

Code of the West *and Morality in Horse-Training*

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Cowgirl Image

Horse-Training Article



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Code of the West and Morality in Horse-Training

By Kimberly Keown - Cowgirl Image www.cowgirlimage.net

This could be considered a controversial article, so I'm including it separately from the rest of my articles. It contains my views on politically incorrect tack such as curb bits and spurs; and a condemnation against today's horse-drugging culture.

Code of the West

There is a reason why cowboys of the Wild West used ropes, curb bits, and spurs to control their horses. Why? They worked.

Imagine if you drove all day, every day in your car but you never knew for sure if the brakes would work or the car would steer straight. Or even if all four tires would stay on the road consistently. Imagine if your car sometimes had a mind of its own and was uncooperative and unpredictable.

When cowboys had horses as their only means of transportation, they had to be able to control those horses – many of which were half-broke or wild. They rode them all day, every day out on the range in the middle of nowhere and over rough country. No hospitals were available, and being stranded could mean being dead. Those cowboys certainly did not want to be bucked off their horses, run away with, or left afoot.

So they used equipment that gave them the leverage to control their horses. They used spurs that motivated the horses to move forward, drive their hind legs under them, and shift their weight off of their front ends. They used bits that supported the horse's heads and front ends to keep them light so they could ride up & down steep hills, ravines, and broken country safely. These bits also helped keep the horses' heads up when they bucked and stopped runaways.

The most talented cowboys knew how to train their horses to move correctly, so that the chances of lameness were decreased dramatically. I imagine an Old West cowboy did all he could to try to prevent lameness. If his horse went lame out on the lone prairie, they were both SOL; and in a worst case scenario, the horse would have to be shot.

A horse who moves with his weight on his front end (like so many of today's horses) has a much greater chance of being lamed – especially when riding through rough country – than a horse who's weight is shifted onto his hind end and thus lightens his front end. The talented cowboys knew how to teach their horses to move in the most balanced manner, which also made the horses' gaits more comfortable, the horse more agile and 'handy', and lessened the chances of lameness.

Cowboys also used ropes in order to catch and control their horses, wild and tame. Sometimes they had to choke unruly horses down in order to control them, until those horses learned to give to pressure. If a horse will not give to pressure, he's like a runaway train. If a horse does not respect his rope, he does not respect his rider. And as with most effective training tools, in the right hands this tool applied only as much pressure as necessary; and when needed there was release.

These tools of their trade were the cowboys' main connection to their horses, and their lifelines. To train some of the horses they rode – half broke or wild – was life or death. So cowboys used equipment that enabled them to control their horses and ride in relative safety.

The horse...and by inference, the equipment needed to control him ... helped settle the Wild West and create the America we live in today.

The Shadow Side

Were some of those Old West cowboys cruel to their horses? Yes. In the wrong hands ropes, spurs and a harsh bit can inflict a world of hurt. Many horses of the Old West were injured, lamed, and killed due to cruel and poor horse handling techniques. I am not defending cruelty to horses or any animal or human, and not defending the 'cowboys' who inflicted it. I am against cruelty of any sort. I do not consider those who practiced cruelty in those days to be true cowboys; I consider them to be criminals.

But I am *for* fair, necessary discipline and control. I am *for* using equipment that enables me to handle dangerous horses safely and decreases the chances of my getting hurt. I am *for* using equipment and methods that teach horses to respect and obey me, even in stressful situations. And guess what? The Bible agrees with me. It has a passage something to the effect of... a parent who refuses to discipline his child hates him; but a parent who loves his child disciplines him fairly in order to teach him right from wrong.

This is what I am for and stand for.

Here's a modern controversy that can be applied here: Gun control. There are those who believe guns should be banned because some people use them to murder. This is a hot topic, and one I won't address deeply. Whether you are for or against gun control however, most people should agree that (in most cases) the weapon itself is simply a tool.

Guns don't go off by themselves. A gun needs someone to fire it; so it's the motive and intent of the person behind the gun that truly inflicts the damage. Blaming a gun for a crime is a matter of addressing the symptom of the problem instead of the root cause.

A gun can be used to acquire food and defend one's life, home, and property; or it can be used to murder and steal. It's the intent of the user that determines whether the gun is used to save life in a justified manner; or destroy it in an immoral murder. It's not the power of an object that defines it as good or evil; it's the intent and purpose that it's *used for*.

In this way ropes, curb bits, and spurs are pieces of equipment that must be handled delicately and used responsibly. They have dangers and pitfalls much like a knife: they can be used as tools or as weapons. They can be used respectfully, correctly, and for the intent they were made. Or they can be used incorrectly and inflict damage. And even when used with the best of intent, accidents can still happen.

