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Monty Roberts Jubilee Tour – experienced by an equine behaviourist

This article is about the events experienced during a demonstration evening on Monty Robert's Jubilee Tour. My initial understanding was that the method was hands free, using the round pen to contain the horse instead of physical restraints, but this was not the case.

Please note that much of my experience is based on what I saw during the demo, as Roberts provided little explanation about what or why he was using a particular technique. The information that was provided was of little scientific value and was often inaccurate or incorrect. I assume that Roberts understanding of basic learning theory and ethology is somewhat limited. Credit to Roberts though, he is a good entertainer. But if you are a scientist or traditional horseman you were normally subject of his negative comments.

The first horse was an unbacked mare. Roberts stressed his 'starting' method was superior to traditional backing methods because his training was so much quicker and less stressful. I do find it unlikely that a horse can be exposed to so much potentially fearful stimuli, whilst confined in a round pen where naturally flight responses are thwarted, and the use of a 'Dually' halter for physical restraint, is not going to experience extreme stress and anxiety. Traditionally, horses are introduced to such stimuli slowly and systematically, normally over a period of weeks, to allow for habituation and desensitization. Horses that are exposed to such aversives without the ability to escape or avoid the stimuli are likely to be flooded (a traumatic learning process) which results in significant negative emotional and behavioural side effects. It is a technique that is avoided by most animal behaviourists. The response of the mare to the dummy rider on her back certainly would suggest that she was flooded as she went into flight response around the round pen. Shortly after, the mare was being ridden quietly around, presumably because she had learned that fearful responses were unsuccessful. Leaving the round pen the mare was reactive to the environment, highlighting that her learning was context specific, i.e. escape or avoidance behaviours in the round pen are futile, so it is unlikely that the mare would be able to be ridden outside of the pen for some time.

The second horse in the demo was described as extremely head shy. After this horse learned that the round pen was inescapable, Roberts rode an unfamiliar horse into the pen, a method he termed 'centaur'. The head shy horse was controlled by a 'Dually' headcollar by Roberts on horseback. This headcollar allows pressure to be put on the sensitive rostral end of the nose. He turned his ridden horse square onto the horse and held the 'Dually' tight, the horse had no option but to stay still whilst Roberts attempting to stroke his ears. However, this horse had learned the avoidance behaviour of throwing his head back away from the handler, and it was a behaviour that even the 'Dually' could not prevent. After at least 30 minutes there appeared to be no outcome. The horse's avoidance behaviour was being negatively reinforced by his continued success at dodging Roberts touch. I am unsure how the layman is expected to be able to carry out this type of training. I would also like to stress that a horse with a history of head sensitivity must be

checked over by a veterinary surgeon before carrying out any training, a point that was not highlighted by Roberts.

Kelly Marks brought her horse in after the break and allowed Roberts to demonstrate how to teach a horse to stand still. Whilst he was training the horse, he discussed the physical violence that traditional horsemen use to train their horses. It could not have been a bigger contradiction. Roberts stood the horse and walked to the end of a long rope attached to a 'Dually'. He turned to face the horse and as it took a step he jerked the rope down so hard the horse staggered in response. He then showed just how poor his skills are as a trainer. Any trainer, regardless of method, requires good timing and consistency, allowing the horse to learn which behaviours are desirable. This is especially important when using aversives in training. However, during several repetitions of teaching the horse to stand still he allowed a various amount of steps to be taken before the punishment, which does not provide the contingency required for any animal to learn how to behave in order to avoid the punishment. Positive punishment suppresses behaviour, it does not allow understanding of how the problem behaviour developed or is being maintained. Suppression of behaviours can lead to other undesirable behaviours being exhibited, as the horse finds a way of dealing with the underlying issue. This brings me onto the final horses.

Two horses which both had a long history of being difficult to load were brought into the arena. Marks handled one horse and Roberts the other. Both horses were handled by the 'Dually', and for a short period after entering the arena, they were taught how to behave in order to avoid the pain of the 'Dually'. Roberts's horse took a longer time to become responsive, and required a considerable amount of lead jerking and backing up. The horse was clearly very stressed and reactive to his environment. Both horses loaded quickly once asked, and the audience was wowed. Loading became an escape behaviour, a way of stopping the pain from the 'Dually' head collar. The training methods used treated the behaviour problem but not the underlying cause of not loading. I want to make it very clear, loading issues generally have an underlying cause (such as fear of leaving companions, fear of small spaces, fear of bad driving etc). Many animal behaviourists use a training method known as systematic desensitisation and counter conditioning (DS / CC). This process allows the horse to feel less anxious and form more positive emotions towards loading, standing in the trailer, travelling and arriving at an unfamiliar location. During DS / CC, loading becomes a behaviour the horse chooses to do. Roberts did not address any underlying issues and did not encourage the horse to form positive associations with loading. It is possible that these horses would panic and may become dangerous, once loaded, during travelling and unloading.

I hope that my experience has given you an insight into methods used in natural horsemanship. Whether you choose to train your horse this way or not, it is important to recognise how the methods work in simple terms of learning theory and equine ethology.

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