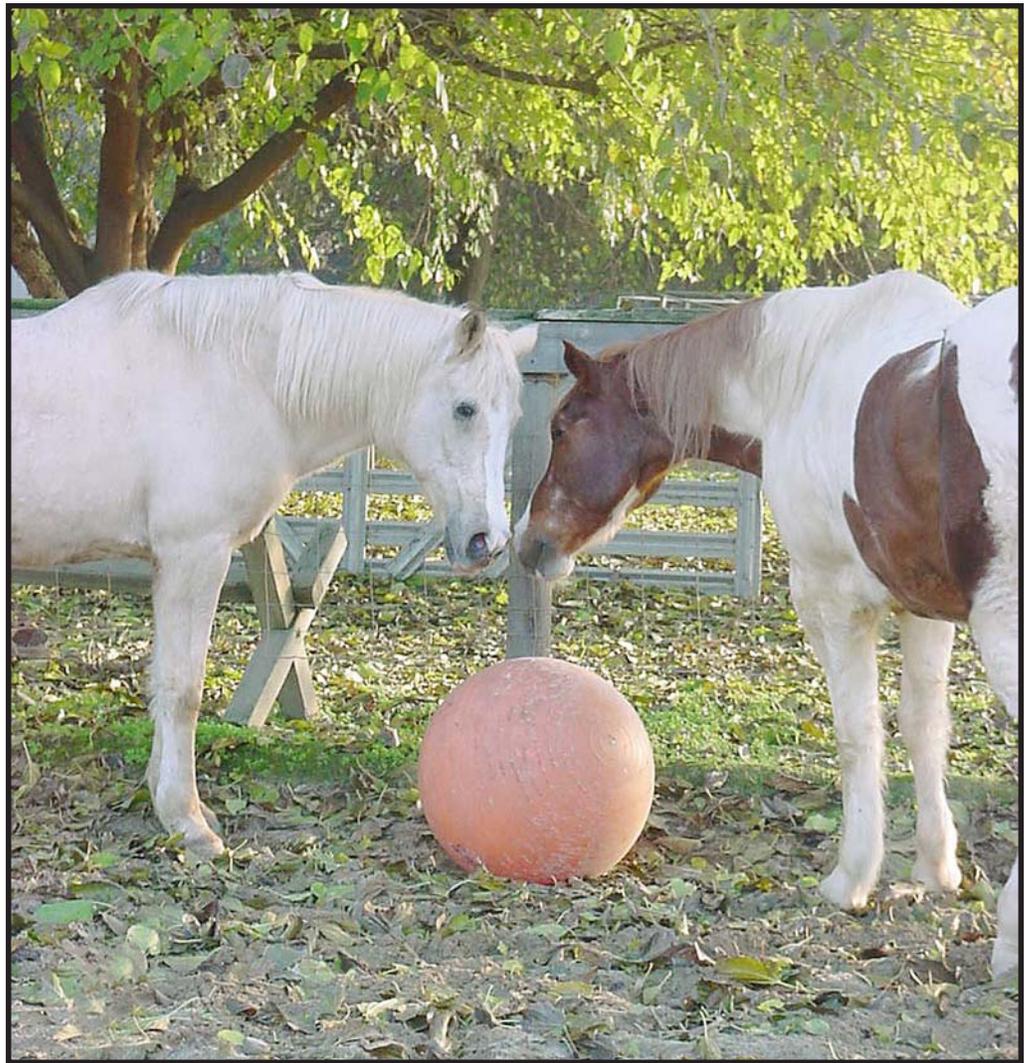
passage, and Spanish Walk. Even at 29 years, Painty is as supple as a cat and easily performs 10-meter figure-eights at both trot and canter. He sparkles when he helps my students to understand canter mechanics by demonstrating departures on a specified lead from a halt. He also positively loves cattle and will sort, pen, cut, or help me rope them; will open and close any configuration of gate – without letting the cattle out; and will lead a more unsure horse over any trail obstacle, whether it be tarp, water, or lumber. Countless students who have come to California to study with us have been helped to improve their timing and “feel” by working with Painty in free-longeing, mounting the circus drum, rolling a ball by pushing it with his nose, or bowing.

Sadie, my “old” horse, is retired, her once golden coat now faded to clear yellow, so that with her snow-white mane and tail she’s as sunny as a Shasta daisy. I bought Sadie when she was 14 years old and so have owned her now for 24 years – nearly the whole span of time that I have been learning horsemanship. We did everything together: a little jumping, a little Western showing, a lot of trail riding, dressage, costume exhibitions. She is the toughest, most sensible, most unflappable horse I ever rode, and that is a good thing because back at the beginning, when I knew less than was good for either of us, she saved our necks more times than I can count. Sadie taught me common sense on horseback, the nuts and bolts of basic management, and how to work with a horse rather than against one in training.

I quit riding Sadie at age 32; I wanted to retire her before there was any chance of wearing her out. Those who know her will realize that I say this with wry humor – there is, it seems, very little chance of that. We call her “the Iron Lady.” When Sadie was 20, I was telling people “she thinks she’s 10.” When Sadie was 25, I said “she thinks she’s 12.” Sadie is about as good an advertisement for the soundness and durability of the Arabian as there could be. One day last year, out at the ranch where she lives, our barn manager Hermie and I were looking out toward the pasture. We had another yellow mare in the stables at the time, a five year old. The manure wagon was parked so that it partially blocked our view — we could only see the horses’ heads and necks beyond it, out in the field. Suddenly, above the level of the wagon we saw a yellow body go bounding, bouncing, bucking, and leaping. Hermie laughed and said, “Look! There goes young Petunia.” “Look again!” I said. “That was Sadie!”