In the wrong hands, *any* piece of equipment can inflict damage. The goal should not be to do away with potentially dangerous equipment. It should be to use it in a responsible, effective manner as necessary for practicable purposes. There is an art to applying each piece of equipment to its highest advantage; and mastering the use of it requires the user to become an artist. In the right hands, leverage tack - including curb bits and spurs - is *essential* for handlers who truly want to have control over their horses and train them correctly.

Brainwashing

This is why I am writing my training articles: to educate sincere horse handlers so that they, too, can train their horses correctly and safely. To teach them which equipment is the most effective and how to use it properly. To bring awareness that horses are dangerous animals. As such, they must be handled carefully and with respect.

I have real, solid, effective training methods that work consistently and emphasize safety. Although they are complicated, I feel I have a unique gift for being able to condense them down into their simplest forms and explain them in a way that's understandable and useful for every level of handler and rider.

Unfortunately, not all of today's horse 'trainers' are so pure minded. The current age of horse 'training' consists of brainwashing people into believing that horses are not dangerous, and that riders must use the gentlest, mildest equipment possible in order to not hurt them. They profess that horses should only be ridden in mild snaffle bits or (even better) halters. That riders should never take hold of their horses' mouths, in order to keep them soft.

When these methods fail to work, the 'trainers' attempt to mask their shortcomings by selling gimmicks such as martingales, 'special' bits, and designer tack. They convey to the public that horses can be miraculously managed by anyone who uses their simple gimmicks or methods. And by 'everyone' they seem to mean horse handlers who are inexperienced, out of shape, and have not developed true horse-training talents.

The Big Lie

There is a huge disparity between many of today's 'trainers' who seem to easily control their horses with their 'gentle' methods; and the cowboys of the Old West, who had hell breaking and controlling their horses - even though the cowboys were extremely fit and very talented horse handlers.

This is a rather amazing turn of events, considering that most of today's horses get probably 5% of the work the Old West horses did. Old West horses were *the* means of transportation for that era and were ridden accordingly. They had a *lot* of riding and thousands of miles put on them. By contrast, the majority of today's horses sit in a stall, pen, or pasture 95% of their time and get ridden once or twice a week (or less).

How did horses' temperaments undergo such a miraculous change from the days of the Old West, to today? Did our society's popularization of round pens and the wide-spread use of mild snaffle bits miraculously turn dangerous, unpredictable horses into gentle, lamb-like creatures that can be broken by the general public and ridden in halters?

The reason for this huge disparity is obvious when you uncover the big lie of today's horse-training methodology. The horrible truth is that many so-called 'trainers' are nothing more than horse drug-dealers.

When society began to discourage the use of effective tack - in order to promote 'gentle' training methods - there was a problem: there still needed to be a way to control the horses. So many people turned from horse-training to horse drugging.

Many of today's so-called 'trainers' (with their 'gentle' methods) get around the very real danger of horses by drugging them into oblivion. Because of the short-comings of their mild tack and lack of training talent, they drug their horses in order to be able to handle them with a modicum of safety.

These people pass themselves off as 'trainers' and publicly profess to use 'gentle' training methods. But they secretly harbor a shocking absence of morality by drugging horses to control them and hiding that fact from the public. These 'trainers' know a lot about drugging horses, but next to nothing about actually training them. They have a terrible lack of morality towards the horses and the people they preach to.

Not surprisingly, due to their lack of morality horse druggers do not care about safety – not their own, not their clients', and not their horses'. I have been astounded by the blatant disregard of everyone's safety by horse-druggers in action. They sell two and three-year old colts to children and novice clients. They go out on long trail rides with novice riders on young or half-broke horses. They teach their clients to ride with reins that are completely slack. They teach riders to become nothing more than passengers on horses that literally run away with them over jumps. They ride horses incorrectly with the weight on the horses' front ends, give the horse absolutely no support with the reins, and inevitably lame a large number of them. They fail to teach their clients even basic safety techniques for handling horses; and they certainly don't follow safe techniques themselves.

Gaping Holes

I am not that kind of 'trainer' and I don't write those kinds of articles. If you have read this far, then hopefully you are not that kind of handler. Or if you are, I hope you are reconsidering drugging your horse as a means of control.

