

FRAN D. SMITH

Train for the Trail

Obviously clinician Dave Seay knows how to relate to horses in ways they understand; otherwise, students' horses and mules wouldn't remain quiet and calm in this situation.

Part 1

Enjoy trail riding more by using Dave Seay's approach to a few simple maneuvers.

Article by
Fran Devereux Smith

HOW would you like to trail ride and not have to hold your horse back at any gait?" clinician Dave Seay asks. "Or have a horse canter by, and your horse stay quiet?"

He immediately gains the attention of students attending his two-day horsemanship clinic at the Santa Fe Horse Park in New Mexico last fall.

"Trail riding horses need training too," he continues. "Some horses want to be in the lead; others get too close behind other horses or act ill-natured in the crowd. These are normal, common problems we all

have, but by reconditioning our horses, we can solve them."

The hard part about reconditioning a horse, of course, is reconditioning his rider-handler. But, as Dave explains throughout the weekend, rethinking old habits boils down to matter of self-preservation—for both horse and rider. The greater the understanding a predator-human has for the prey-horse's natural instincts, the easier it is to make successful changes. The end result: Each feels secure in his survival, and hitting the trail is a far safer and more fun prospect for both.

Protection

At the first clinic session, students watch nervously as Dave turns his mare and gelding loose in the arena with their mounts, then matter-of-factly says, "Don't let my horses get near yours. Just swing the tail of your lead rope at my horses if they crowd yours. It's your job to protect your horse."

He makes the same comment later as he trots and canters a bridleless student horse through the group. At first the horse wants to slow only when he's near other horses. However, by now students afoot and horseback are comfortable with swinging their leads at another horse to push him away from theirs.

A short time later Dave comments, "Every horse here is dead-calm because his handler is protecting him. And the horse I'm riding won't even go near you because you have just taught him to be respectful of other people and other horses.

"If you do that on the trail," he grins, "somebody probably will sue you for swinging your rope. But learn to swing your (lead) rope anyway. Do it overhand; that's a little safer. If you swing it underhand, it might get tan-

gled in a horse's feet."

Even though this might make a student's horse uncomfortable at first, Dave encourages people to continue, "Keep swinging the tail of your rope until your horse accepts it." He explains that when a person quits swinging his lead because his horse becomes uneasy or threatens to bolt, "all he teaches his horse is to leave every time he swings a rope. Swing your rope until your horse settles down; soon your horse won't be uneasy."

Dave then suggests that clinic participants practice protecting their horses. "Set up a trail riding situations at home, for instance, with another horse coming too close behind you. This will help make things safer for your next trail ride.

"Horses bite, kick, or pin their ears because people don't protect them. This is all about self-preservation—on your part and the horse's part. Your horse needs to know you're the pilot and in control, but not in a fearful way. Remember: He is a prey animal who must learn to trust a predator to survive, and that's scary to him." ⤵



Dave's assistant Sharon Henderson swings the tail of her rope to encourage another horse to move away from her mount.

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Push, Don't Pull

"As a predator," Dave tells students, "your natural instinct is to pull on a horse, rather than push him away. You do what a predator naturally, instinctively does, but that's the opposite of what your horse needs for you to do."

He explains that mares push foals away to wean them, just as horses establish order in a herd by pushing, rather than pulling, on one another. "That's the horse's natural instinct.

"When you push him, a horse walks away from you with respect and understanding. That makes a big difference because you help clear things up for the horse. People don't always realize how a horse operates in his natural environment, but that's one of those horse things that will affect what happens when we ride him.

"Another important thing to understand: When horses communicate with each other, they start early.



SHARON HENDERSON

Here Dave "flags" a student's horse to help push her horse away from a leg cue.

In other words, this horse pins his ears when that horse is at a distance. But we humans don't do that; we wait until a horse is on top of us and then must shove him off. If we just swing a rope, and not even directly at the horse, he won't come that

close. Start early. If your horse's feet are eight feet away from you, don't let him come nearer than five feet. You can still rub him at that distance. He doesn't have to be within two feet, where he can rub on you and push you out of his way."



SHARON HENDERSON

Profile: Dave Seay

Clinician and trainer Dave Seay is from the southeastern United States—Florida first, then Georgia and North Carolina, and now Virginia. He grew up showing horses successfully and by the late '70s found success as a trainer on the show circuit. But he soon realized there was far more to learn about his profession. "So when I had an opportunity to work some wild mustangs in Florida," he says, "I took a breather and worked with them. It was challenging to me, a great experience. I learned a lot from the mustangs about how a horse honestly feels about things."

Dave has since worked with hundreds of mustangs for the Bureau of Land Management. His ability to work horses in their natural environment is an asset, but no more so than his approach of "not trying to pull them into doing things." Instead, he "pushes them into figuring out the easiest or best place to go." His approach has worked equally well for finishing western show horses, top-ranked dressage horses,

Dave Seay, who had a successful career in the show ring, says he learned a lot from mustangs.

Energy

"Riding is all about moving with energy," Dave stresses. "For some people self-preservation again takes over—they are scared of the energy because they don't know what to do with it, how to direct it. Other people, for example, ask a horse to move his forequarters, barely putting a leg (cue) on him—and he moves. But, unfortunately, the person didn't really feel his horse respond and pulls on his head anyway."

