

Horsetalk

The journey to natural horsemanship

By JIL MURPHY

I have a broken shoulder and my friend and neighbor, Kyle Van Splinter, has offered to fill in for me by writing about her experiences with natural horsemanship. She has accomplished some amazing results with her own horse and other people's horses. Here is her first installment.

'Both my girls, Firenzé and GiGi, are now wonderful partners with me.'

Have you found that you've become less confident with your horse, frustrated to the point where you've become fearful riding, leading, or just working around your horse? Maybe your horse's behavior has changed and people have told you to get rid of the horse and find another. But you don't want to do that. Or maybe you have a new horse.

All that happened to me, too. For years I used to fox hunt, hunter pace, jump stone walls and sometimes go to shows; I even rode a few times in the New York City St. Patrick's Day parade. A number of years ago when I got a new horse named Firenzé, that all changed. She was extremely bracey — tense, her tail and head straight in the air, non-blinking eyes — which all felt like she would explode at any moment. At times, she would go flying backwards, throw her head violently, one time throwing off the bridle. She would lose it if horses left her and was an expert at other frightening behavior. She was tense all the time at every gait. People saw me struggle a lot. Everything suffered — my confidence, my riding position and my self-esteem.

All the time I was challenged by Firenzé, I also experienced trouble with my homebred filly, GiGi. Don't get me wrong. She was absolutely adorable. She loved to cuddle and looked so innocent, like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. However, she was nearly impossible to lead, and she pushed into my space so that I could barely lead her from the barn to the paddock. When I was bringing Firenzé back into her paddock one day, GiGi, then a 2-year-old, double-barreled me in the hip. In horror, I yelled and she responded with another double barrel, but this time aiming for my head. Luckily, I hadn't closed



LUKI O'CONNOR PHOTO

Kyle Van Splinter and her pupil.

the paddock gate, so I was able to throw myself back and received those blows in my chest. I was OK, but I was scared and my confidence with her was now completely shot.

Those experiences with Firenzé and GiGi are what brought me on this journey and ultimately led to this very personally rewarding place in my life: teaching natural horsemanship.

In this beautiful Westchester horse country, there are loads of people riding and enjoying horsemanship. Most were taught to train their horses in a way that makes sense to humans. Horsemanship has been approached in this way for a long, long, time. Most horses find a way to adapt to this training; perform well and become reasonable partners with their humans. But, there are some horses that rebel, don't understand what's being asked of them or are just plain scared.

This is generally when people look for answers and come to discover natural horsemanship. For those that have partnerships that are seemingly working well, this method of training brings the

partnership and the team's level of performance to a whole new level.

Natural Horsemanship looks at horsemanship from a different angle. It helps you re-think what you've previously learned and begin establishing a language with the horse that makes sense ... to the horse! The philosophy is based on understanding and utilizing the basic psychologies and instincts that motivate the horse's behavior. In its communications, natural horsemanship uses body language, vocal cues, corrections and releases, while learning to understand what the horse is communicating with his or her physical cues. Additionally, you learn to think of ways to create situations that are a "good deal" for the horse. You learn to find a path to "go with" rather than fight or go against. Ultimately you become your horse's benevolent leader, whereby your horse wants to perform, is a willing partner and feels safe and relaxed with you.

Both my girls, Firenzé and GiGi, are now wonderful partners with me. We successfully ride everywhere and even do liberty demonstrations together.