

ASK THE ALPHA MARE

Nature versus nurture

By Kathryn Kincannon-Irwin

Dear Alpha Mare,

We have a 10-year-old TB gelding that we bought for my daughter as a hunter-jumper when he was five. He had raced for a short time, but when we bought him, he had been retrained and was a good mount. He and my daughter get along famously. Two years ago Angela went away to college. As a result, Dylan has become, in my daughter's words, a "pasture ornament." She is now only home a handful of days a year, and sometimes she rides him, sometimes she doesn't. We have had arguments over whether Dylan should be sold to someone who could give him more time and attention. She says there is nothing better for a horse than to be able to live like a horse with other horses. I say a horse is better off with a routine and sense of purpose, as long as they are ridden and handled well. What do you think?

I think you each have valid positions. And they are not mutually exclusive. On your "nurture" side of the equation, I think for a person to enhance rather than hinder a horse's welfare, quality of the experience rather than quantity of time spent, is the key.

On your daughter's side of the argument, our 11 mares and geldings here at Riversong Ranch live in the proverbial lap of equine luxury. They graze on huge pastures of meadows, trees and shelters, are a stable, sensible herd that get along better than most siblings, and have very user-friendly handling on a daily basis. As far as a "horses living like horses," they are living the life of Riley.

If healthy herd dynamics was all that is needed for horses to be their best selves, all of our horses — and we have a mixed bag of ages, breeds and temperaments — should be poster children. While it's true about half of them have natures that lend themselves to

being sensible, level-headed, low maintenance and easy going on their own, others get worked up over nothing and can be their own worst enemy. My 8-year-old TB gelding, Razzy, is a case in point.

Razzy's macho athleticism has earned him the position of alpha gelding in our herd. But he's no equine mentor. The first one to jump from the frying pan into the fire, Razzy would forever be looking for his head if it weren't attached, and I'm waiting for the day I go out to the paddock and find he has indeed cut off his nose to spite his face. Dennis-the-Menace to the core, Razzy will stir up trouble just for the heck of it, go ballistic if an underling challenges him, then pout for an hour if the alpha mare gets after him for the same disrespectful gaminess. Complicated and clever, ever a source of mischief and entertainment, he has perfected the art of drama queen and prima donna to a tee. And I wouldn't trade him for the world. It's just who he is — his basic nature, nurture aside.

Now that our indoor arena is up and I am off the road for a few months this winter, I have had the time to, at long last, focus on my horse. Time to rekindle the deep bond and really good groove that we developed during our first two years together working through all of Razzy's post-racetrack trauma — a bond I know has been worn thin by Chris and I being on the road the bulk of the last four years.

As always, Razzy kept me guessing and threw me for a loop. While he has been impeccably polite and well mannered both on the ground and under saddle — nothing short of a perfect gentleman on the surface — when you looked just beneath, something felt wrong. My first inkling came when, with the luxury of an arena with good footing, I finally had a space to lunge him for the

first time in I don't know how long. Two things happened.

As soon as I picked up the lunge whip, he bolted sideways, spun in, faced me and started backing up, his eyes all the while glued to that whip like it was a venomous viper. Yes, Razzy was one of those TB's from the track with whip issues. But we had worked through all of this six years ago to the degree that you could bring a complete novice in, hand them the lunge line and the lunge whip and no matter what mistakes they made, Razzy would stay in the frame that made him feel good. He was a flawless example of my husband's "ism" that "state of body equals state of mind." Razzy's self-carriage was a reflection of how well he liked how it felt. And he has had not one negative incident with a whip in the past six years. Not one. So why the flashback?

Secondly, when I would end a session by cutting him loose to roll in the indoor arena, he would trot around for a second before rolling, then he would get up and just stand there. Not only stand, but plant, with his body rigidly braced, his head raised just enough to ensure a constant IV drip of adrenaline, his eyes hard and glazed over. In other words, he was shutting down with a stoic, indignant posture that said, "I can't cope, but don't screw with me!" I thought it a fluke the first day, but then saw him take the same posture the next few days — sometimes staying glued and stuck for an hour or more. It blew my mind. What was up?

It finally came to me like a thunderbolt. This was Razzy's latest coping mechanism. Perhaps it was one he thought worked well enough with the herd. But it was one that definitely wasn't in his own best interest — emotionally or physically. And I just knew he was showing me this because he didn't know what to do about it



— asking for help in the only way he knew how. It was now up to me. If I waited for him to figure it out, I'd wait until hell froze over. If I continued my program of groundwork and riding, assuming he would finally get over it, I would not only be letting him down, I'd be depriving him of the nurture that his nature badly craved.

So I threw out any expectations and started at ground zero. My only goal was that Razzy remember what it felt like to feel good. I stood next to him at the shoulder, massaged his girth until he bent his head towards me, and with my other hand relaxed his top line by massaging his neck back and forth until I felt the tension unlock — the valium-feel of a low head being critical for any lasting positive change. This ultimate endorphin-blissing shape worked like magic. The eyes softened, the body let go, the mind opened. My horse was back! I did this consistently and repetitively on both sides until, with big exhales and huge body shakes, I could visibly see and feel the shift — the change for the better. After a few minutes on each side, I would encourage Razzy to move — to walk it off — by sliding away, arcing around and drawing him into body-bending figure-eights. In very short order, he was in my back pocket, calm and relaxed, yawning and sighing. When we stopped, he would lean in, polite and low-headed, then softly pick up my

hand with his nose. His way of saying it was working.

Every horse is different. But in Razzy's case, this theme — bending, stretching, staying forward through any number of activities — leading, long-lining (which he loves), lunging (whip issue again resolved), even round-penning, spells the difference between feeling good or feeling bad, giving of himself and trusting me or holding back and being cheap. Razzy and I both know that doing the best he can for himself is a far cry from being the best that he can be. A herd of like-minded victims-waiting-to-happen would only leave him stuck. A set schedule of riding and working without awareness for how he feels about it would keep him stressed. What he needed most from me, and what I was able to give him, gladly, was to do for him what he couldn't do for himself — improve his basic nature with my learned nurture to shift the angst of prey vulnerability to the power of pure willingness. Now that's my definition of getting along famously.

Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and Train the Trainer sessions throughout North America and Europe. They are currently developing Riversong Ranch Equestrian Retreat on the shores of the McLeod River just west of Edmonton. If you have a question that you'd like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please e-mail her at alphamare@explornet.com



Here Razzy, my 8-year-old Thoroughbred, and Bahama, his 16-year-old Shire-TB heartthrob, show the best face of herd dynamics as they share a tasty patch of clover.