

# REACHING THEIR POTENTIAL

By Paula Turner

## Part 1

A “Mr. Smith” wrote almost two years ago, saying he was impressed by our methods of teaching horses honesty and maximum efficiency of movement as part of the breaking process.

Though his colt was being broken elsewhere, he wanted us to give it a month of “polishing” before sending it to the track, believing this would insure the animal’s honesty. (A trainer’s translation: The colt will be broken at a really cheap place, then I will give you a month to correct any mistakes and smooth his rough edges before sending him to the race track.) What Mr. Smith did not understand was that “polishing” his colt’s rough edges in one month might require a chain saw. Since we do not like using chain saws, I wrote that we did not accept first-time horses for one month; the training he read about took five to do it well. I was sorry, but under those circumstances, we would not be able to take his horse. (I failed to mention that honesty and efficient movement are not quickly tacked on a horse’s training, like bumpers at the end of an assembly line.) The other day I got a call from Mr. Smith. He was obviously in a hurry.

“I’ll be brief,” he announced. “I just wanted to get your OK before presenting this idea to my partners.” He said his colt had been on the starter’s list twice for rearing and refusing to break from the gate. The only other problem was the colt’s habit of spitting out the bit, throwing in the towel, and pulling up consistently before getting to the wire. And sometimes he bolted for the outside rail. I managed not to laugh. Neither

*The psychology of the horse is a key to successful breaking and training.*



did I remark that consistency is a desirable trait, nor, all chickens do come home to roost. Mr. Smith did not seem to be in a humorous mood. He said he wanted us to spend a month working the colt in the gate, get him breaking properly, and, while we were at it, teach him that races do not end before the wire, then return him to the track. He had already invested a good deal of money in the horse and did not want to spend too much more in this last-ditch effort before giving up on the animal. *(Translation: This horse was never taught honesty; now that he has had a year of winning at his own game, cheating, and considers himself invincible, I will give you a month to turn him around 180 degrees, and convince him he was mistaken all this time—that man, not horse, is in*

charge.)

“Will you take the colt for a month of gate work?” he asked.

Stifling the impulse to laugh and say, “You’ve got to be kidding!” I replied in stead, “I’m sorry, but no.”

“No? Why not?”

“Are you now or have you ever been a professional race horse trainer, Mr. Smith?” I asked (too late realizing this sounded like a Senate witch-hunt).

To which he replied, “No, why?”

“Well, you’ve prescribed specific training for the horse, and if I told you we’d do just that, I’d be lying. The gate’s the most dangerous place on a track. You do not just go there and have it out with him. That would be like taking him to his home ring and saying, ‘Stick up your dukes, Boy, let’s fight.’ We wouldn’t take the horse to the gate before knowing he clearly understood our lines of communication.

“If the horse has truly been cheating for a whole year, he figures he qualifies for the ‘...old dogs, new tricks’ adage. It takes more skill, time, effort, and risk to change a horse’s mind than teaching him properly the first time. Done in a hurry, it almost surely involves a major battle with an animal who, especially if he’s fit, may fight hard enough to seriously injure himself, not to mention his rider.” (I do not think I made Mr. Smith’s day) “If I accepted your colt, we would treat him as if he’d never been taught anything, start with basic lessons in the stall involving proper response to stop and go commands, which come to mean the same to the horse as yes and no. He would progress as quickly as his understanding of obedience to man allows. When we found gaps in

that understanding, they would have to be filled in.

“Without going into a treatise on horse psychology” (I sensed his impatience), “you can’t build a house starting with the second story; a horse has to have a proper training foundation if he’s going to last over the long haul, and if the mental/psychological conditioning is not as exacting and thorough as the physical, you’re leaving vital blocks out of that foundation. The building might stand for awhile, but don’t be surprised when it caves in. The horse might do what he’s asked, as long as it happens to suit him. But don’t expect obedience every time.

“Was this horse ever a problem on the farm before going to the track? Were there any battles with him over something he didn’t want to do?”

Probably perplexed, Mr. Smith answered, “He worked really well in the training corral, did everything beautifully. I thought they did a very good—”

“But,” I interrupted, “did he ever give them a fight over anything?”

“There was one area he didn’t like, some place he was leery of and didn’t want to pass ‘ he answered.

“And what happened? Did they ever get him by it?”

“They tried for over a week, and never could get him near there, so they just worked him elsewhere, and he was fine. He didn’t give them any trouble after that,” he replied.

I asked, “Was he taken to the trouble spot again?”

“No ‘ Mr. Smith said, “he gave them no problem anywhere else, so they just avoided that area. Couldn’t you work with him for a month?” he asked.