I am a moral trainer who cares about the safety of both horse and rider. I also care greatly about teaching a horse to move correctly and to learn to be truly obedient. And I am disgusted by those who:

- 1) Profess to use 'gentle' training methods; yet have no conscience about drugging an animal on a regular basis to control it.
- 2) Lie about their 'training methods' and make it appear as if they are unusually gifted animal handlers.
- 3) Make it appear that horses are not dangerous animals - *if* you have the magic touch or the right gimmick.
- 4) De-emphasize safety and preach dangerous training techniques that get other people hurt when they try them at home.

If I had to rate horse druggers in general, I would say that the ones who are honest in admitting that they drug horses to control them are more moral than the ones who hide it.

Drugs are not cure-alls for horse ills. They don't work through and fix behavior problems. They don't teach a horse to move correctly or increase his athleticism. They don't teach a horse to respect his handler or have faith in him. They don't build a better connection between horse and rider or help them communicate more effectively. All they do is temporarily overpower and subdue a horse so that he does not spook, buck, or run away.

Many drugged horses become neurotic and have deep emotional anxieties due to the repression of their natural fears, especially when they're placed in high-stress environments. Horses who are drugged and put in environments such as noisy horse shows, race tracks, or unfamiliar trails can become extremely fearful. This is simply due to the fact that they are never mentally or emotionally prepared for such environments. Since they are not introduced to these environments slowly, in full possession of their senses, their fears are never addressed and worked through. Instead, those fears are overpowered and suppressed. And surprise, surprise! Real trainers like me end up with these horses later on, have to completely retrain them the right way, and get to work through those old issues all over again. There have been times in my career when I've felt like I'm as much horse-therapist as horse-trainer.

Societal Popularization

I am a purist. I believe in natural potential. Correct movement to me means training a horse to move the way nature intended him to move. Achieving this purity of movement requires using methods and tack that effectively control the horse *and* help him distribute his weight correctly to achieve the best movement possible. To do this successfully means working through physical and behavioral training problems and actually solving them.

Most horse-druggers, on the other hand, don't know the first thing about training a horse to move correctly. As a result, many drugged horses are taught to move incorrectly and unnaturally. Because this poor movement has become so common, society has largely popularized it and made it *politically* correct, even though it's not *naturally* correct.

AQHA One high-profile case in the past has been in AQHA (American Quarter Horse Association) horse shows. Horses' heads were tied up high in their stalls for hours on end so that their necks would get tired and they would move with their noses low or near the ground during competitions. (I personally witnessed this in several stalls at a show in the late 1990's.)

Most of the horses in those shows moved incorrectly as a result of these 'methods'; and because it became so widespread and common, those were the types of horses judges would place at the top. Other competitors, wanting to place highly in the shows, would emulate the same incorrect movement, and the entire problem snowballed.

If riders had trained their horses correctly, the horses would have leaned to yield to bit pressure, move correctly, and been obedient. But these handlers instead chose to drug and 'hang' their horses, so the industry became rife with cruelty and lack of ethics.

30-Day Wonder Today's horse drugging culture has also given rise to an unwillingness to take the time to train a horse correctly. This is the age of the 30-day wonder. Saddle-break a horse in 30 days: walk, trot, and canter. Some 'trainers' will even throw in trail rides and cattle-herding in this time.

Except for a few special horses - and a few exceptional breakers - I don't believe it's realistic to break an undrugged horse in 20-30 sessions. Most horses - drugged or not - do not have time in 30 rides to truly assimilate the huge change they are undergoing.

Being broken to saddle is bar-none the biggest transition in a horse's life. His whole world changes irrevocably. And in 30-days, he doesn't have time to learn to move correctly with a rider. He doesn't have time to truly adjust to a bit, to become quiet with a rider on the trail, or mentally and physically adjust to having someone on his back. Horses who are rushed into breaking can become extremely insecure, agitated, impatient, barn sour, sullen, and angry. In fact, today's 30-day wonders leave a LOT to be desired. Their numerous training holes and bad habits later have to be worked through and corrected by *real* trainers.

Racing The easiest-to-see example of today's horse-drugging culture is the horror of horse racing. In flat racing (popular examples are the Kentucky Derby & Belmont Stakes) two and three year old horses are pumped full of steroids, tranquilizers, and drugs to open their airways. Then they are pounded down a racetrack before their bodies have truly developed or their knees closed. After their track careers are over, many of these horses are lamed or killed. Some lucky few are adopted by owners that have to completely retrain the horses out of the terrible habits learned on the track.

Have you ever seen a two or three year old colt that's not been pumped full of steroids? Thoroughbred or not, it doesn't look anything like the ones on the race track. Two and three year old horses are narrow, small, gangly, and awkward. They have not filled out; their legs are not strong; they are immature, young, and dumb. In short, they have not matured mentally or physically. And they shouldn't have - they're horse-teenagers.

