

ASK THE ALPHA MARE

Freedom can be highly over-rated

By Kathryn Kincannon-Irwin

Eating crow is not high on my list of favourite things to do. But it can be cathartic. So rather than answer a question from a reader this month, I find myself compelled to share an uncomfortable but invaluable lesson I learned the hard way while in Holland this past September.

Last month I ended my column with: "Truly caring about our horses means we need to commit to caring about contact, and doing whatever it takes to learn to give this to them." Little did I know the gods and goddesses would, like a flashing neon sign, throw these words in my face while whispering, "Let's see if she can walk her own talk."

I'll spill the beans in advance — I didn't. Here's the story. My husband Chris Irwin has been a headline presenter at an expo in Holland the past three years, and I have presented "Alpha Mare" demonstrations there the past two years as well. This year I was also invited to be one of three guest speakers at an evening reception they give the night before the expo. The first two speakers were giving slide shows about equine performance and nutrition, so I felt the audience would enjoy some real-life interaction and decided to have a round pen presentation — my intention being to explain the "conversation" going on between the horse and myself as I free-lunged it in the enclosure.

Without much time between speakers to set up, my round pen was nothing more than temporary stakes topped with a rope, only three feet high and very flimsy. Alarm bells sounded in my head. It was 9 p.m. when they brought in the Thoroughbred gelding (an ex-racehorse no less — how ser-

endipitous was that!) by the name of Jordan. Keeping in mind that Jordan had been taken away from his 40-odd herd mates and brought by himself to an indoor arena with a few hundred predators staring at him, when they let him go in the enclosure it didn't surprise me that he started racing around, high-headed with adrenaline. But that he was also twirling his head in angry histrionics was not expected. A hot-blooded Thoroughbred, sensitive and easily excitable, yes, but I didn't expect to see him that mad right from the get-go. I took note of more alarm bells.

When they introduced me, the audience clapped. More adrenaline, more head-twirling, more distress from Jordan. More alarm bells in me. I watched Jordan test the rope a couple of times. He thankfully did not try to jump out although he could have — easily. I spoke a little to the audience about what the horse, through his body language, was showing us he was feeling and why, then told them that as I had gotten Jordan into this anxiety-ridden situation, it was now my responsibility to go in and calm him down.

No sooner had I stepped into the enclosure than Jordan stopped racing around, turned in and faced me. I was pleasantly surprised by this and instinctively backed away to draw him in. He came right to me, very politely, and as we fluidly figure-eighted around the enclosure I could feel him soften and relax with each arcing bend. I could also sense immense relief in him, and I'm sure the audience could, too. Amazingly, in just minutes, a neurotic wing-nut had become a focused friend.

All I had to do now was heed the messages Jordan had been sending me since setting foot in that arena to morph a good start into a memorable bond. I knew

Jordan trusted me. I could now earn his respect and prove to him I had "the right stuff" by moving him — aka herding him — well. With a less-than-solid enclosure, however, fine-tuned awareness and finesse were key — too strong and he would get worked up again, too soft and he would blow me off. Just right is what Jordan needed to see in me in order to counter all the bad drugs he had pumped himself full of while racing around getting worked up. And contact would have been his good medicine.

But I blew it. I didn't have a lunge line in the arena with me. So I started to free-lunge Jordan, and while he did come down from a gallop to a trot, he maintained his brace. I noticed and even mentioned to the audience how contact would be a good idea at this time to encourage a feel-good frame of movement, but then told myself and them that I didn't think we needed to stop the flow of the presentation to go there. Plus, I knew that as I had never had Jordan in contact, a whole new can of worms potentially awaited. But it was a risk I should have taken.

That I didn't effectively sealed my fate. Those gods and goddesses knew I knew better, so they weren't about to cut me any slack. Orchestrating an unforgettable wake-up call, the sound system started screeching and exploding like firecrackers — like all those alarm bells I hadn't paid a single bit of attention to. It was only a few seconds, but everyone in that arena literally jumped out of their skin — none more so than Jordan who took off like a bottle-rocket tearing around the pen and screaming in panic. I looked at the woman manning the sound system who looked as shocked as the rest of us. She had no idea what just happened. I took a big breath and did my best to compose myself, then told the

audience I needed to do some damage control to get Jordan back with me. A virtual mission impossible without contact.

I have seen over and over again that horses live fully grounded, in their bodies, in the here and now. But somehow this hadn't registered. Somehow I got lulled into a la-la pure-est mentality long enough to have it cloud my judgment. All the positive energy and good intentions in the world weren't going to prove to Jordan that he should feel good and become level-headed, focused and calm. Without contact, all I could offer Jordan was a wing and a prayer — neither of which meant squat to him. Showing Jordan physically how to feel better — with my hand flexing out the adrenaline and turning on the endorphins so he could find his own "zone" — now THAT would have made him sit up and take notice. Without it he would likely stay his own worst enemy as an adrenaline junkie. And blame me for it. After all, I was the one in the pen with the lunge whip pushing him around. And he was feeling just plain bad in the process. So whose fault could it be other than mine?

Adding insult to my own personal agony, the sound system did its hair-raising number again. And a few seconds later, a third time for good measure. I turned off my mic and asked the woman to turn off the sound system. By then all our nerves were frazzled and the organizers took it as their cue to tell me to wrap it up. I said that the audience was free to go but that I would stay in that round pen with Jordan until he was no longer freaked out. And I did just that. And the audience stayed put. No one left.



It took me a good 10 minutes for Jordan to come back to his senses and decide he could turn in, face me and allow me to put his halter on. Once I had contact, he calmed down considerably with a loose-lead follow around the pen before they took him back to his paddock. "Too little too late" was the mantra that kept running through my mind.

After it was over I had many people come to me with tears in their eyes, thanking me for showing them an example of what to do when "sh-- happens." They said they appreciated how I took the time to give the horse what it needed in a traumatic situation. But I knew better. I knew, and Jordan knew, that I could have prevented it all, but didn't. I betrayed the small amount of trust Jordan had for me in the beginning and paid the price publicly for not heeding my own advice.

There is a moral to my story: Freedom's fine when you have nothing left to lose. But when a fragile mind is on the line, a little contact can go a long way. 🐾

Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and Train The Trainer programs throughout North America and Europe. They are currently building their own Alberta-based equestrian centre at Riversong Ranch, west of Edmonton near Whitecourt, which will open for events in August of 2008. If you have a question you would like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please email her at alphamare@xplornet.com

HORSES ALL