“Mr. Smith, I seriously doubt what you want can be done in a month, or two, either. “Unless your horse has been quitting because he wasn’t conditioned enough to finish his races, he’s a fit horse. Serious lessons are much more readily accepted by a horse who’s not so sharp than by one

who’s ready to run.” (A few times clients have tried to jump the gun by sending horses they have had on some fitness program—like daily swimming—without thorough professional training at the same time. It is hardly advantageous to train the body and ignore the mind. There is nothing like a thousand-pound bundle of nerves and energy wound tighter than a seven-day clock, springing off the van, totally lacking the discipline and business-like attitude required to keep from hurting him self or someone else.)

“You see, we like our horses to learn very early, before they get anywhere near fit, that their trainer or rider is no less than holy. That translates: Rider says, ‘Jump;’ horse says, ‘How high?’”( How could his colt possibly have the fear of God if he hasn’t got religion?) “Without knowing him at all, I can’t say if we could convert him in a month. Sounds like he’s been enjoying himself; he may never want to be saved.”

“Would you take him for two months?” Smith asked.

“In two months — possibly one — we could probably tell you if the horse is worth keeping in training. I can’t guarantee we’d be able to turn him around.” (I felt like a psychiatrist might when asked if he could get someone over a major psychological hang-up in 30 or 60 days.)

“Well ‘ said Smith, “I’ll have to talk it over with my partners.” Thus ended the conversation.

Before Mr. Smith loses another shirt in the race horse business, there are a few points he would do well to consider. If he wanted to understand the psychological aspect of training race horses, I would have told him once a solid foundation is laid, it can be added to only one block at a time. You never proceed to the next lesson before the horse responds properly each time he is questioned on this one. Like the elementary school student, he may need review several days before he fully understands and

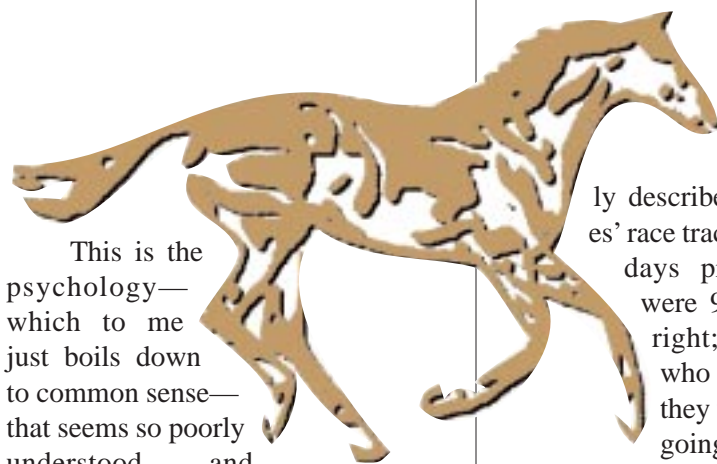
integrates a particular lesson.

If he looks out the window, you have to know how to get and keep his attention, as well as when to call recess. If he cuts up in class, he had best learn his p’s and q’s now. Students tend to do best when they know the teacher will not put up with any stuff. If he is truly disobedient, and his teacher/trainer does not deal with him decisively now, that trainer is inviting greater trouble later for himself or another.

If one of our horses is disobedient further along in training, we just return to the stall for a refresher course in the basics. We rarely have to fall back on more than one review session; horses are usually eager to leave the stall and do whatever you ask afterward. On the other hand, if each time he does something correctly he is praised like the dickens, and much is made over him, he learns that doing well can be most enjoyable, and starts to gain confidence in himself, directly from his teacher. To keep building that confidence, his teacher has to know each time he comes up with an incorrect response, whether he is a little uptight or confused and needs kind reassurance and help, or if he is just being lazy and needs prodding.

His lessons must never be rushed or glossed over, lest he be overfaced and the rug pulled out from under his budding confidence. When lessons are given gradually and thoroughly, he thinks school is easy and starts to get high on himself. The teacher’s goal in making the lessons so easy is instilling such confidence in him that he comes to believe he can do anything.

No matter what an athlete’s physical condition, if he does not have the confidence to believe in himself, he will not win- if he does have that confidence— which evolves into courage—on a given day, as trainers like Allen Jerkens, “the Giant Killer ‘ have proven, he can beat a better horse.



This is the psychology—which to me just boils down to common sense—that seems so poorly understood, and worse, rarely even considered by race horse owners. While hundreds of would-be runners are born each year, far fewer are “made” into race horses. Unfortunately, while many potentially decent horses are also bred each year, many are “unmade” by the time they first hear the bugle in the afternoon.