Watching Good Friends Age

This is not to say that my horses are without some physical problems and definite signs of age. Both have more trouble than they used to in maintaining body weight and muscular condition; both of their backs are lower than when they were younger. Both have windpuffs around the ankles, both have some palpable thickening of the tendons, and both tend to “stock up” on one or both hind legs especially if weather forces us to keep them in the stall for more than 24 hours. Both have hollows over their eyes due to resorption of all the post-orbital fat. Painty has a lot of white on his face, and



This shot was taken in the fall of 2004, only a few months before both my old friends passed on. Yes, the horses were good friends with each other. They were both aware that they were owned by me. There was a definite pecking order, too, with Painty on top. I believe that Painty missed Sadie when she went.

both their faces are sunken above the cheekbones due to the fact that neither one of them has a viable tooth in their head – their teeth are completely worn out. Sadie maintains a number of tooth-stumps; her “style” of aging caused the stumps of the teeth to be welded into the sockets by hyper-cementation of the periodontal ligaments.

Painty has about every other tooth; his “style” is to have them loosen, teetering in and out of the socket, hanging on by a thread or two. When one gets loose, I have my veterinarian remove it. I have been lucky that my horses have lost their cheek teeth one or two at a time over a span of years, so that they might have a chance to learn to “quid”.

As a result, they’re both champions at geriatric hay-processing: they first butt and shake their alfalfa so as to knock the leaves off, then lick up the leaves, which break up into small particles in the presence of saliva and are therefore not dangerous for them to swallow. Once they’ve eaten the alfalfa leaves, they



turn to their “grain” which is actually mostly hay pellets, especially valuable to older horses because they are made of good hay, as close as possible to a horse’s natural food, but ground up so that there are no particles in the pellets larger than coarse sand. This is important because research in my anatomy lab has shown that in a young horse with good teeth, that’s the size of the particles that make up the bolus that the animal will swallow. In a young horse, the teeth grind the grass or hay to this fine consistency; in old horses, a machine has to do it before we feed it to them.

Besides the pelleted hay, Painty and Sadie also get a cup of “senior” sweetfeed with each meal, plus another cup of rice bran. They like the taste, and the rice bran provides extra calories. Sadie also gets a tablespoon of corn oil with her meals. We feed them three times per day.



Once they’ve licked up their pellets and sweet feed, they settle in for the long stretch on the hay stems – and I do mean “long stretch” because since Painty and Sadie are functionally toothless it takes several hours for them to finish their “token” flake. Sadie takes the stems in, chops them once or twice with her tooth stumps, mulls them around for a while in her mouth, and then spits them out. Painty enjoys mashing stems into wads like grampa without his dentures working on a piece of celery. He sucks the flavor out, then ejects the quid. When Painty and Sadie go out on grass, they do the same things they do with the hay – in other words, they have the pleasure of grazing, but they don’t swallow much. By such “instinctive wisdom” they can continue to live the lives of horses and yet avoid colic due to intestinal obstruction arising from swallowing long, unchewed stems.



Other problems relate to their feet and their skin. As horses age, their immune systems become less efficient, and they are therefore more susceptible to fungal attack, whether in the form of rain-rot or thrush. Of course, if the feet are allowed to become unbalanced so that the heels contract, thrush becomes more of a problem. We have gone through bouts of bad farriery which resulted in unbalanced, bruised, abscessing and thrushy feet and ensuing lameness. This was not the farrier’s fault, but my own bad

Old horses’ heads take on sharper contours due to resorption of fat and changes in the teeth. As the substance of their cheek teeth gets used up, their faces become sunken along a line above the cheekbones. This is more evident when you compare Sadie and Painty to my newest horse, Oliver, who was only 11 when these photos were taken.

judgement – I am responsible for everything that happens to my horses. Currently, I have been fortunate to find a farrier with high-level expertise and a great “eye” for proper trimming, who has gotten the hoofs back to normal, relieving the lameness as well as the thrush.

