

Ask the Alpha Mare



Email your questions and/or comments for Alpha Mare to alphamare@telus.net. Your feedback is welcome, and could be featured in an upcoming Alpha Mare column in *Horses All!*

In less than five minutes, with not one second of braced resistance, stress, or concern, Avalon was wearing a halter and continued munching away by her mama's side.

Impossible, you might say. And if I hadn't been the "doer" in this process myself, I wouldn't have believed it either. It wasn't hocus-pocus, and there was no magic. Hardly. There is common sense and hard science to the ease of this process, and

it is so profound as to be worthy of its own column. I think you'll agree...

There are three simple rules here, and all of them have to do with what *not* to do, rather than what *to* do:

1. Avalon was never handled indiscriminately by anyone who wasn't fluent in equine body language. In fact, other than our ranch assistant, Petra, whom Avalon sees every day, she wasn't handled at all. She just watched and gauged the well-being of her environment and the comfort level of the other horses with these humans, and made her own decisions about trust.
2. We didn't have a timeline based on age or maturity. We allowed Avalon to grow up at her mama's side, just another horse in the herd. And, we let the herd educate her as to what behaviours were appropriate and which ones weren't. We have a content, well-adjusted herd that lives peacefully side-by-side, and we know that each and every one of them sees Chris and I as their "benevolent bosses." We knew Avalon would see this, and know that we keep them all safe and sound and in-line. Nothing could set a more proper tone than that.
3. We didn't have an agenda for what must happen



Photo 2

Photo 2: Petra firmly, but gently, flexes Avalon's head down and around her until she feels her relax and release into it. Petra does this a few times in a row, until Avalon seeks her hand, knowing it is there to make her feel good.

before she was ready to be had her soaking up endorphins



Photo 3

Photo 3: When Petra feels that Avalon's head is totally calm and resting in her hand, she takes her hand away and Avalon stays curled around her, basking in the good feeling she just received. An important note is that Katja, Avalon's mama (seen behind), is so accepting of this procedure happening with her baby that she stays level-headed and calm, never once showing any stress at her daughter being worked with by this human. This also sends a signal to Avalon that everything is just fine.

halted. The only critical component – and this is a *big one* – was that she knew the consistency of *our hands making her feel good*.

So what does this mean exactly? It means that every time we handled her – for any reason – it was important to create a shape in her body that

and feeling relaxed. It means that every time she felt our hand arch around and cup her nose (initially met with a braced, "No, don't do that!") we patiently and gently encouraged her to soften, find balance and round her top-line. This physiologically sent such a "Wow, this feels good!" message to her brain that she

by Kathryn Kincannon

You know the old saying, "The cobbler's kids have no shoes." Well, when it comes to Chris and Kathryn Irwin's horses, due to our unbelievably heavy travel/work schedule, our time with them – handling, riding, anything – is embarrassingly limited.

The good news is that our seven horses are a very content herd that revels in being "wild and free" at Riversong Ranch. Katja, the "Empress Dowager" of alpha mares, rules with a lovely velvet hammer of non-violent autocracy. Tsunami, Chris' 17.2 hh "Amazonian

Queen", rides shotgun for Katja; the four geldings snigger and scrap like playful schoolyard delinquents; and little Avalon, our six-month-old, self-proclaimed "Warmblood Princess", has us all – horses and humans alike – bowing to her royal bidding with a smile on our face and love in our hearts.

So, when it came time to introduce the little filly to the reality of there being more to living a horse's life than the freedom to do as she pleased, we could have been faced with indignant defiance and resistance. But we weren't. Not in the slightest.



Photo 1

Photo 1: Now six months old, in preparing Avalon to see the halter as something good and not bad, Petra shows her that human hands can feel good on a horse's head. She first asks Avalon to bend around her, and then arcs her hand around Avalon's nose to cup it with her thumb on one side and her fingers on the other.

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Photo 4

Photo 4: Petra approaches Avalon at the shoulder with the halter while the foal is eating near her mama.



Photo 5

Photo 5: Petra drops the halter over the side of Avalon's wither and slides it towards her nose.



Photo 6

Photo 6: Petra allows Avalon to drop her nose into the halter, which she does without any fuss.



Photo 7

Photo 7: Petra buckles the halter, securing it around Avalon's head without Avalon showing any signs of distress.



Photo 8

Photo 8: With the halter on, Petra scratches Avalon's withers, letting her know just what a little star she is!



Photo 9

Photo 9: When Petra steps away from Avalon, Avalon's high-and-mighty indignance reveals itself: "Hey, where are you going? This thing's still on my head!" After a few minutes, Petra approached Avalon's shoulder again and gently unbuckled the halter and took it off. This entire haltering procedure was done in one "take" and took less than five minutes.

was, literally, mesmerized. When we could see that she felt this, we'd softly release our hand, and every single time she would stretch down to bring it back, wanting to feel it again.

That's when we knew she was getting hooked on us for

all the right reasons.

This is what some people would call "magic." But it's not. You are fooling yourself to think that a young horse will automatically take a halter or pick up its feet just because, in your heart of hearts, you know

you will never hurt it.

Horses are prey animals, after all; not dogs. It is a huge leap for them to decide to just be okay with us when everything in their DNA is screaming at them to get away!

For a human to have a horse

as a companion requires that we ask it to go against everything it is. It must over-ride its inherent instincts to avoid restriction of movement at all cost. That is, to having its feet picked up, a halter put on, being led on a line, being asked

to stand still for a dewormer or a needle from a vet.

When a horse will look at you and say, "I trust you enough to try it," it means that you have earned the right to ask. It means they see you as "the better horse" and, as such, they defer to your judgment for their safety and well-being. That's a huge step for them, and when you know you have that from your horse, pat yourself on the back!

Avalon has shown total curiosity about us strange, two-legged humans. She has never seen us as anything to be afraid of or threatened by. She sees that we are always very welcoming and invite her to be sociable and affectionate.

Yes, she will test us like all little ones to see what she can get away with, but is very respectful about being "called on" any inappropriate behaviour or pushiness. And when we have had our hands on her, it has been with an awareness of our body language and with a slow, flowing touch that never makes her brace or panic.

The following photos show, step by step, the lead-up and then the haltering process for little Avalon. It took a matter of hours, not weeks and months. And it was not a fluke. Chris haltered her one day, then I did. Then Petra haltered her a few days later.

Each time, Avalon came to us willingly and when we took the halter off, she followed us around wondering what was next. I can tell you that it had us all speechless – it was a true non-event for her!

I will also tell you that the power of a baby horse putting itself in your good hands willingly because it honestly believes you will do right by it is an experience not to be missed. Or taken lightly. It will open a floodgate of compassion and understanding in your heart that just may change you forever.

Kathryn

Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and "Train the Trainer" sessions throughout North America. 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 email her at alphamare@telus.net