This lack of consideration for the psychological aspect of making race horses has contributed to the overabundance of “90-day wonders” on the track. This is not to say that it is entirely impossible to take a young horse which knows nothing and in three months give him the confidence to become a champion, not to mention have him ready to safely deal with the zoo that is your typical a.m. race track scene. (It is like taking a just-turned-16 kid, still-warm license in hand, and putting him behind the wheel in Manhattan at 5 p.m. Few of us would want to be in the general vicinity, much less the passenger seat.)

## Part 2

A client recently described his young horses’ race track behavior after 90 days preparation: “They were 90-day wonders all right; they wondered who they were, where they were, and what was going on. They couldn’t

get out of their own way.

By now I imagine Mr. Smith has found someone who, instead of giving such frustrating answers to his request — taking up his time expounding on horse psychology — has told him, “Sure, we can fix your horse right up in a month. No problem, send him on ...”

I am reminded of the story Bruce, our farm manager, told about attending a horseman’s association dinner and meeting a man who switched from training Western horses to breaking race horses. He told Bruce he had read an earlier training article, and it was all right except the part about psychology. Don’t need psychology. Just train ‘em all the same.” (Either this guy or his brother probably broke Mr. Smith’s horse.)

I could not begin to count the examples that fly in the face of such philosophy; but will recall a few. (Names are omitted to protect the guilty.)

I was once asked to take over the training of a mediocre filly which had run several times, done all right, been injured, and was being prepped for her return to the track. Dropping her down in class, owner and track trainer hoped some unsuspecting person would claim her, broken down.

I was amazed when first shown the filly, galloping on three legs. She looked miserable, was dull and void of personality, and, like many race horses, galloped too much on her forehead.

The first thing I did was forget her

race track trainer’s orders and put a halt to her galloping. We took her on long hacks in the company of Junior, my tough little ex-event horse. Gradually we added more and more jogging, teaching her how to reach up underneath with the hind end and carry her self properly balanced. With the pressure off her forehead, and the greatly lowered stress of jogging rather than galloping, the soundness problem disappeared, along with her miserable expression and attitude. She began to enjoy her work.

Once she was sound, we did not let her go back to galloping on her forehead, but had her do a slow, very collected canter instead. After she understood keeping the hindquarters engaged, Junior (which was two hands shorter) showed her how to stretch out and, in less than three strides, cover the same ground she previously had in four. Since she still had a box turtle’s interest in really running, we had Junior gallop alternately behind and just off her shoulder, so he would think he could not quite catch her.

The entire period we did other little things to build her confidence and aggressiveness, and Junior picked on her regularly while hacking to and from the barn. Gradually her reaction to him went from cowardly ducking away in fear to being more and more irritated with her aggressor. After she started biting back at Junior, her rider asked why I did not put a stop to his bullying. “Just wait” I answered. “One day very soon, this filly is going to walk out, of the barn, spot Junior, stand up on her hind legs, and come after him. When she does, she’ll be ready to go to the track.”

I will never forget the look on her rider’s face, or the sight of that filly, when the very next day she walked out of the barn, took one look at Junior, stood up on her hind legs, and came at him with ears pinned and teeth bared.

We sent her to the track on the next van. The day she shipped I was

asked how soon I thought she would be ready to run.

"I believe she is about three weeks away from a good effort," I replied.

Sometimes coincidences are too much to believe. Exactly three weeks later, she won handily for a tag of several thousand more than had been planned. Instead of breaking down, she went on to win her next two starts—in allowance races—and continued holding her own.

A few years later, one of the fillies we broke had the potential to make a name for herself in New York. There were only two stumbling blocks: Her wheels and her attitude. I informed the owner his horse would not be able to handle breezing for several months if he wanted her to stay sound, and the extra time she needed to get strong enough to handle speed would also give us a much better chance of channeling her exceptionally negative attitude in a positive direction.

Her fighting-the-world-and-everyone-in-it outlook could easily result in self-injury. Channeled, it produces a horse which kicks in when the others are falling back and one which fights for the lead, eyeballing the competition without blinking. That is a runner.

When her owner changed trainers in New York, the new trainer decided the filly—sight unseen, not to mention, unknown—would get to him quicker if sent to his favorite facility, where her training would be geared much faster. And it was.

Soon she was galloping and breezing with the rest of her class. There is no point splitting hairs over whether it was her attitude, her wheels, or a combination thereof that caused her downfall. As far as I am concerned, eventually, speed kills, whether it is from the horse or, more often, his owner's or trainer's impatience. A year later, I heard she still had not left the training center, and she had four grapefruit-size ankles . . .

