Communication as a Solution to Conflict:  
Fundamental Similarities in Divergent Methods of  
Horse Training

Nikki Savvides  
University of Sydney  
nikki.savvides@gmail.com

Abstract  
This paper examines the ways in which two methods of horse training generally considered divergent approach the concepts of partnership and conflict in human-horse relations. It focuses on finding similarities between the methods, both of which, it is argued, demonstrate the significance of communication in improving human-horse relations. Using interview material, the paper analyzes the practices and beliefs of individuals involved in natural horsemanship. In doing so the paper shows that communication between human and horse works to promote relations between them that are free of conflict. This analysis is offered as a potential "solution" to welfare problems that exist both within competitive dressage practice and within individual human-horse relations. The paper also examines how the fundamental similarities between dressage and natural horsemanship could point to universalized theories of horse training focused on improving human-horse relations.

Keywords  
communication, conflict, dressage, horses, hyperflexion, natural horsemanship, partnership

Introduction  
The term partnership in relation to human-horse relations is used in a variety of equestrian disciplines. In Western riding, a form of training derived from the ranching traditions of the Americas, trainers aim to develop a working partnership with their horses (Blazer, 2001). In the Australian stock riding practice known as campdrafting, partnership between horse and rider is seen as necessary if a cow is to be caught and wrangled (Wright, 1983). Arguably, the use of the term as a means to explain the connection between horse and human unites otherwise divergent methods of horse training. In this paper I will examine how two such methods, dressage and natural horsemanship, are in fact both a part of a similar genealogy of horse training, one that considers
communication between human and horse of paramount importance. Using experiential material based on interviews with riders and trainers, I explore why these two methods are considered divergent by their practitioners. I also analyze the ways in which each method approaches the notion of partnership and how this contributes to human-horse communication. In doing so, I identify the fundamental similarities that exist between the methods and demonstrate how communication might improve human-horse relations. The paper will also explore the prevalence of what many trainers from either discipline would consider problems in human-horse relations, in which conflict plays a strong role. I examine conflict as a matter of contemporary significance in dressage with reference to the controversial training method known as hyperflexion or “rollkur.” Using interview material, I look at how the potential for such conflict exists within all human-horse relations by virtue of miscommunications between rider and animal. I suggest, finally, that finding solutions to matters of conflict might be achieved by following the common theories about partnership and communication that exist within both dressage and natural horsemanship methods, and using them in practice.

The concepts of partnership and conflict in human-horse relations have not yet been addressed within the context of an analysis and comparison of the theories behind two different training methods. Several recent research papers explore communication between human and horse in detail, with work by Birke (2007, 2008) and Brandt (2004) being of notable significance. Yet these focus predominantly on the method known as “natural horsemanship” (Birke, 2007, 2008) or on human-horse relations generally (Brandt, 2004), and neither specifically explores the concepts of partnership and/or conflict. Other existing discussions of the concept of partnership in human-horse relations are brief and mainly related to disciplines other than dressage or natural horsemanship (Wipper, 2000). While Patton’s (2003) paper on human-horse relations considers the notion of partnership and communication within dressage, the author does not discuss other training methods as a point of comparison, nor does he address the concept of conflict in human-horse relations. Neither does Game (2001), who discusses what she terms the “centaur” nature in a way that envisions the romantic possibilities of the “elementally multiple . . . an imagining of the connections or seams between horse and rider and cosmos” (p. 3), but who does not explore the potentials for problems and misunderstandings in human-horse relations. Hearne (2000), however, does address the matter of conflict by acknowledging and exploring potential miscommunications that arise out of the limitations of language placed on horses and humans by their being different species. She examines the role of coercive training methods in creating conflict; however, she does so without reference to any particular discipline or method of training or to the theories behind them.
Further, while numerous recent articles qualitatively analyze various aspects of the methods of natural horsemanship (Birke, Hockenhull, & Creighton, 2010; Birke & Brandt, 2009; Birke & Latimer, 2009; Birke, 2007, 2008), and several recent scientific and veterinary papers and books quantitatively explore dressage training (Heuschmann, 2007; McGreevy, 2007; McGreevy, McLean, Warren-Smith, Goodwin, & Waran, 2005), there is a notable absence of current, qualitative research into both the theory and practice of dressage.