If horses were not raced until they were at least four or five years old, not pumped full of steroids and tranquilizers, and given real training under saddle before being raced, I would be all for it. Who doesn't get a thrill out of a horse race? But the racing culture today is unscrupulous, driven by greed and profit, and is sickening.

The Ugly Truth

As horrible as horse drugging is, if there wasn't a market for it, it wouldn't exist. Much of the blame for the horse-drugging culture must be cast on clients who want a shortcut to 'training'. They are the ones who buy the drugs and use them on their horses. They are the ones who don't want to put in the blood, sweat, and tears it takes to really train a horse. They are the ones who popularize horse druggers and financially support them. No buying, no market, no drugging.

In today's society, many people do not hesitate to take drugs themselves or give them to their children. Whether they choose substances such as cocaine and marijuana or prescription Ritalin or Adderall, many people have no problems with using drugs on a daily basis. Just look at the number of illegal drugs entering the US from Mexico and Columbia, and the number of celebrities in rehab. Clearly, there is a huge market for those drugs, or there would be no demand for the trafficking.

And drugs seem to be mainstream America's cure for all ills: our entire health-care system is based on prescription drugs. While I am in no way opposed to life-saving drugs in medicine, I think our health system relies on them far too heavily. I believe drugs often treat the symptoms of an illness without treating the root cause: which may be nutritional, emotional, environmental, circumstantial, arise from family crisis, or due to unhealthy lifestyle. In addition, drugs have prohibitively inflated the cost of health care in the US to the point where one must either have health insurance or be independently wealthy to access it.

In the same way, many people have little or no scruples about using drugs on horses as a means of control.

The School of Hard Knocks

As if hurting their horses with bad training and poor movement isn't enough, horse druggers who pass themselves off as 'trainers' are also dangerous to the people they preach to. These people get hurt when they go off on their own and try the gimmicks or so-called 'gentle' methods on their own horses. I happen to have been one of those people. And believe me, that is past tense.

Here's a hint – never try to saddle-break a horse in a halter. Unless you're an experienced breaker or bronc rider and prefer to do it this way. But in that case, please don't tell other people they can go out and do the same thing without being injured. Otherwise, those people are SOL when their horses buck, run away with them, or climb over a fence.

I learned this 'gentle' saddle-breaking method from several popular training videos I watched. As per video, I haltered & saddled my unbroken horse (he was already very comfortable with having a saddle on him) and ran him loose around the pen for a few minutes. Then, as per video, I stood up in the stirrup a few times and the horse was dead quiet. So I climbed on him. And guess what. That horse let me ride him around the pen for two circles. I got off, ending the day on a good note, and thought the method had worked.

The second day I started all over the same way. Everything began as quietly as it had on the first day.

I swung my leg over the horse, pulled a little on the halter rope, squeezed a bit with my legs. And the horse immediately threw his head down and bucked like CRAZY. Not only did he buck me off, he almost bucked over the top of me as he came around again. Since I was hurt from the fall, I couldn't get out of the way. (Incidentally, this is one of the few times I've ever been hurt by a horse.) I had a badly bruised hip from the fall and was lucky my injuries weren't worse.

Once I had mended, for the third breaking session I decided to move to a bigger arena and put a bridle with a snaffle bit on the horse, hoping it would give me more control. Since I had done a lot of groundwork with the horse prior to ever trying to ride him, he had been bridled many times. I saddled & bridled the horse and ran him loose around the arena, as per video.

As before, the horse let me get on. Then he bucked. When I was able to pull his head up a little with the snaffle bit and ride him through the bucks, he bolted and ran away with me. When he found that I was still on him, he decided to jump/crash through the arena fence. I felt him speed up and gather himself under me in preparation for the jump... and I was pretty sure he wouldn't make it over the fence and would end up going through it. (Incidentally, he chose the end of the arena that had brush outside of it, and a slide down a ditch with a creek at the bottom.) Luckily for me, the horse stumbled just before making the jump, his haunches slid out from under him, and he fell down.

I fell off, and that's why I'm alive to tell you about it. That day I was hurt the second of the few times I've ever been hurt by a horse. After that, I sold the horse back to his original owners and never did get him broke. And that was the last time I placed any faith in so-called 'gentle' training methods. They may have been gentle to the horse... but they sure weren't gentle on me.