Then there was the colt we called "Mr. T," sent from a 2-year-olds in

training sale last year. Though his ankles needed respite from over-stress, he looked like he could run a little. (He should have arrived with a big sign that read, "THIS IS A TEST" plastered to his side.) When I walked into the stall and patted him on his neck, you would have thought I fired a shotgun at him. He threw himself backward, crashing hard against the wall, and stood frozen trembling, eyes bulging.

After much soothing, when he quieted down I said, "OK, this must be somebody's idea of a joke. Let's put some tack on him, and see what else he can do."

To this day, we have no idea how they managed to put the bridle on him at the track. I do not think I want to know. First of all, it was a major effort to get his clenched teeth open for the bit. When the bridle or a hand came anywhere near his upper head, he exploded, wheeling in non-stop circles to the right, oblivious of hurting himself or anyone else. (And the truly dangerous ones are those not concerned with survival.)

I guessed that to begin with, the colt had what I call "funny ears." Young horses which distinctly do not want their ears or poll touched are not at all uncommon in this business. When we get horses like that we almost tease them out of it. By simply talking quietly while scratching them on the face and neck you gradually work your way to the ears, leaving your hand in place if the head is flung. No matter what they do, your steady stream of soothing words never stops.

In most cases, within 15 minutes you can stroke the ears themselves, the horse having learned no harm comes from the hand that is giving him such pleasure. When the process is repeated several times each day, they soon forget what they ever worried about. One could turn this reasoning inside out, skip the patience and pleasure, and punish the animal when he ducks to keep his ears from

being touched. Hence, he learns to associate pain with hands going near his ears. A sadist could carry it a step further and put the twitch on to force him to be still while those hands slide a bridle over his ears. Who could blame the animal for then thinking, "I know I never should have let them near my ears; now I'll be tortured every time they fool with my head." We breed these animals to fight. They are not born knowing we only want them to fight for the wire.

The only horse we had had before similar to "Mr. T" was "Mouse," a little filly whose history we knew. Raised in a large field out West with 2-odd Quarter Horses, all eating from a communal trough, she might as well have grown up in a street gang. I am sure she must have had to fight for everything to survive. When you opened her stall door she presented her hind end poised and ready. This attitude proved interesting when she got her halter off, twice. Whenever she was led out of the barn you could also count on her to stand on her hind legs and strike the shank out of your hand while aiming for your head. Within a few days it was apparent that some one had best have a heart-to-heart with her about the advisability of threatening, or attempting to strike, everyone who dared come near. After a 3-minute debate (which she might not have lost had she been physically fitter), she was soaking wet and quite exhausted. (As a matter of fact, her trainer was also, but fortunately, managed to outlast her.)

It seemed like a good time for her first bath, which, lacking the energy to do otherwise, she stood for quietly.

"Mouse" was like those potato chips that used to come in the bag labeled "untouched by human hands." When simply touched, gently patted on her neck or shoulder, her entire body trembled in apprehension.

For two weeks we took her out of the stall and just patted her, a dozen times a day. As she slowly relaxed, the hands gradually covered more,

and finally, all of her body, until they elicited no tension response whatsoever. Within two more weeks, hers was always the one head to stick out over the webbing when footsteps were heard in the aisle. With eyes and nicker, she literally begged anyone to come and pat her. She became the most affectionate race horse I ever knew. "Mouse," which was literally a wild thing off the range, came around much quicker than "Mr. T." After several critically dangerous attempts to bridle "T" I decided only Sally, my best hand, and I would give him the "Mouse" treatment: Two weeks of touching and patting while talking to him. Gradually he accepted being patted on the head, and even having his ears stroked, with less and less time spent working from his body to the ears. Still, he gave us the old reaction when we attempted to bridle him . . . "O.K. guys," I told the help, "we're going to bore 'Mr. T' to death with attention. I can't see using a twitch or tranquilizer just to get the tack on."

We avoided playing Russian roulette by ignoring the bridle and his symptoms, and focusing on the source of his problem—lack of trust. I asked all the help to go into his stall to pat and talk to him several times a day. I wanted him to learn to accept anyone walking into his stall and soundly patting him anywhere on his body—attention our weanlings enjoy. It was almost six weeks before the above treatment no longer caused him to look up from eating hay, at which point we finally succeeded in bridling him, but that was a very careful, slow procedure. The headstall had to be unbuckled and pulled through the left side of the browband. Once he accepted the bit, you had to support it holding the two pieces of headstall together over his nose, then gingerly swing the longer piece across his poll, and pray.