Training relations between human and nonhuman animals are of current interest to scholars with interests outside the realm of human-horse relations. Haraway’s (2003, 2008) contribution to scholarship on training relations and on the idea of partnership has been significant, though she focuses on dogs rather than horses. Haraway (2008) explores the ways in which human and nonhuman animals who are enmeshed in a process of “training together” [italics added] act as partners, operating “inside the complexities of instrumental relations and structures of power” (p. 207). Within these relations, she argues, human and animal “make each other up in the flesh” (p. 175); a form of “symbiogenesis” (p. 1). Yet, like Game’s, this view of training is romantic, presupposing a harmony in human-animal relations that does not take into account the potential for miscommunications to occur between human and animal. Nor does Haraway’s work explore what the outcomes of these miscommunications might be.

Considering the lack of any research that specifically focuses on similarities in the concept of partnership expressed in theories of dressage and natural horsemanship, research into this area is warranted. This paper will explore how the contemporary solutions to problems in human-horse relations offered by natural horsemanship methods play out within the extant theory and practice of dressage, both competitive and otherwise. Further, the identification of these similarities and analysis of potential solutions will allow for a useful dialogue to develop between practitioners of different methods of horse training. Ideally, this will contribute to improving human-horse relations by placing the matter of equine welfare at the center of all training practices, despite any divergence in theory. This will also contribute to the broader field of human-animal relations by demonstrating that when human relations with nonhuman animals in “training” involve a central focus on communication, animal welfare is respected and upheld.

Divergent Methods with Fundamental Similarities in Theory

The facets of training that make horses and humans “partners” have been discussed by trainers from the disciplines of both dressage and natural horsemanship, which differ in practice. At a basic level, in the practice of dressage the rider
uses subtle physical commands to tell the animal how to move. It is the rider’s legs against the horse’s side, asking the animal to stride out into the walk more quickly, to move up into a trot, or perhaps to canter. Dressage is in the movement of the rider’s hands, balancing the horse’s movement and holding the animal in the frame in which his or her body works with optimum efficiency and grace. At a more advanced level, dressage exists as a proximity of relation between horse and human in which it is as if, as master trainer Alois Podhajsky (1997) suggests, “the rider thinks and the horse executes the rider’s thoughts” (p. 70). This “corporeal communication between rider and horse” is, as Paul Patton describes it, “largely invisible” (2003, p. 86).

A complex training system that represents centuries of development, dressage embodies the notion of partnership through its focus on developing a connection between horse and rider that allows them to perform the complex movements that characterize the practice. Influential “master” dressage trainers stress the centrality of partnership to the practice in their theoretical writings. Portuguese trainer Nuno Oliveira (1976) asserts that dressage training makes the horse “a partner, rather than a slave who is enforced to obey a rigid master by constraint” (p. 18), demonstrating the ideal of cooperation in dressage practice. Alois Podhajsky (1997), who once ran the famous Spanish Riding School in Vienna, argues that such partnerships happen when trainers endeavor ‘to understand [horses’] reactions and . . . behaviour” (p. 66), thereby giving them the means to develop “a sound foundation for successful cooperation” between human and horse (p. 50). And according to master trainer Agoston D’Endrödy (1959), riders must arrange training so that it does not overstrain the animal, allowing him or her to have a “live-long [sic] cooperation with the horse” (p. 8). For these dressage trainers, the key to a successful partnership is communication between human and horse, a “mutual understanding” (Podhajsky, 1997, pp. 46, 99); a “conversation” (Oliveira, 1976, p. 18), or, as D’Endrödy suggests, “a bilateral process” in which the trainer “accommodate[s] himself in conversation as far as possible to the ‘language’ of the horse” (1959, p. 97). The ultimate result should then be, borrowing from Podhajsky (1997), that “two creatures [blend] into one” (p. 70).