Reality Check

Hint #1: If a horse is angry or panicked, he will GO THROUGH, OVER, OR UNDER A FENCE. Horse druggers won't tell you this little secret. That's because they drug horses down enough so that the horse may give a few nice little bucks – all in a circle right around the corral – and he's done. In reality a feisty, undrugged horse will practically kill himself to get away when he becomes angry or frightened. In the craziness of the moment, he doesn't care if he does you or himself harm.

Hint #2: Many horses will not buck when saddle broke if you are careful and do it right. I've broken several this way. One was a big stallion. I actually did do a 30-day wonder breaking him: walk, trot, and canter in 30 sessions. He was one of the most stubborn horses I've ever worked with in my life; but by golly, he was kind about letting me get in the saddle.

But some horses will buck, and hard. One was the crazy SOB I described earlier. Another was a nasty little mare I was hired to break several years later. She wasn't much bigger than a pony; but I rank her second to the unbreakable gelding on my list of most dangerous horses. She was fairly unmanageable on the ground as well as under saddle. I improved her ground and saddling manners a heck of a lot. But not being a bronc rider, I didn't get her saddle broke.

In the case of this nasty mare, I had clearly learned from my mistakes with the gelding. Because I'd developed my training method by the time I trained her, she showed her true colors right away and there was never any question that her behavior under saddle would be horrible. After I had taught her to longe quietly with a saddle & bridle on, I drove her with two longe lines. When I would purposely move a line under a stirrup or under her tail, she'd buck clear around the pen and jump so high I'd have to look up to see her. This gave me a pretty good idea of how she would react to stress when someone was in the saddle.

Since I was going step-by-step with this mare (as per my methodology), I didn't get hurt as in the case of the gelding because I didn't climb right on her. The mare would try to run away and buck when I simply put a foot in the stirrup and stood up in it. In the end, she ended up being too much for me saddle break.

The horse-drugging 'trainers' who get dangerous horses like these simply drug them into oblivion, get on them, and say they are trained. And they tell everyone how well their 'gentle' methods work. Then the horses are, like as not, sold to owners who have no business owning them and are afraid to ride them. So the horses sit useless in a pen or pasture most of their lives, eating hay and taking up space.

Taking Off the Blinders

When you train right, there aren't nearly as many surprises. If the horse is quiet, you find out. If the horse is sullen, you find out. If the horse is manic, you find out. And if the horse is not too much for you, you can work through the problems. If he is too much for you, you can figure this out on the ground and find another horse or another trainer.

When you train wrong, you literally never know what will happen next. You pretty much have to hope for the best, as there is no way to make the best actually happen or really know if it will. If you have a horse who's too much for you, you'll probably find out at the worst time and get hurt.

This is exactly what happened to me in the case of the unbroken gelding who threw me. I hoped for the best, didn't know what I was doing or how the horse would react, and had no control of him. The worst happened and I got hurt twice. With the mare, I didn't get her broke either. But I knew what to expect from her and did NOT get hurt.

Both of these nutty horses were the kind willing to hurt themselves and their riders, were completely unpredictable on any given day as to whether they would behave or go crazy, were truly dangerous... and yes there are those kinds of horses in the world. There are good bronc riders who can manage horses like that; I'm not one of them.

Do I wish I had the skills to have broken both those horses? Yes. It's hard to admit failure and disappointment. Perhaps some day I will be a good enough horseperson to be able to handle horses like that under saddle. But the truth is, I've successfully trained many, many horses. And quite a few of *those* were horses others had given up on and could not handle. My not being able to handle a few horses does not detract from the many horses I have done well with.

If I can't swallow my pride and admit there are horses that are too much for me, how can I tell my clients to do the same? There's not much glory in being humble, using common sense, and doing what's necessary to stay safe. Especially in today's society, so many people are in a hurry to call a horse 'trained' and deny the fact that horses are dangerous. But my life, health, and principles are worth more to me than my pride or anyone else's opinion. If I get hurt, it only affects me. I have to be the one set limits for myself and keep myself out of trouble as best I can. And this goes for everyone working with horses: no one will be more affected if you get hurt than you. So be your own best friend and don't get caught up in the pride game or go against your instincts when they tell you a situation is dangerous. You're more of a hero for sticking up for your principles and erring on the side of safety.

100% Pure Training

The scenarios I've described are prime examples of why SOLID, PROVEN, EFFECTIVE training methods are so important. True training methods provide safety for both horse and handler. They have to work. And they have to be thorough; otherwise they leave training holes that come back to bite you in the butt – or buck – later.