If he once felt the leather slide on his poll, his reaction was still explosive—rearing and whirling uncon-

trollably. If the gods were smiling, you next care fully threaded the headpiece back through the browband, then rebuckled it to the left side—no problem for any one accustomed to handling nitroglycerin. I think it was the closest I will ever come to defusing bombs.

Putting the saddle on was never a problem, and we squeaked through the next two weeks with only two flip-out sessions. When he did freak from the horror of leather moving behind his ears, it was best simply to return to the problem later, for, though his body might settle back to earth from its suicide trip, his mind remained in another world much longer.

Since driving is an integral part of our training, Sally taught "T" to accept a lunge line going from the bit, through the stirrup, and around his rump. Merely getting him to walk quietly with the line only laying across his back took a full hour. The next day, it took another hour for him to go quietly with the line around his rump. All this time, everyone continued going into his stall to pat and talk to him several times a day.

By the 10th week, most of his nitro had evaporated. One morning he was so relaxed, his entire being exuded calm trust. We did not take the bridle apart, but put the bit into his easily opened mouth and slipped the headstall on over his ears. Then he just stood there looking at me as if to say,

"So what was all the fuss?"

I would like to have seen him that relaxed—solid—for a few weeks before sending him off, but his upcoming trainer called saying he needed to fill a stall. He gave me the lowdown on "T" at the same time. Word at the sale was the colt could run, if he could be trained—if he could be tacked—because he was crazy.

I told the man that just today we man aged to get the bridle on normally, and our barn was still standing.

"Mr. T," which had arrived much

like a kid fresh out of reform school shipped the next day. I hoped we had at least diverted him from a sad fate. A few months later I heard he won his first start, a straight maiden race, by 10, then was second against tough allowance company, and has since been finishing in the money.

One of my favorite equines of his time was a former stakes horse in England, which must have missed the old country sorely. He always stood with his head in the far corner of his stall seemed miserable, did not take hold of the bit when galloped, and would not run any faster than you could kick your hat. His heart just was not in it. With nothing to lose, I determined to find out what would make that Limey tick.

He must have grown up watching old westerns on the telly, for he liked nothing more than loping around like a cow pony, slow and relaxed, loose reins flap ping in the breeze, rider sitting down. And he loved hacking, and exploring the stable area.

Before long he started acting more like the other horses: Head out over the webbing, observing the world, pricking his ears when you came down the shed row. He went from a definitely depressed horse which would just as soon not go to the track, to one which as we walked around the shedrow before going out to gallop, every other step would kick his heels up. With each kick he gave a loud squeal of sheer delight.

You could not keep him from it; he felt so good he could hardly stand himself. He did very well — equaled a course record in New Jersey . . . with the dogs up.

A well-known trainer had a horse he knew could run, but was sulky and would not fight for the finish. He made a friend of mine, Jill, the colt's sole exercise rider because he could see that she got along with the horse better than anyone else.

Given a free rein with the colt, Jill took the time to do more than just the back and forth to the track routine,

got to understand him, and found the key to making him happy. Her understanding of his psyche turned him around 180 degrees and released the champion inside a sour horse. Hence, you would recognize his name today. At Belmont we were sent an older horse which was a half-brother to a classic winner, a big, powerful good looking colt. His family ties were obvious.

One look said if this horse could not run, we were in the wrong business. His owners thought they had pulled a real coup, having bought him across the ocean for less than \$100,000. They just wanted to win one black type race, then put that boy to stud.

The first time this “bargain” went out to gallop, one of New York’s

finest exercise riders was aboard, and I was next to him on another horse. We were half way around the first turn, when suddenly this horse did a 180 and tried to go home. After a rearing display, the rider got him going again. Before our mile and a half was up, the horse did a repeat performance. In fact, he did variations on the same routine each time he went to the track.

Nice bargain: No stone was left unturned in the effort to make an honest horse out of this guy, but all to no avail. He had no interest in galloping once around non-stop in the morning, much less, running in the afternoon. Who could blame him? He had taken over the position of trainer early in his career. Generals do not volunteer for demotion.

You do not have to be a psychologist to train a horse. Nothing short of a head-on with a freight train will stop some race horses from running their hearts out, but those animals are the exception rather than the rule. Race horses are sort of like cars; it is hard to make up for lack of attention to detail in their building. It is humans I do not understand. No matter how good his physical conditioning, how can we expect a horse to achieve his greatest potential if equal attention is not paid to his psychological training? Why one would send a car with the Pinto’s degree of craftsmanship in its making to compete against a Ferrari is beyond me. No matter how many Pintos may be entered in a race, my money is on the Ferrari. — *Paula Turner*

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