Similar ideas are found within the context of natural horsemanship theory. These methods are considered “natural” because they aim to communicate with horses using horse language (Birke, 2007). At a practical level this involves working and playing with the horse both on the ground and under saddle in a way that is intended to replicate the ways in which horses interact with one another in the wild (Parelli, 2003). As Birke (2007) explains, in doing so, natural horsemanship trainers “emphasize understanding why horses do what they do and approaching them with sensitivity” (p. 220); a focus on communication therefore plays an important role in these methods. According to Birke
Theoretically, natural horsemanship teaches humans to “learn to speak the horse’s language” (p. 115), forging connections between horse and human through communication. This focus on communication points to fundamental similarities between theories of natural horsemanship and dressage. So too does the use of the term partnership, which also recurs in literature written by well-known natural horsemanship trainers such as Pat Parelli and Monty Roberts. These trainers have developed and successfully marketed their own training methods and both similarly present partnership as an ideal of training. Parelli aims to create “partnerships for life” (2003, p. 202), which he argues occur when his students learn how to “think like a horse” (2003, p. 26). The result, he believes, is that riders learn to work with their horses without “mechanics, fear and intimidation” (2003, p. 6). Monty Roberts similarly offers “students predictable, discernible, and effective tools to communicate with horses using their own natural language, forming a partnership based on trust and communication rather than dominance” (Monty Roberts Join Up, 2010).

It is evident that the theories expressed by natural horsemanship trainers are not dissimilar to those of the dressage masters. Yet dressage and natural horsemanship methods are often considered divergent, with natural horsemanship often posited as a modern alternative to the more traditional training method of dressage (Miller & Lamb, 2005). One reason for this consideration is suggested by Parelli (2003), who criticizes what he calls the “normal approach” for its focus on dominating the horse (p. 6). However, the fundamental similarities in the theories of both natural horsemanship and dressage point to possibilities for compatibility.

The Practice of Natural Horsemanship

In order to uncover further similarities between dressage and natural horsemanship and to examine whether they are in fact compatible as training methods, I interviewed horse riders about their training practice. The 22 participants were Australian women between the ages of 23 and 65. They were recruited via advertisements in saddleries and at horse shows, on the Internet on forums focused on horse-related discussions, and a number of participants were known to me personally. While I selected 16 participants who practiced both dressage and natural horsemanship methods, I also interviewed four riders who practiced dressage but did not practice natural horsemanship, and two who practiced natural horsemanship but not dressage. The aim of this selection was to examine whether those who did not practice both methods used any sorts of techniques or held any particular beliefs about training that were not shared by those who did practice both methods.
Participants were asked about their relationships with horses and their experiences practicing natural horsemanship and dressage. The interviews were formally structured, and the questions were always the same and asked in the same order, but they allowed room for the participants’ own comments and elaborations, at which times the interviews took on a conversational tone. I was not concerned with the age, ethnicity, or gender of the participants. Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering the work of Birke (2007) and Burr (2006), who attest to the predominance of women in horse-related activities, all were female. Some interviews were undertaken in person, while others were conducted via e-mail or telephone. The interviews were qualitative rather than quantitative, with the aim of exploring the interviewees’ subjective experiences. As Devine (2002) suggests, analyzing experiences and the meanings that interviewees attach to them works as an appropriate means of conducting qualitative research by allowing researchers to tap into “the thought processes or narratives that people construct” (p. 199). The interviews were designed to encourage participants to “tell stories” about their relations with horses and training practices in a way that would reveal these thought processes and narratives. The interview questions were based upon research aims, but in order to ensure that they did not operate as a “mechanical conversion” of research aims to interview questions, I took note of Maxwell’s (2005) argument that the development of successful interview questions involves three stages. These are: first, self-analysis (how do I interpret the questions?); second, feedback from others not associated with the study (how does the layperson interpret the questions?); and third, analysis by use of a pilot test “to determine if the questions work as intended” on a small group of people not dissimilar to the selected respondents (Maxwell, 2005, p. 93).