Even more people let go when, as Dave describes it, "the horse is dying with energy." For example, a good reiner finishes his set of spins with energy, but another allows his horse's energy to die as he drags through the final spin. "That happens," Dave explains, "because the person left the horse without energy the last time he worked



"Leave your horse with energy," Dave explains, "and that's how you'll find him the next time you work him—with his energy up and responsive."

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him. So the horse thinks, 'If I keep my energy down, he'll quit.' Instead, leave your horse with energy, and that's how you'll find him the next time you work him—with his energy up and responsive."

The big benefit in learning to use a horse's energy, according to Dave: "No matter if you're on the ground or in the saddle, when you take the pressure off the horse and stop your energy, the horse soon learns to stop. This is important: His energy stops when your energy stops." ←

and jumpers, who now respond softly and willingly to their riders.

Since his first clinic in 1986, Dave teaches and trains other horses from the back of his two horses, Dove and Santee. "I've trained my horses," he points out, "not to be on welfare, and they do a really good job. They've helped so many people get together with their horses.

"That's the fun part for me. As long as I can help people and help horses, I'm happy. The hard part about being a clinician is trying to keep everybody safe—the horses and the people. That's important, and sometimes it's a difficult job."

Difficult or easy, however, Dave sees himself doing much the same job 10 years from now. "It satisfies me," he admits, then adds, "but it's important to me that I be able to use my horses while I'm doing it. If I couldn't do that, I'm not sure I'd be as happy." The other big attraction in his work, according to Dave, is his teacher—the horse. "I'm still learning," he grins, "and I have a long way to go."



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Release

When learning how to raise a horse's energy and direct it to advantage, Dave cautions against sending mixed signals to the horse. For example, a person on the ground swings his lead at the horse's hindquarters to encourage movement, but stands too far forward, near the horse's head, neck, or shoulders, which discourages the horse from moving. Similar confusion results when a rider asks his horse to step out with energy while holding or even pulling back on the reins. The key: Give the horse a direction to go when his energy is up and offer him a release from pressure as he starts moving there.

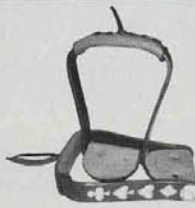
A handler afoot and/or a rider in the saddle can learn to raise his horse's energy and channel it appropriately. Either way, some horses are at first uncomfortable with that. Once a horse learns it's okay to be energetic, he also soon learns to stay quiet and calm provided, Dave points out, that the person releases his pressure on the horse in a timely manner.

"The timing is that quick," he says, snapping his fingers. "When you ask him to do something, the horse thinks about it for only a split-second—and that's when you need to let go. Release the horse when his energy is up. Then he realizes that when his energy rises, you leave him alone. And you soon realize that his is controlled energy; your horse does only what you ask."

"Knowing when to make the release is the hard part. Release your horse," Dave recommends, "at the start of whatever maneuver you're going to do—a back, a stop, whatever. If you ask a horse to back, let his energy die, and then release pressure, the horse thinks you'll let go if he doesn't do much. So for a good back-up, let go when the horse starts to back; then you'll have a horse who backs with energy."



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"That release is his reward, and the horse then understands he did the right thing. Give the release whenever a horse makes the slightest effort to respond." Once a horse masters the first step in any maneuver, a handler then maintains his and the horse's energy and asks for a second step before again offering a release. Over time, the horse develops a willing attitude because he knows a release is coming no matter how many steps are required.

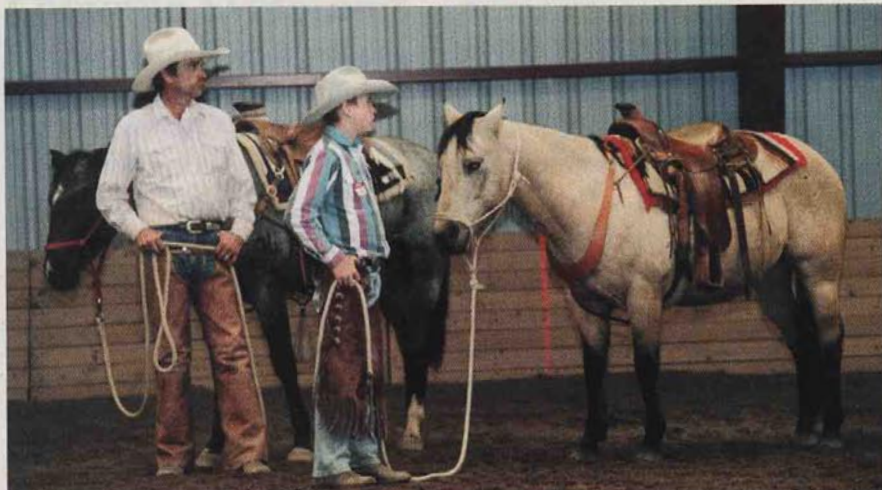
A common mistake: All too often Dave sees people demanding that a horse perform the same maneuver over and over with no release in sight. "If you relentlessly ask a horse to perform, some horses just shut down, and some horses will move if you really get after them. But some horses say, 'If you kick me one more time, I'm ready to fight.' All these horses could have made it as riding horses if the person had just let go when the horse did what he wanted."



Dave and his horse push the gray to disengage his hindquarters. The all-important release will occur the moment the gray starts to cross his right hind over his left.

Next month Dave discusses how to disengage the hindquarters and move your horse's forehand from the ground.

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Father and son Frank and Ransom Spencer share the clinic experience as students.

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