The most important thing solid methods do is help you find out DURING the training process if the horse is too much for you. And you often find this out when you are doing groundwork and in a safe area. *You don't have to get into the saddle in order to find out whether a horse may be dangerous.*

I can tell nearly as much about a horse by leading, longing, and handling him as I can when I'm in the saddle. I can feel how sensitive he is to the pressure of the longe line. I can watch how he moves on a circle. I can tell when he is and isn't moving correctly, how he distributes his weight, whether he is stiff or overbending, and whether he is putting more weight on one hind leg or the other. I can tell how much respect he has for me and how well he yields to pressure. I can see what makes him upset or afraid. I can watch how he reacts to stress. And I can confront and work through many of these problems on the ground before I even get into the saddle.

This is the real trick of my safety and success. I usually won't get on *any* horse - broken or unbroken and especially a strange horse – until he's trained correctly on the ground. If he won't lead correctly, longe the way I want him to, and tie without pulling back... guess what. I don't get on.

The horses I train are taught to move correctly, obediently, and in a balanced manner. I can train a horse to carry his head at any height I ask him to – medium or low for Western Pleasure; high for extra collection in Dressage; or nose nearly touching the ground (just to show off) - and the horse will still be moving correctly at each of those heights.

None of the horses I train ever need martingales, because they are ridden in bits they respect (usually curb bits) and taught to yield to them. When they yield to the bit, there is complete release of pressure. They seek the bit for support when they become unbalanced, and they get release from it when they regain that balance. They respect me and the tack I use. They bond with me because they know I am disciplined, fair, sensitive, and they can trust me.

I have proven my techniques over and over. Here's a way to find out if your training methods are really sound. Go to people's houses and train their horses two times per week for 1-1½ hours at a time. The time includes catching the horse, grooming, saddling, longing, and riding him; then unsaddling and putting him away. Try training all breeds, ages, and sizes of horses in muddy pens, wire-fenced paddocks, round pens, and arenas of various sizes. Try training in all weather conditions and with neighbors starting bonfires or racing their cars past. Try breaking a pony in a grassy, unfenced area created by the V of two dirt roads. And try doing all these things while explaining what you are doing step by-step to the owners who are standing right there watching your every move.

Try creating a training discipline that's so comprehensive you can train horses CORRECTLY in Dressage, English Pleasure, Western Pleasure, Trail Competition, Jumping, Reining, and a whole lot more – and even train one 'untrainable' horse to do all these things in just a few years.

I have done all this and more. Am I proud of it? Yes. I feel it's one of my greatest accomplishments in life. And I want other horse handlers - who sincerely want to train correctly - to learn from my experience instead of by trial-and-error as I did. I want horses to benefit from firm, fair, and effective methods. I want horses and their handlers to understand and respect one another; and in so doing become a real team and true friends.

I want handlers to realize that horses are dangerous animals, and respect & accept them as they are. I want handlers to be careful and responsible when working with horses. I see many people who behave carelessly around horses and heedlessly risk their lives, other people's lives, and their horses' lives. I see people who are ignorant about horses because of lack of information, because they don't know there is a better way, and because they are brainwashed by the prevailing idiotology into thinking that horses are not dangerous.

Training for Effect

Our society has de-popularized effective horse-training equipment such as curb bits and spurs in favor of 'gentle' training methods. This is great in theory and sounds fine and dandy. And it would be... *if* that gentle tack actually worked.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to notice that horses are big, strong, dangerous animals. They are also quick, agile, and unpredictable. When they become angry or frightened, they are forces to be reckoned with. Horses can easily hurt or kill a human inadvertently, or do it purposely. And to get the respect and attention of these animals, it takes strong, specialized equipment and the talent to use it correctly.

I too used to preach 'only ride in a snaffle'. But I found during my training career that most horses simply don't listen to or respect mild equipment such as snaffle bits. Most horses *need* equipment such as curb bits, spurs, and halter-chains or Be-Nice halters. These training tools gain a horse's respect and motivate him to behave. They also support him in moving correctly. Leverage tools are instrumental in helping a horse shift his weight back onto his hind end, lighten his front end, and drive forward with his hind legs. A leverage bit helps a horse do this while he's being ridden; a halter chain or Be-Nice halter helps a horse do this while he's being led or longed.

The following paragraphs are an excerpt from my training article *Transitioning Into a Curb Bit*. I believe it's the most comprehensive, helpful, and informative article available to help horse handlers select the right leverage bit for their horse and ride correctly in it.

-- It's ironic that today's society seeks to prevent horses from becoming hard-mouthed by teaching riders to ride in the mildest bit possible - a snaffle. A snaffle is a bit so mild that it's only one step up from a halter.