After using Maxwell’s (2005) three-stage model, I developed five questions which were intentionally open-ended, designed as such in order to “facilitate a discussion of issues in a semi-structured or unstructured manner” (Devine, 2002, p. 198). These were as follows:

1. Describe your relationship with your horse.
2. What problems have you encountered in your relationship with your horse?
3. How have natural methods changed your relationship with your horse?
4. What specifically about natural methods do you think caused this change?
5. How have natural methods helped you in your competitive practice of dressage?
Even in cases where the interviews were conducted by e-mail, the informal, “conversational” style of the interviews conducted in person and over the phone was replicated through ongoing correspondence between me and the respondents. The questions were effective: most of the interviewees talked or wrote at length about their experiences. In the cases where respondents did not practice one of the methods discussed, they nevertheless spoke or wrote at length about why they chose not to practice that method. The answers worked together as a semistructured narrative of respondents’ relations with horses and of their practice of natural horsemanship and/or dressage. Informal probing was also used to assist the participants in elaborating their stories and was effective in terms of “guiding” the interviews (Devine, 2002, p. 198). The interviews provided ample material, which was analyzed using the coding method proposed by Strauss (1987), in which transcripts were “fractured” and read minutely in order to recognize categories of similarity. I was able to draw conclusions based on an interpretation of these categories and remained open to the idea that these conclusions would continually change as the analysis progressed, and the themes of the interviews became more apparent (Strauss, 1987, p. 29).

The interviews revealed much about the reasons why the two methods of training discussed are considered divergent. It quickly became apparent that those who did not practice both dressage and natural horsemanship believed that, compared to the method they preferred, the other method was at least divergent, and at most inferior. In the words of a participant named Simone, who only practiced dressage:

[Dressage and natural horsemanship are] very different in my eyes… dressage is about having the horse in a collected frame… he’s balanced, and he’s supple. Natural [horsemanship] is more about doing tricks and riding without a saddle… you can’t do that stuff in the [dressage] arena.

Another participant named Vicki stressed that it was the focus on physical alignment and balance that made dressage superior to natural horsemanship:

The problem I find with [natural horsemanship] is that even though it focuses on partnership, it doesn’t actually carry that onto the physical side of things… there needs to be a point where, yes, your horse understands you and trusts you both on the ground and on his back, but then you translate that to what your legs and hands are doing and how… that holds the horse in a correct position… dressage focuses on alignment and balance which you need if you are going to get anywhere [with your horse].
Of the participants who practiced natural horsemanship only, all made a distinction between the outcomes of dressage and natural horsemanship. For instance, Scilla said:

Dressage has...a purpose, but I think that natural [horsemanship] has taught me more about communication and partnership [because] it is focused on the horse and not just on performing set movements for the human’s sake.

Similarly, natural horsemanship enthusiast Nadia said that she:

find[s] dressage unnatural, I find the bit and bridle unnatural and...I see these dressage riders pulling their horses heads around and I think, “Oh my God, that’s awful”...[natural horsemanship] is horse language, it’s what the horse wants to do...it’s not cruel.

The ideas expressed by these four participants show the ways in which the two methods might be deemed divergent by their practitioners and supports the distinctions made by the notable trainers of both methods, discussed earlier. Participants’ views of dressage as somehow “cruel” or “unnatural” aligns with existing research into the contemporary phenomenon of natural horsemanship. Birke’s (2007) interviews with practitioners of natural horsemanship revealed similar concerns, while Miller and Lamb (2005) also suggest that the increasing popularity of alternative methods aligns with the advent of new methods of competitive dressage training considered coercive.

Conflicts and Coercion in Competitive Dressage

Coercion within human-horse relations has been discussed at length by Hearne (2000), who argues that coercion occurs when communication fails. Because “[e]very muscle twitch of the rider will be like a loud symphony to the horse” (2000, p. 108), Hearne stresses that riders need to become “kinesthetically legible” (p. 110)—able to be read by their horses and to read their horses’ body language. When this does not occur, the rider forces the animal to do something without complicity because the horse has not properly understood what the human has asked (p. 130). This “coercion,” Hearne argues, is one reason horses end up “if you are lucky...dull [and] unenthusiastic, or if you are unlucky...[acting] murderously” (p. 130).

