Controlling the ride
by Izak Hofmeyr

The Australian-based natural horsemanship practitioner, Mark Rodney, conducted a series of clinics in South Africa a while ago. With him was his South African-based student and qualified instructor, Patsy Devine from Drummond in KwaZulu-Natal, and her sister Sue Duveen, who lives in Australia. One of these clinics was a colt starting clinic hosted at Moolmanshoek in the Ficksburg area of the Free State. SA Horseman was invited to attend the clinic.

Mark Rodney runs an organisation called Horsemanship Australia, advocating an approach to horses which is a combination of a sound understanding and application of the tried and tested German Training Scale, combined with and based on a solid foundation of natural horsemanship. The elements of the training scale are rhythm, suppleness, contact, impulsion, straightness and collection.

Natural horsemanship, explained Mark, is based on understanding the nature of the horse as a prey animal, and specifically their herd psychology and hierarchy and commu-
Contact via the rope. Mark commented on the good minds of the Moolmanshoek horses he worked with, mainly Boerperd and Arab communication. They are also into-pressure animals, which means that when you push them in any part of their body, they will instinctively push back. Yielding to pressure is a learned behaviour.

The effect of energy
"Bearing in mind that horses and humans are on the opposite ends of the food chain, it is important to understand how they perceive our energy.

"If your starting point is that you and your horse form your own herd of two members, and you build your relationship based on the understanding that they are the more fearful of the two, it is clear why projecting your energy appropriately as leader is so important.

"One of the initial stumbling blocks I often experience when starting a new clinic, is that people have no idea of the concept of leadership. It is all about energy. Energy is the universal language. It is always there, and horses are acutely sensitive to it. Firmness, or the absence thereof, starts way before it becomes an action."
In order to have the clinic attendees experience the effect of energy, Mark performed an exercise with the whole group where they made a circle inside the round pen and focused their energy in different ways on a group of horses in the circle. By letting the group focus their energy and then relax the energy, the response from the horses was quite telling.

"One of the first things we try and do is to get women to radiate more energy and focus, while we try and get men to cut back on the energy they radiate. I find that men generally are too robust and aggressive when they work with horses.

"A handy tool in getting them to back off a bit, is to give them a lasso with a break-away hondo. With this hondo, the noose will break loose if too much pressure is exerted on the rope. This forces men to be very sensitive and not to revert to power when working with a young horse."

**Moving the feet**

Another fundamental of being your horse's leader, explained Mark, is that you have to have the ability to move your horse's feet in any direction, at any speed and at any time.

"The unfortunate fact is that very few horse owners fulfil their role as leaders properly. Many owners are in fact literally and figuratively taken for a ride. Now, many horses are able to cope with weak leadership by simply taking over that role, but there are a percentage of horses who simply cannot cope without good strong leadership. These horses are the ones who can become problem horses, because they have problem owners.

"So, my aim is to get riders to progress from being taken for a ride, to being able to influence the ride, and finally to control the ride. For some people it is very difficult to go through these steps and accept the responsibility to control the ride."

Another fundamental issue is the channeling of the horse's energy. Because horses are designed to move at speed mainly when they are in danger, and they get an adrenaline rush in the process, it is important to get to a stage where the horse will deliver bursts of effort under the rider but be able to control itself and remain calm. The rider's calm and relaxed attitude is again a crucial factor.

**Comfort spot**

An important aspect that Mark emphasised, is to create a comfort spot or zone for the horse, a place where it feels safe, and where it does not experience a threat from the human. This comfort spot could be a number of things or places. It might be that the horse feels comfortable in walking in a ten metre circle around the human.

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confidence in you as leader that it would do anything you ask unquestionably, because it trusts you implicitly."

The learning zone
With the comfort zone as basis, Mark identifies another zone, which he calls a learning zone. This is the zone into which the horse ventures and then comes back to the comfort zone. In the example above, the learning zone would be the 12-metre circle.

"As a trainer, you have to be acutely aware that, for a young and unsure horse, the space between the comfort zone, the learning zone and the zone beyond the learning zone, which I call the chaos zone, is very close together.

"And the one place where you need to stay away from, is the chaos zone. This is where the horse abandons all the learned behaviour and reverts back to its instinct to flee, to get as much distance between itself and the perceived danger. Or, if it cannot flee, to face the danger and fight to the death."

Any approach to training, he says, needs to be geared first and foremost to avoid the chaos zone, and secondly, to come back to the comfort zone skilfully and regularly. The larger the comfort zone becomes, the further the chaos zone retreats, and the more confidence the horse gets to move into the learning zone.

Setting up for success
It is crucial to try and not set the horse up for failure, he explains. If the horse could handle half a second of being mounted without reaction, chances are that it will stand for one second. And then, chances are that it will stand for two seconds, and then five, and then ten. So why try and push the first mounting beyond half a second and perhaps setting the horse up for failure?

Although this was a colt starting clinic, it is quite clear that the principles Mark used, are the fundamentals of horsemanship and are equally applicable to any level of any discipline.
**About Patsy Devine**

Patsy has been riding for nearly 30 years. Her main interest was showjumping and dressage, until approximately 15 years ago when she was introduced to Parelli Natural Horsemanship by her sister Sue Duveen, also a dedicated horsewoman. Her focus then shifted from a desire to compete, to the desire to teach these principles.

She successfully completed Mark's Horsemanship Australia Instructor Training Programme to become their first affiliated instructor outside of Australia. Her association with Mark and his wife, Debbie, has exposed her to instructors such as Philip Nye, Edgar Leichtwark and Manolo Mendez.

Patsy can truly say that as an instructor, she teaches the unique blend of natural horsemanship principles and techniques together with the classical approach of the Training Scale; which has been the natural outcome of Mark and Debbie's extensive research, experience and training. She is largely called upon to start young horses and work with difficult horses.

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**About Mark Rodney**

Mark has been working with horses for over 30 years and he has been a master farrier for 25 years. He spent six years as an instructor, and as a young and difficult horse trainer with Pat Parelli.

He has also worked with traditional trainers – leading Australian showjumping rider, Colleen Brook, and dressage trainer, Edgar Leichtwark (most qualified in Australia), as well as other leading coaches and trainers. Mark also works with some of Australia’s leading thoroughbred studs.

Mark is an active competitor in both dressage and showjumping, and is qualified as an instructor with the Equestrian Federation of Australia.