The irony here is that due to this biting idiotology of 'only ride in a snaffle', many horse-handlers inadvertently *make* their horses hard-mouthed and desensitized to the bit *because* they ride in a bit that's too mild. While riding a horse in too harsh of a bit is a good way to make him hard-mouthed, the truth is that a bit that's too mild is just as dangerous. In fact, a horse that is ridden in too mild of a bit is largely being taught to evade & ignore the bit, disobey it, and disrespect his rider.

Many riders in today's society are taught to never take hold of a horse's mouth, in order to keep it soft. But the truth is, never touching a horse's mouth does not give him a soft mouth. It gives him a hard one, as he never learns to yield to the pressure of the bit and respect it. If (for whatever reason) the rider one day does try to take hold of the bit, the horse will become angry, confused, and may toss his head or otherwise resist. This is a very dangerous situation, because a rider that can't take hold of the horse's mouth has no control over the horse.

The opposite habit the horse learns when he's ridden in a bit that's too mild, is to lean on it. And in today's prevailing horse-training idiotology, many English riders are mistakenly taught that a horse who leans on the bit is 'taking contact'. *This is not true.* True contact on the bit is not the horse leaning on the bit. The horse's weight will be on his front end, he will not move correctly, and he will be prone to stumbling.

I don't usually quote the Bible. But I have read it, and there is a passage something to the effect of, 'if you have control of the horse's head, you control his entire body.' Clearly, this man knew horses. In other words, when you have the horse's head, you have his feet. If you don't have control of the horse's head because he's in too mild of a bit, you don't have control of his front end, his weight displacement, or his feet. Therefore, the horse is not balanced, he is not moving correctly, he's not yielding to his bit or the rider, and he is not controllable or safe to ride.

A horse who is ridden in a bit that's too mild is mainly taught to evade the bit, to lean on it, or both. And some horses get very good at both. If the horse doesn't feel like doing what the rider wants, he may toss his head and evade the bit. If that doesn't work, he may lean on the bit and practically pull the reins out of the rider's hands. Or vice-versa.

However, a leverage bit that a horse respects does allow the rider to get control of the horse's head; and the rider can then support the rest of the horse's body to move correctly. If the horse is balanced, yielding to the bit, and moving correctly, he is being obedient. Therefore, he is controllable and safe to ride. --

How to Tell if a Horse is Drugged

I do not differentiate between 'legal' and 'illegal' horse drugs. Whether it's a paste that calms the horse and doesn't show up in a test or a shot that does... it's all the same to me. Giving a horse chemicals to calm him down is drugging him. It's unnatural; it's immoral. The only time I condone it is in a crisis, such as when the horse is injured and needs veterinary care. Or for any other reason that is a matter of injury or life and death, and is temporary.

If a horse is heavily drugged, he may be oblivious to his surroundings. He may appear unusually quiet and uninterested even though there is a lot going on around him. He may appear unusually sullen or as if a psychic dark cloud is hanging over him. He may look like he's about to fall over. He may stumble a lot. He may drag his head. You may have the ambiguous feeling that the horse is capable of doing something sudden and hurtful; even when he doesn't. If you are very sensitive, you may just feel that something is not quite right. Even though the horse appears calm, you don't really feel that you have control over him; you don't feel that he is truly listening to you and being obedient.

If you want to see drugged horses, go to horse shows.

How to Tell if a Horse is Not Drugged

A well-trained, undrugged horse is quiet, obedient, and respectful; yet still alert and clearly in possession of all his senses. He is spirited. He is reactive. You can get a quick response from him. He is eager and energetic. You will feel safe around this horse; but it will be clear to you that the horse is safe only because he is well-mannered and well trained; not because he isn't capable of acting up.

In general, when a horse is NOT drugged, it's relatively easy to tell once you learn to look for it. He will appear alert. You will get the sense that the horse (as all horses are) is dangerous, and that the horse *could* make a sudden move and possibly hurt you. If the horse is not well-trained, he may spook at unfamiliar objects, get upset in unfamiliar surroundings, appear impatient, or paw the ground. He may not stand still for mounting.

One of my favorite stories is when I was showing a very difficult horse I was training in a horse show. This was a 14-year old gelding that previous trainers had nicknamed 'the devil horse', and he was virtually unrideable when I started working with him. However, during my four years of training him, he performed safely in horse shows in Dressage, Reining, English & Western Pleasure, Trail, and Jumping -- ridden not just by me, but also by his owner who was a lady in her forties or fifties.