The matter of coercion within human-horse relations is of current concern because of the prevalence of training methods considered coercive (Heuschmann, 2007; McGreevy, 2007; McGreevy et al., 2005). One such method
that has been hotly debated is known as hyperflexion or “rollkur,” in which riders pull the horse’s head in toward the animal’s chest, which is meant to develop “swing” in the horse’s back (Heuschmann, 2007, p. 88). This is intended to create the sort of extravagant movement desired in competitive dressage (Sandin, 2001-2005). Hyperflexion has been identified by veterinarians such as Gerd Heuschmann, Paul McGreevy, Frank Ödberg and Marie-France Bouissou as a significant contributor to equine welfare problems and horse “wastage.” According to Heuschmann (2007), hyperflexion “puts enormous tension on the upper neck muscles . . . and the back” of the horse (p. 88), while McGreevy stresses that it can lead to a form of “learned helplessness” that lowers the horse’s “motivation to trial new responses, desensitising it to the punishing stimulus and creat[ing] fearful associations” (McGreevy et al., 2005, p. 32). This may engender conflict behaviors, including bucking, rearing, bolting, and refusing to move (McGreevy et al., p. 2005). Research conducted by Ödberg and Bouissou (1999) shows that such behaviors are the primary reason horses are sent to slaughter in Western countries, with 66.4% of nonracing horses sent to slaughter for that reason. Yet known practitioners of hyperflexion, such as multiple world champion dressage rider Anky van Grunsven, have aimed to show that the technique has no ill effects for horses. Van Grunsven’s claims have been backed up by physiologist Eric van Breda (2006), who argues that “the health and well-being of elite trained horses is maintained despite non-natural bio-mechanical positions” such as hyperflexion (Young, 2006).

The ongoing debate in the dressage world is indicative of growing concerns about the welfare of the horse in competition, that also play out in the “revolution” in horsemanship (Miller & Lamb, 2005) that has led to the contemporary popularity of natural horsemanship. Welfare issues demonstrate the need for a general change in the ways in which competitive dressage is practiced; however, dressage theories themselves would seem to provide some of the solutions to these problems. The ideas about partnership expressed by the “masters” of dressage, including Podhajsky and D’Endrody, emphasize the need for communication between horse and rider, which operates bilaterally, and which works to forge a lifelong connection between human and animal in which the latter’s strength and agility improves. Ignoring the current debate ignited by critics of hyperflexion such as Heuschmann and McGreevy, and its advocates, such as van Breda, it is evident that, according to the masters, successful human-horse relations rely on cooperation and harmony rather than coercion. In considering the high rates of horse wastage caused by training-related behavioral problems, it would seem that interrogating the effects of techniques such as hyperflexion and other problematic facets of competitive dressage
is necessary if humans and horses are to forge lifelong connections without conflict.

**Bridging the Void: Conflict as a Catalyst for Change**

Conflict appeared as the main reason that research participants turned to natural horsemanship. The interviews highlighted that failures in communication occurred in many human-horse relations, upsetting the potential for a partnership to develop. For instance, one participant named Mandy recounted a past incident with a horse she had ridden as a teenager, stating that:

> I loved [my horse] but he could really be a pain... if he didn’t do what I wanted, which was often, I’d hit him, pretty hard, with the whip. He’d respond by bucking. One day he threw me off so violently that I was knocked unconscious for almost ten minutes... I was too frightened to ride for ages.

Mandy’s fear and her horse’s dislike of being ridden went hand-in-hand; their relationship was based not on communication but on conflict. The bucking could be identified as the sort of training-related conflict behavior referred to by Heuschmann (2007), McGreevy (2007), and McGreevy et al. (2005), with the participant’s response (whipping the horse) clearly aggravating the problem. Similarly, interviewee Louise described an incident with her horse in which she says she felt “halfway between fearful and despotic”:

> He bolted on the trail for no reason, and I lost my stirrups... I stayed on for a while but eventually fell off and bruised my coccyx... he ran off of course and I had to hobble home by myself. I really... let him have it then.

In letting him “have it,” the participant shows how misunderstandings (bolting for no reason) might both cause injury to the rider and encourage the rider to act in a “despotic” manner toward the horse. The initial conflict therefore escalates to a point where matters of communication and partnership are absent.