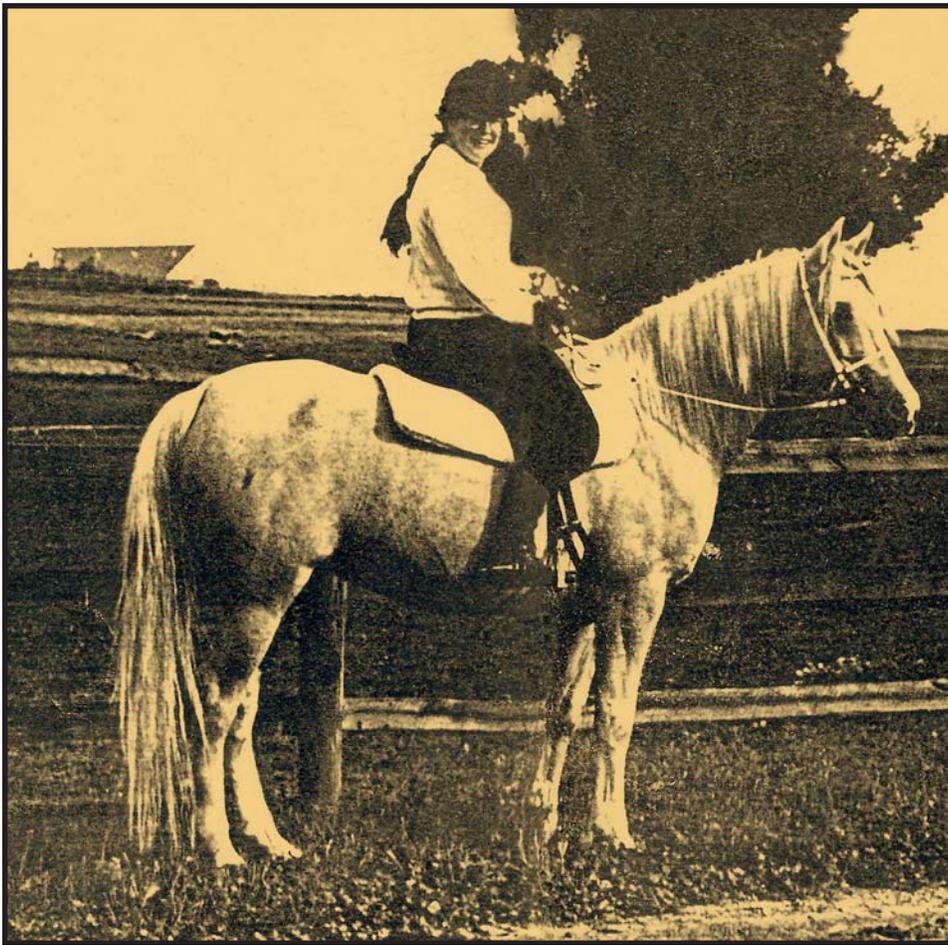
Painty has gone through a spate of ringbone and spavinny hocks, manifestations of his tendency toward osteoarthritis. At one point he was so sore in all of his joints that he could hardly hobble away if another horse chased him out at pasture, and I was considering putting him down. However, a trial of glucosamine, administered via intramuscular injection under the supervision of one of my veterinarians, proved almost miraculously effective, and after a few once-monthly injections Painty not only became pasture-sound but fully rideable again. That was three years ago. Since he’s bright-eyed and eager to go most days, I plan to continue to ride him until he tells me he doesn’t enjoy it anymore.

The main difference now in how he goes is that his stamina is less than it used to be before he was 25; he will get out of breath and the breathing is sometimes stertorous. When riding him, I listen to his breathing and I pay attention to what he tells me moment by moment, and meter our activity level accordingly. Resting between bouts of athletic effort is our normal pattern of schooling in any case. Rest equals reward, and ease and freedom allows that wise old mind plenty of scope so that Painty can, as Ray Hunt says, “come from the other side to help me out.” One of the most difficult problems that any horse owner faces is to maintain the horse’s desire to help – his motivation and enthusiasm – over the long span of years. You have to be continually creative to provide variety and find new things to do and to learn when you reside at the same farm for years. This is one spot where I get an “A+” from my horses and I’m not too big to brag about it.

Painty hasn’t had any significant injuries, but Sadie has collected more dings over the years than a demolition derby queen. She’s an independent loner in a herd, generally liking to graze off by herself to one side, but if somebody harasses her, especially another mare, she’ll give them kick for kick. As a result, years ago she suffered a broken jaw (and lost two lower cheek teeth as a result); fractured a hind splint in four places; and has one frontal sinus that is pretty much stove in. When the other horse kicked Sadie in the jaw, it crushed one of the salivary ducts on that side and this caused a buildup of saliva from the submandibular glands. At first this contributed to swelling under the periosteum of the jawbone on the affected side. When that filled with “exostosis” or cement-like bony patch material, an area on her throat in the region of the thyroid gland began to swell. Gradually over the years this swelling (or benign tumor) has gotten larger, but it has never interfered with her breathing or swallowing or her ability to be ridden comfortably on the bit.

Five Suggestions for “Deeper” Care

In an era and in a culture that often starts young horses into strenuous work years before they are physically mature, and which therefore is often compelled to retire them, already worn out, years before what ought to be their physical prime, I think these two horses have a lot to teach us. I know from worldwide correspondence that there is a great groundswell of interest in real information concerning the schedule of skeletal maturation in horses; the article on this subject originally published in the Equine Studies Institute Website has now been reprinted in more than 100 magazines and club newsletters worldwide. By extension I think it is safe to conclude that many – probably most – horse owners in developed countries want their horses, whom they regard as friends or even members of their families, to live long, productive lives.



At left, a scan of a photo taken of Sadie and me in 1986. Sadie was sturdy and handsome. Besides an unflappable temperament, Sadie also had “presence” that sometimes made her seem bigger than life. Once when I was schooling her in an arena near a public road, a man went by in his car, then slowed, turned around, and pulled into the driveway. Sauntering up to the fence, he said, “Sure do like that hoss’s color. How much do you want for a stud fee on that stallion?”

Here are my five golden rules for “requisite love.” They represent an attitude and approach to horsemanship that I feel will make it more likely that your horses will be happy, comfortable, and productive for the whole span of their lives.

1. Buy Good Livestock

This may not, at first glance, seem like a way to love a horse – but I think you actually have to begin loving a horse before you buy him. World riding master Nuno Oliveira puts it this way: “the choice of a horse must first be a love affair.”