At this particular horse show, the horse was upset and being a huge pain-in-the-ass. At some point, a drug tester came over and wanted to take a urine sample to check if the horse was drugged. (Random testing is done at some shows.) As I had my hands full trying to handle this very difficult horse, I looked over my shoulder and said in exasperation, "*If he was drugged, do you think he'd be acting like this?!*" She left.

Why she didn't then go over to some of the other horses – horses who were so flatly oblivious to everything around them that they should have been obvious drug-testing candidates - I don't know. That's the horse-drugging culture, I guess.

The normal behavior problems of a poorly-trained, undrugged horse can be cured with good training. The horse I mentioned above was successfully shown at many horse shows; both while I rode him and when the owner rode him. In fact, one time a huge carnival truck drove right past him while I was riding him in the arena. The arena was only about 10 feet from the road. When I saw that semi coming, I prepared to be launched for take-off and started praying. The semi drove past, and the horse didn't even look. To this day, I still remember that moment... and thank God and that horse for my life.

At our highest point of training, the owner could have sold this horse for a lot of money to some English or Western Pleasure show rider. She would never have done so however, as the horse would not have been safe for anyone who did not strictly follow our training routine.

Drugs are not necessary to train a horse. And they don't actually train him. A horse doesn't learn anything from them. He doesn't work through any of his fears or learn respect or discipline. He doesn't learn how to carry his body and move correctly. He is simply overpowered and not in control of his senses. In addition, not all horses react with oblivion to the drugs piled on them. They rebel: they act out, they act up, they become sullen and treacherous. They are not 'drug and ride' horses. And they are deemed by many to be untrainable.

What *is* necessary to train a horse is talent, hard work, brains, and dedication. That's why I have been able to successfully train horses that others couldn't. With solid methods, a horse is as trainable as the handler is capable of handling him. If you can handle a horse, he is trainable. If he's too much for you, he's not trainable for you. For me, the majority of horses are trainable. However, even I have my limits and there are some horses that are too much for me, especially under saddle. On the ground, there are very few that I can't work with and improve.

Support

Sadly, there is not a lot of support in today's culture for people who don't drug their horses. Society is so brainwashed into believing that horses are not dangerous, that it's not politically acceptable for a horse to act up in public. So if your horse is misbehaving because he is not drugged, society will frown on you. You may even be banished from horse-riding circles.

If society supported real horse-training, there would be better-trained horses in the world. There would not be as many novice horse owners fooled into buying horses they can't control because the horses are drugged during pre-sale rides. There would be fewer horses going lame due to bad riding techniques. There would be awareness that horses were not created to stand in a pasture all day and only taken out for trail rides once or twice a month. There would be much greater emphasis on safety and the awareness that horses require responsibility, dedication and work.

If there was a change in society's attitude, horse handlers would support each other and create environments in which it was safe to work through a horse's problems. They would be patient enough to take time to actually solve behavior problems; not rush to grab a drug to temporarily subdue the horse. Handlers would use good, solid training techniques... they would *have* to, otherwise they'd get hurt. They would focus on safety, become truly good handlers and riders, and have better relationships with their horses.

Conclusion

I am (and I hope you are, too) a moral person who cares about the safety of both horse and rider. I care greatly about truly teaching a horse to move correctly and be obedient. All my articles address training a horse correctly and teaching him to respect his handler. To be obedient, confident, and comfortable with his training. To help him learn to move correctly and reach his full potential. And they teach handlers to support the horse, become sensitive to his needs, and reward & discipline him correctly.

My horse-training methodology is based on purity and common-sense. Horse handlers can use it step-by-step and get tangible results, no matter how little or much experience they have. This is because the method works to the ability of the one who applies it. In other words, you can start slow and grow at your own pace. Or you can start big and get very detailed and complicated. Regardless of the handler's experience level, when one pinnacle has been reached the methodology expands to accommodate a larger vision.

My training articles contain solid methodology. I compiled my methods by learning from various sources, figured things out myself by trial-and-error, and above all, put each technique into practice and to the test. If you think my methods are for you, try the free ones. If you like my style and will work hard, sincerely applying what you've learned, buy some paid articles. But be warned: there are no shortcuts and no easy ways out.

I believe my methodology only works for those who sincerely apply it and are dedicated to putting in the work. It will not work for those who are lazy, insincere, or looking for shortcuts. And that's the beauty of purity: it's simple... but that doesn't mean it's easy.

It takes brains, guts, and hard work to train a horse. But in the end, it's more than worth it. You'll know unequivocally when you've trained your horse right. You'll feel secure in your partnership with your horse, and he'll be the envy of your neighborhood.