Eight participants linked competitive dressage to conflict, with one participant named Michelle describing how she “failed” at competition because:

> we just couldn’t get it together, it’s like the universe transcribed [sic] against us, and... we start to fight each other and I’m reefing his head around, and I know it looks just awful.
Katherine shows how conflict and miscommunication connected in her competition experiences:

I used to find competition...difficult because I get nervous and [her horse] would always start to play up. When he plays up, I get very stressed, and we stop communicating... it was kind of awful.

Both responses show how the pressures of competition affected the relations between rider and horse and brought conflict to the fore. Similar ideas came out in other participants’ descriptions of their competitive dressage practice.

The common existence of conflict in human-horse relations lend credence to Patton’s discussion of the “void” that exists between horse and rider at the early stage of their relationship: “neither can be sure what the other expects or fears, neither can be sure how the other will react to their movements or what this means” (2003, p. 89). The void (or “Gap”) is, as Hearne (2000) suggests, terrifying, as it is characterized by an “absence of language” (p. 111); and in the midst of this void lies not only incomprehension but the capacity for violence, harm, and fear. The halfway point between fear and despotism is the crux of this void, that which bypasses communication and allows confusion and disorder to reign in its place. Such confusion is what may cause trainers to “leap anxiously to fill the void quickly (by say, spurring the horse into a gallop or choking the horse into paralysis—sides of the same coin of terror)” (Hearne, 2000, p. 111). The notion of partnership and communication fits uneasily within the void, as suggested by one interviewee named Belinda:

I’d get really angry at my horses if they did not act or react a certain way, and I’d take things personal [sic], like they were doing something especially to annoy me, or purposely not paying attention to me.

Belinda’s anger is reflective of the complex nature of human relations with horses within the void, for when Belinda took things “personal,” she was causing miscommunications to occur between them by leaping to conclusions about what the horse’s intentions were. The void between horse and rider in such incidents reflects their inability to “[get] on together,” in the sense that Haraway (2008, p. 15) uses the phrase to describe human-animal relations in training. However, Hearne (2000) also recognizes this void as the “nothingness from which something comes” (p. 111), suggesting therefore that in nothingness communication begins. Indeed, relations of conflict within the void would seem to have acted as the catalyst for some participants in terms of their decision to learn the practice of natural horsemanship. As Samantha explained, she:
couldn’t get through to [her horse] for a long time after I got him so I started to do [natural horsemanship] because he was becoming dangerous. Once I began learning [natural horsemanship], that let me communicate in a way that expressed what I wanted in a way that the horse understood.

Thus, at least for this rider, danger caused her to seek better ways of interacting with her horse that taught her how to communicate with the animal.

**Solutions to Conflict**

In many of the interviews I conducted, it became evident that riders who learned to communicate with their horses seemed to assist in overcoming conflict in their relations. The ideal of “partnership” recurred in the interviews as a desired outcome of training, with many participants using the term specifically to describe their relationship with their horses. The participants told stories about their relationships with horses changing as a result of using natural horsemanship. Mandy, who was bucked off her horse, found that natural horsemanship:

> taught me to focus on understanding the horse, and I think because I really wanted to make a change that I did. [He] was a different horse after we started [natural horsemanship] … The whole thing definitely led to better connections between us.

Samantha, who had a horse that she “couldn’t get through to,” similarly found that changes occurred after she learned natural horsemanship methods because:

> it teaches you to think more about what the horse experiences in training, so I think it makes you less likely to blame the horse when things go wrong. But it also makes you realize what you can do to make things better … because the change has to come from you, ultimately.

She also acknowledged the way in which natural horsemanship could work together with dressage to improve her relationship with her horse:

> Having a horse that trusts you on the ground is a horse that trusts you under saddle whether you are going on a trail ride or performing a dressage test … you become a team.

Similarly, other participants who practiced both dressage and natural horsemanship found that the methods could be combined, with participant Leonie suggesting that:
having the foundation from [natural horsemanship] translates into the dressage arena [because] you have are partners and know you can rely on one another.