What I’m going to say next follows from this. In looking at a horse to buy, please don’t start with the physical conformation. That comes later. First, you need to connect with who the horse is — how he looks at you. There has to be an attraction there *on his part* that implies the possibility of respect, admiration, and mutual tolerance of each other’s foibles. From this, true friendship can grow. It is friendship – *meaningful connection with a significant human being* – that is the main factor in causing a horse to want to live a long time: he wants to live *with you* a long time.

Once your “inner wisdom” tells you that the horse you’re looking at is looking at you like he wants you to own him, you can think about his conformation. Though I am not going to discuss that aspect in detail here, if you want your horse to live a long time, it’s desirable to get a well-conformed horse. You should

also seek out your horse's sire and dam and any relatives you can find, to ascertain whether conformation points run in the family.

You do not have to have a horse with a pedigree to have a great horse. Sadie never had "papers" to my knowledge, but with a little asking around, I managed to discover some things about her family. Her mother was a big, tough, dark yellow Quarter Horse mare with a goodly dose of that great old sire Leo in her. Toward the end of her life – she also lived to be over 30 — she worked in a feedlot, sorting cattle. I do not certainly know the name of Sadie's sire, but I do know that he was an Arabian. There were not very many Arabian stallions in the Kansas City area in 1965; the most likely candidate is a stallion named Tugaloo. A substantial and well-conformed grey, he was a good-minded horse trained for ranch and stock work as well as for show. He lived into his late teens.

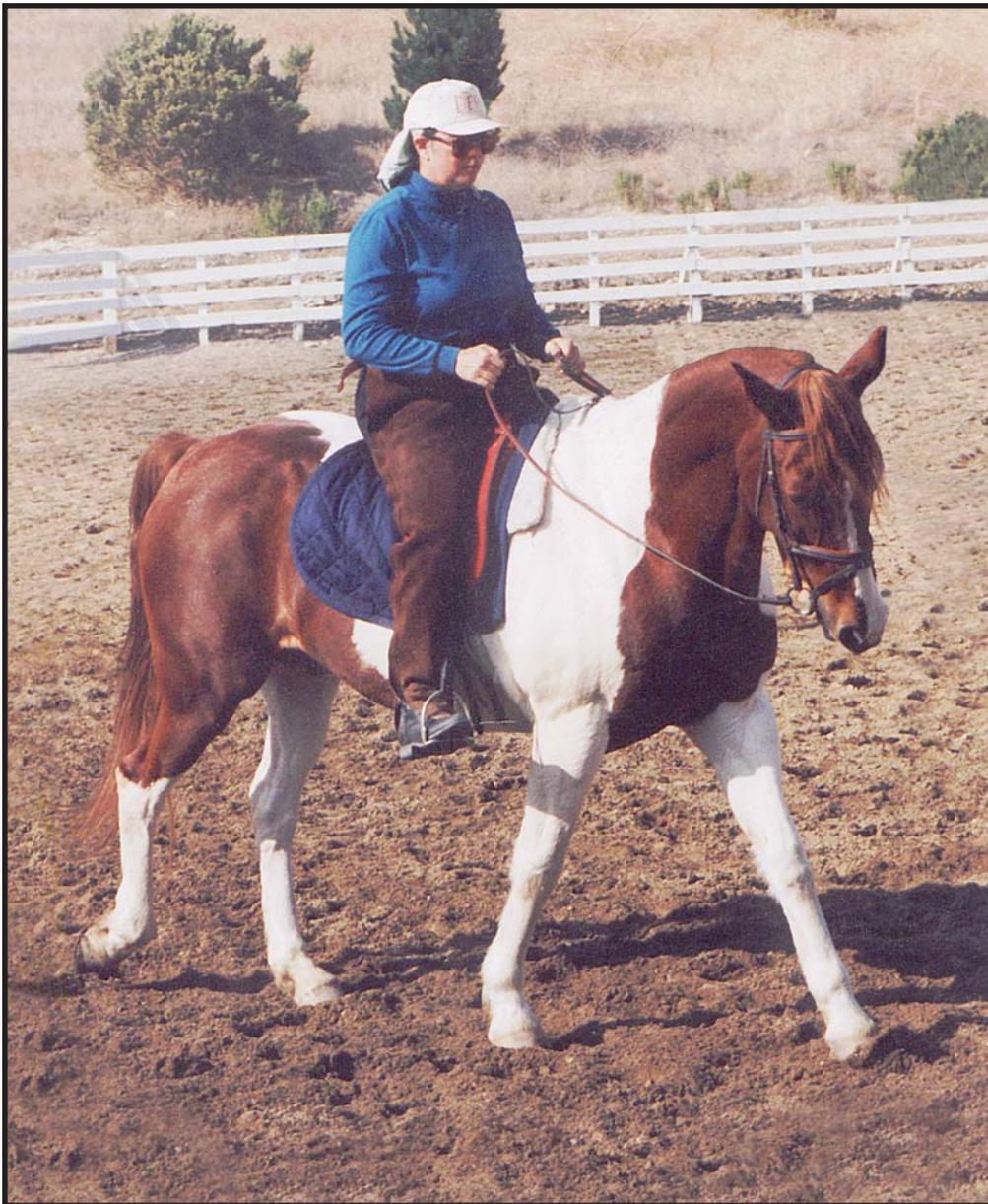
Painty was bred for color and "Western" riding, but he came out much bigger than average and did not look much like a Quarter Horse. This puzzled the man who bred him. When I interviewed the breeder, he said, "Yeah, that was something I never did understand – about every second or third year, his mother would throw a 'giant' foal." Looking through her pedigree and the pedigrees of the several stallions that this man had stood over the years, I saw names such as "Rex", "Stonewall", "Bourbon", "Genius", and "King". The breeder, who was familiar only with Quarter Horse history, interpreted these as obscure Quarter Horse bloodlines, when in fact they are old-fashioned American Saddlebreds. Their genetic influence is the source of the "giant" foals, and they account not only for Painty's height, but his high action, great bone, wonderful hoof quality, high withers, wide loins, and tail that comes off the top of wide hips. The Quarter Horse side of his ancestry added breadth, substance, and tons of muscle.