As did Carol, who described how natural methods taught her not to “force training to go on if things are falling apart.” Instead, she learned to:

become more sensitive to the horse and his needs…I am inspired to get my riding to the stage where it becomes an expression of the horse’s enjoyment. I think that once dressage becomes light and happy that you know you have succeeded. I mean, when the horse is uncomfortable, you know pretty quick, and so many of those dressage horses are unhappy [as a result of rollkur]. It’s pretty clear to me that when the horse fights with you, he is saying something is wrong.

When conflict became a problem in competition, natural horsemanship offered Caroline a solution:

Competition is often the cause of confrontation between horse and rider…natural methods make you stop and think and remember that things don’t need to be so serious…Natural [horsemanship] helped a huge amount in changing things for me and my horse [because] the whole system is set up to make you think like a horse, and I think horses respect that.

In this way the participants’ stories highlight how the similarities in the theories of both methods translate into actual practice. By thinking “like a horse,” participants found that their relations with their horses improved. The focus on communication and partnership emphasized by natural horsemanship worked to improve dressage performance, both outside competition and within it. Thus the practice of natural horsemanship and dressage are not mutually exclusive, just as their theories are not. Further, when pressed for an answer, those participants who did not use natural horsemanship accepted that their methods were aiming for the same outcomes as dressage. As Lynette said:

These disciplines [dressage and natural methods] are…basically doing the same thing. They are teaching you to “talk” to the horse in a more effective way…I think that anything that teaches you how to train better is worthwhile.

Vicki thinks dressage is more effective than natural horsemanship because “you’re making sense to the horse both mentally and physically” but also admitted that:

the focus natural methods have on partnership is…really good…that’s what we all want with our horses, isn’t it?
Such an acknowledgement of these fundamental similarities by riders who had believed the methods divergent shows that the primary factor that concerned the participants was their relations with their horses. It seemed that anything that helped improve these relations was deemed successful in terms of training. This shows that any chasm between traditional and alternative methods could ultimately be bridged by focusing on the relationship and the welfare of the horse, rather than concerns about the type of method used. In putting horses first, riders and trainers might therefore find that training relations have the potential to be long-lasting, free from conflict, and fulfilling for both human and animal.

**Conclusion**

The significance of partnership in both dressage training and natural horsemanship methods indicates that many horse trainers desire the same outcomes. As an ideal, partnership has merit, driving humans to seek better ways of interacting with their horses and leading to the sort of communication between horse and rider that is epitomized by dressage masters and natural horsemanship trainers. Analyzing the damaging role that coercion can play in human-horse relations leads to an understanding of why and how conflict is of significant and current concern for those interested in equine welfare and human-animal relations. The notion of the void, which challenges the potential foundations for partnership, can also be seen as providing the catalyst for change for riders who are concerned about their horses. The conflict, danger, and violence of the void appear to lead riders to a point where they question the foundation of their relationship and seek other ways of interacting with their horses. Arguably, such a point need not be reached before the matter of (mis)communication and, most important, equine welfare is addressed. By finding potential solutions through natural horsemanship methods that encouraged communication, the participants showed that they could come closer to experiencing the ideals of harmony and partnership expressed not only by well-known natural horsemanship trainers, but by the dressage masters. In finding a way to combine seemingly divergent methods for the sake of their horse, participants found that their relations with the animal improved.

The prevalence of techniques such as hyperflexion within competitive dressage practice is cause for concern for those with an interest in equine welfare. Yet it is apparent that dressage competition and communication are not mutually exclusive. Encouraging communication between horse and human would benefit both horses and riders who wish to improve both their training relations and their competitive ability. The opening of a dialogue between practi-
tioners of competitive dressage, of traditional dressage and of natural horsemanship methods might therefore contribute to equine welfare and reduce the prevalence of conflict behaviors and horse wastage in competition.

In terms of the broader area of human-animal relations, the research shows the link between human-animal communication and welfare. The research suggests that the concept of improving interspecies communication offers potential solutions to conflict and welfare issues that may exist within other animal training-related disciplines. It also demonstrates that humans should not let ideological or practical differences affect their commitment to improving nonhuman animal welfare, and that a mutual interest in welfare matters should unite, rather than divide, these individuals.

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Notes

1. Bolting is a term used to describe the flight action of a horse who, tuned out to his or her rider’s aids, accelerates into an out-of-control gallop.

References