There's a natural wave in Painty's mane and tail, he grows a long, lank, straight winter coat, has long fetlocks and curly, fuzzy hairs growing out of the backs of his legs from the fetlocks all the way up to the backs of his knees – yet his summer coat is slick, short, fine, and shiny. All these things are characteristic of American Saddlebreds. And, no one even the least bit familiar with the Quarter Horse could ever mistake Painty's long, boxy head as representative of that breed. There is no breed of horse in the world with a more comfortable canter; Painty can collect to an extreme and canter as slow as four miles per hour — or stretch out those long, rubbery strides to go at twenty-four miles per hour. There is no breed of horse in the world more highly pre-adapted for solo performance exhibition, none which is easier to motivate or more eager or intelligent; no breed easier to collect, and none in my experience from which it is so easy to elicit the passage. It is going to be very difficult to find another horse like Painty when he goes.

2. Give Them Your Attention

By this I do not merely mean going through the daily motions of feeding, cleaning, inspection, and doctoring. Rather, I mean to remind you of how important it is to be *fully present* when you are with your horse. I have been lucky to be around some very fine horsemen in the last twenty years, and one of the greatest gifts one of these wise old men gave me was the suggestion that, no matter how well a training session may seem to have gone, *the most important part of it occurs afterwards*.

My teacher encouraged me to linger with my horse after every ride. He wanted me to take the tack off, turn the horse loose (if safe to do so) in the area where he was ridden, let him roll, and then spend unhurried time scratching his favorite itchy spots. He said, "you can't pet them too much". He also said,



You do not have to have a horse with “papers” to have a great horse. Painty was one of the most athletic horses I ever climbed on, and he had so much “try” that you had to be careful not to over-ride him. This photo was taken in 1996 at a Ray Hunt clinic in Carmel, California. Painty was beautiful when he collected himself, with a shapely neck, powerful hind-quarters, and a sweet facial expression. I was extremely happy to get this horse -- it truly was a “love affair” as Nuno Oliveira says, and Painty and I enjoyed many hundreds of great afternoons, like this one, in each other’s company. This is what “pleasure riding” is supposed to be like.

“this is where the horse learns the most.” My teacher was helping me realize that productive “riding” has to be much *less* about saddle-time, mechanics, and technique and much *more* about relationship. It is from this unstructured time spent in my horse’s company that I learned enough about him to know, when I am in the saddle, what he is probably thinking about and what he might need from me.

Having practiced this for a decade, I now notice many riders who are what I term “drifty-minded.” Sure, their backsides are in contact with the saddle, but skin-deep is about as far as their connection with their horse goes. What they don’t realize is how hard on him it actually is when they spend the whole time yacking to their friends or gazing blankly off into space. When something comes along that bothers or troubles the horse, these riders are unaware of it because they are not paying attention. Only when the horse’s unease builds to a level where he must raise his head in alarm, jump aside, hurry away, or take other measures unpleasant to the rider, does she suddenly “wake up”. Then, unfortunately, the next thing I am liable to see is that the horse gets punished for being “bad”.

Even harder on the horse is the rider who spends an entire hour “training” the horse for competition – not through perfecting the smallest elements that are the basis of all great performance, but by endless repetition of the most superficial skills. We see this, for example, in the aspiring competition roper who wears his horse out by making endless identical runs, in the teenaged girl who will jump her horse lame, in the dressage enthusiast who spends half an hour on the same twenty-meter circle to the left, making not one single change in bend, tempo, rhythm, step length, or gait.

The effect of this kind of thoughtlessness is to make the horse into a robot. Though they may be athletes, these people are no more “present” with their horse than the drift-minded trail-rider. They do not seem to realize that all horses have minds and feelings; they treat their horses as if they were mere gymnasium equipment. The animal is there only “incidentally” to his ability to carry the competitor to trophies, money prizes, or social approbation – and you better believe, every horse who finds himself in such a situation is acutely aware of the fact.

The first rule of training is to demand that the horse pay attention to us. Like a child who is gazing out the window when he’s supposed to be minding the teacher at the chalkboard, a horse who is not paying attention to his handler is in no position to learn. He will also be a danger to himself and others. My point is that if we insist that the horse pay attention to us, we must give him an equal amount of attention in return. What would result if the teacher sat at the head of the classroom, staring out the window? Effective teaching starts from relationship: it cannot begin until *the teacher notices* her students’ individual needs and propensities.

This all probably seems reasonable and makes logical sense. But the long-term benefits of *conscious noticing* are much deeper and more subtle: by paying attention to him, you convey to your horse the conviction that he is *owned*. That’s how you become the “significant human being” in the relationship. By giving your horse this, you give him an abiding sense of self-worth. I have kept horses at any number of large facilities over the years, places where they have a string of “schoolies”. Whenever one of these animals got picked out by the “right” kind of person – one who would spend time with him, pet him, groom him, talk quietly to him, give him that all-important attention – his status in the herd pecking-order went up. It’s not easy to quantify “scientifically”, but horses seem to need somebody they can whicker to, and I think that’s a key factor in helping them live longer.

3. Teach Them Tricks.

Not too long ago, I was having a telephone conversation with a nationally-famous horse trainer and riding instructor whom I had not seen in quite a while. As we were catching up on news, I mentioned how much fun my horses have mounting their homemade “circus” drum. There was a silence on the other end of the line, and then with a gasp this professional said to me, “Deb, you don’t mean to say – you teach your horses *tricks*?”

Why yes – I do. There was a time when I didn’t, when I believed that “tricks” were bad for horses, would ruin their dressage, would make them “anticipate”. Back then, I believed that movements were beautiful and important to the horse’s development, but that “tricks” smacked of pretention, shortcuts, and fakery.

What I didn’t realize is that a horse’s mind is a terrible thing to waste. Horsemanship clinician Harry Whitney likes to say, “please remember – all aids first have to go through the horse’s brain.” Unless he

What's so cute about this photo is that Painty and little Jonathan are *both* standing up on drums. Jonathan figured out he'd be more visible to Painty if he could climb up a little higher when asking Painty to "wave goodbye". Painty helped many children learn about horses.



uses his brain, a horse cannot learn how you want him to use his body. Prevented from using his mind, a horse will become discouraged. He'll turn into a robot – or a rogue. Today, I want my horse's full participation in every shoulder-in, every creek crossing; I want him to think about what he could or should do to help me every time I open a gate, approach the letter "X", or swing a rope.

I got into teaching tricks because I discovered that if I taught a horse to make a plie bow (the two-footed bow or "camel stretch"), he instantly became a better mover: the mobility of the shoulders improved, and he carried his neck with a better arch. The first horse I taught this to was Sea Horse, an Arab; but I should probably say, he taught me how to teach it to him. This arose because he particularly enjoyed doing it and would bow down so low each time I asked him to that his chest would touch the ground and his forefeet would extend as far out to the front as they could go.

Sea Horse not only taught me how to teach him this trick, he showed me how much it surprised him that I wanted to *teach* him something instead of simply assuming that he already knew how to move, and demanding that he do it. I would set up a little problem for him to solve – something like "lift your left forefoot and set it down six inches to the front when I say the word 'bow'" — and then his curiosity would just kill him until he could figure out how to obtain the reward he knew would be there for succeeding at this little sub-component of the finished bow.

I learned that Sea Horse liked learning, and he, in turn, learned *how to learn from a human*. It changed his whole attitude toward me – and, I think, other humans too, so that when Sea Horse went on to a new owner, he was in a much better position to succeed and be valued from the start. This excellent



Sadie tooling around at a gallop. She always enjoyed a good run, with her tail flagging up true to her Arabian ancestry. Top photo taken when she was 32; bottom photo at age 37. It's important to permit your older horse to have as much "play time" and time out on pasture as he can tolerate and enjoy.

reciprocation has occurred with every horse I have worked with since. The variety in the ease with which different horses can be engaged and motivated is positively amazing, and this of course only adds to my enjoyment of the art and science of horsemanship.

While I was employed by DreamWorks studio as technical consultant for the film "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron", part of my duties involved helping animators to recognize and interpret horses' facial and bodily expressions. To do this, we would get a different horse for each week's class and I would then attempt to engage the animal in learning something new. Most were willing – to step up on a platform, roll a ball with their nose, bow, pick up a hank of rope, cross a tarp, jump a cavalletto, take a few lateral steps, or back straight. Then the animators enjoyed what I regard as the most delightful experience in all of horsemanship: "being there" at the precise moment an animal "gets" how to do something – watching the penny drop. I regard it as awesome that we humans, whose lineage has been separate from that of the horse for better than sixty million years, can still engage in this "conversation".

Trainer Chuck Grant observed, "once a horse has learned a trick from you, he will continue to perform that trick so long as he is physically able." It's likely that your horse will be physically able to bow, step up on a solid platform, "wave goodbye" with one front hoof, fetch, roll a ball, "count", or work a low teeterboard

long past the time when he can be competitive in shows. If he knows these things along with how to drag a tarp, stand still to let a novice practice with the roping dummy, confidently load and unload from the horse trailer, open and close gates from horseback, or push cattle at a walk – you have almost guaranteed that horse's survival, because there are thousands of people who want a horse just like that for their grandchild, for their own first horse, or to work on their ranch or in their lesson program.

It never fails to impress me that my mare Sadie is now old enough to have (human!) grandchildren. She worked for years as a “schoolie” and in handicapped riding programs, and she has certainly helped to raise plenty of human children. She has never kicked, bitten, struck, stepped on, or run off with any of them, while kindly consenting to carry them for what is, in the aggregate, literally thousands of enjoyable miles. What could possibly substitute for that wise old mind?

4. Beware of Cures Worse than the Disease.

My friend and senior colleague Matthew Mackay-Smith, DVM, has been in practice for over 40 years. One of the wisest things I have heard him say is “beware of cures that are worse than the disease.”

Giving first-aid and medical treatment when it is needed and when it will protect or enhance the horse’s quality of life is both humane and sensible. But there *inevitably* comes a time when medical intervention becomes not only expensive but inhumane. There are situations which may arise even before the end of the horse’s life when it is most appropriate *not* to give treatment.

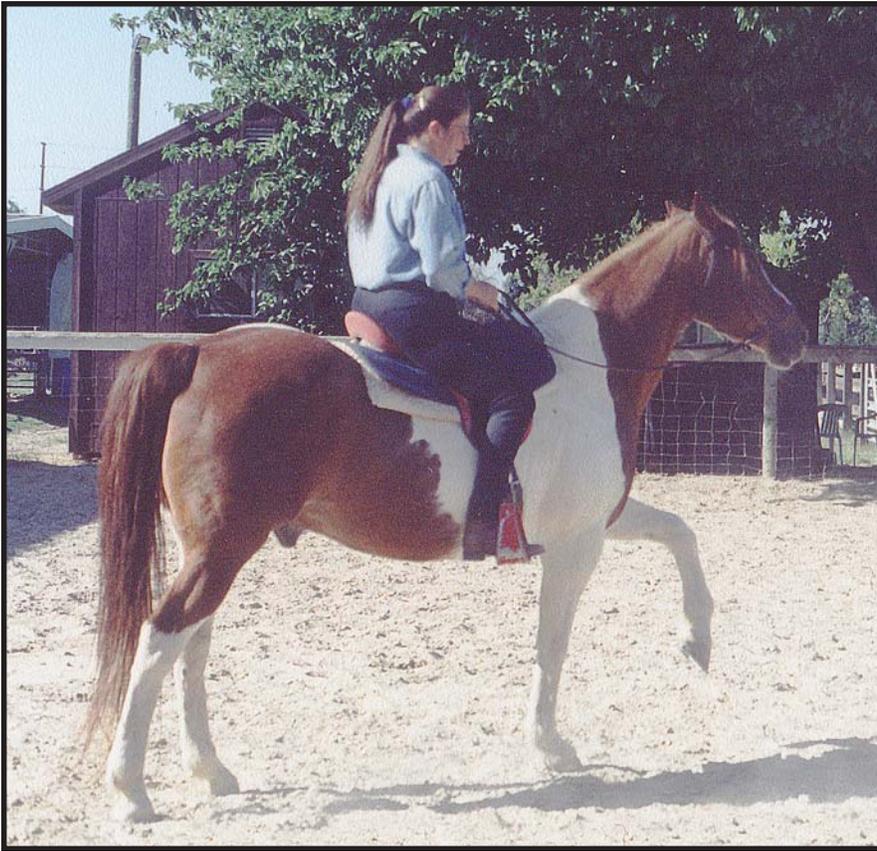
I mentioned above in this article that Sadie has a large tumor in her throat. This began to develop when she was 26 years old, and has been very slowly growing ever since. It in no way interferes with her ability to be ridden, to breathe, or to swallow. It does not break open, it is not infected, and it is not, apparently, related to any other medical condition. To remove it would not only be very expensive, but would involve surgery in which she would have to be laid down under full anaesthesia. The chances of Sadie’s dying from the anaesthesia are many times greater than the chances of her dying from the tumor. This is a good example of a treatment that would be worse than the disease.

Here’s an example of a couple I know who opted for treatment. They own a 32 year old gelding. Since they live in an urban area, the old boy spends 99% of his time in a one-half acre lot with several other horses. A quiet and safe ride, the couple would put inexperienced guests on him to go out for the occasional trail ride. On these rides, he was sound at a walk but stiff and “off” at anything beyond a slow trot.

One day, the couple found the gelding very lame in the left forefoot. They called their veterinarian for X-rays, which showed that he had fractured the coffin bone.

The choices that they then faced were these:

- (1) Euthanate the horse. Total cost: two hundred dollars. No discomfort to the horse.
- (2) Put a box-type shoe on the affected limb to stabilize the foot. Allow two to six months to see if the fracture will heal – healing occurs under these circumstances in only about 50% of cases. Provide painkillers as needed. Total cost: one thousand dollars. Moderate discomfort to the horse.
- (3) Perform surgery on the affected limb. This would involve hauling the horse to a surgical facility and full anaesthesia. Metal pins would be placed through the hoof wall and into the coffin bone to stabilize the broken parts. A six-day stay at the clinic would be needed post-op, and then stall confinement for between two and six months. After the horse returns home, the stabilizing pins must be checked and disinfected every day. Painkillers would be provided as needed. When X-rays determined that the parts



Painty and Deb having fun with a Spanish Walk. As the horse ages, his tolerance for strenuous athletic work may become less. Then you build breaks into your daily ride -- playful activities that both you and your horse enjoy but that don't demand so much stamina. After a rest, you can go back to loping or passage or pirouettes or take another jump or two. The rider who knows her horse and cares about him will monitor his reactions and level of comfort on a moment-to-moment basis.

had to put down my favorite cat, Atrox, who had terminal cancer, was “Debbie, the good lord simply doesn't give them the same lifespan He gives us.” Atrox had lived to be 18 – it was time for me to accept the inevitable, no matter how much pain I had to endure at our sad parting.

5. Invite Your Horse to be Well and Happy – But Don't Demand It

This is my way of summarizing all that I have said above. To be a good friend to human or animal means to acknowledge that we are fundamentally separate, as well as to rejoice in all that we have in common.

I see many owners whose horses are extensions of themselves – too much so. This makes it difficult for them to let the horse go when the time comes.

There is an analogy to be drawn here with people and their children. Over a hundred years ago, “scientific” horse-trainer Dennis Magner said, “Next to child-training and government comes horse-training and government – and which were the least understood it were hard to say.” The owner who is

had healed, there would be a second trip to the clinic and a second round of anaesthesia so that the pins could be removed. When all of this was done, the horse would be free of pain from the fracture, and as sound as he was originally – which is to say, only marginally sound. Total cost: over six thousand dollars. Great discomfort to the horse.

The couple opted to have the surgery. The husband is a successful businessman; they have the financial resources. Do you? Even if you do – do you believe that surgery *and all the discomfort to the horse that it involved* enhanced or protected this horse's quality of life?

Most veterinarians receive some training in how to help owners make treatment decisions on behalf of an animal for whom nothing more can be done. One of the most comforting things my veterinarian said to me when I

her horse's friend recognizes that, for all we need fresh air, clean water, and nutritious food, her horse's body is not like her body – and so she feeds the animal grass and not beefsteak. The owner who is her horse's friend will also recognize that he is not her baby but an adult organism that has no moral sense and that outweighs her by a thousand pounds. The horse is, in short, separate from us — even alien. The fact is both scary and thrilling.

Sometimes people worry that they will not “know” when the time has come to euthanize their horse. I understand that for someone who has never gone through it, there could be some intellectual question about this. But experience tells me that the owner who has been a true friend to her horse, who has not made him into an extension of her own ego, can be certain that she will have the wisdom to choose rightly.

My life at this time involves a great deal of travel. I am sometimes out of town for a month or more to distant parts of the globe. I have therefore prepared for Sadie and Painty's deaths by providing my veterinarians and the owner of the ranch where they live with legal documents stating when and how my horses may be euthanized should an incurable, final situation arise, and in the event that I am absent and cannot be reached. I have spoken one-on-one and heart-to-heart with all the people who will have to be involved.

I have also reached an understanding with my horses about this. They know I care about them. It is my belief that they would not want me to exhaust my last penny in a vain and extreme effort to keep them in this plane of existence, merely because it is going to give *me* pain to see them die. I am certain that they'll be waiting for me on the other side when I get there too – and then, by golly, there will be horsemanship indeed.

EPILOGUE

The above article was written in the fall of 2004. In March of the following Spring, Sadie was turned out in a small paddock with another mare. The two began chasing, and about five minutes later Sadie crashed into the perimeter fence. She fell to the ground, then rose. Stable personnel rushed to her side and noticed that her breathing had become very labored and noisy. They telephoned me and the veterinarian, but before either of us could arrive Sadie had expired, just a few days before her 39th birthday. Cause of death: congestive heart failure. It was a mercifully quick end to a good, long life.

One month later, I got a mid-morning telephone call from the stable manager, saying that Painty looked colicky. “OK, I'll come right over,” I said. “Be prepared,” she said, “this doesn't look real good to me. His stall looks like he's been thrashing all night.” I took Painty's leadrope when I arrived, thanked the lady for her good care, and then called the vet. When she arrived, her prognosis wasn't too hopeful either. “His gut doesn't sound very good,” she said. We gave him a good slug of Banamine and agreed that I would walk him but let her know if he either began passing stools, or got worse with an increase in pain. So Painty and I spent the whole of a last, long day together. We did a lot of walking. While the Banamine held, Painty enjoyed getting up on his drum a couple more times. He wanted to “wave goodbye”. By four p.m., it was clear that he was not going to be able to poop, and the Banamine was wearing off with Painty showing increasing discomfort. The vet came back and said, “let's do an abdominal tap. If the fluid is bloody, that will tell us that he's had a rupture.”

She carefully sterilized the injection site and then inserted a hollow needle. Out came abdominal fluid the color of red wine. I nodded curtly to her as I put the halter one one last time. “Let’s take care of it now,” I said.

Painty and I walked out to a paddock with a wide gate, where it would be easy for the chain-truck man to come later to take his body away. “How beautiful my horse looks,” I thought. “Goodbye, old friend,” I said as the drugs went in. Painty’s body sank down, the vet giving him a little push so that he would roll easily onto one side. He closed his eyes, and I saw his golden spirit go up, “dissipating into infinite distance”.

The reader will note, once again, that there was no effort made to treat maladies that are untreatable in old horses. I did not suggest it and my veterinarian did not suggest it. Sadie’s tumor did not kill her, and I did not even contemplate performing abdominal surgery for Painty’s colic; if he could not work it out himself, euthanizing him would be much the kindest response I could make. Either of these horses could have fatally colicked at any time due to the geriatric condition of their teeth – but I also consider it wrong to completely deprive a horse of pasture time. There comes a point when, if they are going to live a horse’s life, they just have to take their chances. So, we feed them hay pellets but we also let them have pasture time. This is a balance we would seek to maintain so that they can have high quality of life for as long as possible.

My best advice is this: yes, I still weep when I remember my last day with Painty, or all the fun I had over the years with Sadie. I remember, but I do not clutch and hold, just as we must also, finally, learn not to clutch and hold the reins. If you can let go cleanly, you may find that your best old friend still has some deep lessons to teach you, even though he’s gone on ahead to a happier land.

