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Tom Dorrance

*The Pioneer of
Resistance-Free Training*

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In search of true unity.

From the man who inspired Ray Hunt, Greg Ward,
Dr. Robert Miller, Jack Brainard, Pat Parelli and thousands more.
Article and photos by Lesli Groves.

Tom, 83, keeps this colt's attention just by flicking the lead rope each time the horse starts to move.



Tom Dorrance is leery of articles written about how he handles horses.

After 50 or 60 years of being asked to explain how he communicates with animals, he knows how hard it is to put into words. But, undaunted, I set off on my pilgrimage to ask him to explain it all to me. Afterwards I wished I had picked an easier subject — something like, say, the meaning of life.

Tom Dorrance sat on his little camp chair and I sat about three feet away on a bale of hay. From out of the canvas bag lying at his feet, he pulled a piece of black nylon string. He had knotted the ends together to make a loop, and he told me to stick out my index finger. Slowly, his small, brown, 83-year-old hand reached out for my hand, and then turned it so my index finger was pointing straight up. He draped the string over my finger, then he put his finger into the loop and pulled it taut. Using his free hand, he wove his middle finger in and out of the string, then touched his fingertip to mine. He gave a little pull with the index finger that held the other end, and Voila! the string just dropped away from our connected fingers.

We stared at each other for a minute. I tried to decide if this was just an old man's string trick or if there was some special significance that I was missing.

"Now," he said slowly. "You do it."

In a matter of seconds I tangled the string.

"I'll talk you through it," Tom said.

I couldn't understand the signals, and grew frustrated with my own fingers. Baffled. I was "tripping over my try," as they say, because I wanted so much to do the right thing. After all, I'd traveled halfway across the country just to talk to the man. What was he going to think about someone so dumb she couldn't even do a silly string trick — with someone telling her how to do it!

"The string," he said finally, "is not going to change any more than the person who's working it."

He was trying to tell me that if I wanted to get magic from the string, I would have to take a different approach.

He talked me through the trick again. I quit trying to stay a jump ahead of him and just listened. When the string fell away from our connected fingers, he smiled and said, "That's good."

I have since forgotten how to do the string trick. But I have not forgotten Tom's message.

Decades before "resistance free" training had a name, it had an advocate in Tom Dorrance, a shy cowboy whose ability to communicate with animals earned him a cult following with which he's never been quite comfortable. His disciples include Ray Hunt, the clinician who basically took Tom's show on the road, and infinitely successful reined cow horse trainer Greg Ward. (See Legends, September 1993) Then there's Dr. Robert Miller, the man spreading the word about foal imprinting, and another famous clinician, Pat Parelli.

The stories about Tom are legion. They say the day Tom took over the rough string at the 25 Ranch in Nevada, they no longer had a rough string. Every horse quit bucking. Greg Ward has seen Tom sitting on his camp chair in the center of a round pen with a whole group of loose yearlings lined up in front of him, like little soldiers. "Come on to lunch with us, Tom," Ward invited after a long morning's work. "You go on," said Tom. "I want to stay here and talk with these fellows."

Because of the stories, many people get the impression that Tom is like some Indian medicine man or shaman with almost supernatural



The flag helps desensitize a spooky horse. The lead rope is dangled around a fence post.

powers. That's part of why he's so uncomfortable with the fame his talent has brought him. He believes that these communication skills are latent in all of us.

Another reason he avoids the limelight is Dorrance takes no credit for his knowledge. He says everything he knows, he learned from a horse.

"This is not magic," he has said. "It is reality."

I met Tom through Jody Semper of Clovis,

"I tell people, it has to come from the inside of the person, and the inside of the horse, to get true unity and willing communication."

"A lot of people ask me to teach them to do something. I say, 'I can't teach you anything. I might be able to help you learn to do something, if you want to learn it, but it has to come from you.'"

"Sometimes a horse will put up the greatest resistance just before he comes through. I call it the darkest hour before the dawn. When the horse has tried all the avenues of his natural instinct of self-preservation, and puts up its greatest resistance, is when people usually give up or get mad. If they would just be patient, the horse is about to come around."

"When I hear somebody talk about a horse or cow being stupid, I figure it's a sure sign that animal has outfoxed them. If they looked at it differently, they could benefit from that experience."



"People will come to my clinics for four or five years before some of this sinks in. They'll say, 'Are you getting better at presenting this, or am I just now catching on?' I say it's been the same old broken record for 50 or 60 years. It might be that they're beginning to understand."

"You watch a foal with his mother, and if he starts to get a little out of hand, she'll give him a little bump, or a little nip, and he understands. People ask me all the time how I learned to do things, and the only thing I know to tell them is I learned it from the horse."

"A young man was talking to a very successful, older man, and he asked him, 'How is it you come to have such good judgement?' And the older man said it was from experience. The young man waited for him to continue, but when he didn't, the young man finally asked him, 'Well, where does experience come from?' The older man said, 'From bad judgement.' . . . If you misjudge, but you benefit from that experience and learn what not to do again, you'll develop better judgement."

"I tell people I've never seen a stubborn mule. I have seen the mule shut down for a while, to give the person enough time to think about what they should be doing."

California, who had invited him for a combination clinic/83rd birthday celebration last May. Tom rarely does clinics. When he does, they are unstructured, free-flowing sessions that deal with whatever "project" pops up that day.

A project might be any little annoying habit most people overlook, or it might be catching a horse for the first time. "I don't bother anybody unless they ask," he said. "And if they ask, they're liable to get more than they asked for."

Or less. Tom gives people a great deal of credit for being able to figure things out with a minimum amount of guidance. He encourages people to think on their own.

"A lot of times people come to me and say they are having a horse problem, and I tell them, perhaps that's not the case. Perhaps your horse is having a people problem," Tom said. "People have to learn to think like a horse. Most of the things a horse does are out of self-preservation, and that's good. Otherwise, there'd be no more horses."

For two days I observed as Tom directed people doing everything from saddling and riding a colt for the first time to teaching one to stand quietly in the center of the arena amidst all the confusion. I saw firsthand how a horse will sigh and lick its lips when it accepts something, and how something as inane as a well-tossed pebble can teach a horse to stand quietly tied for hours. I watched Tom waving his flag like some sort of magic wand to keep a hyper horse's attention, and how he could, standing out on the end of a long, cotton lead rope, get a colt that had never been haltered before to pose like a statue just by giving the rope a well-timed flick when the horse started to move.

Most of all, I watched how he concentrated on the horse. He was so tuned in, he seemed to almost be sending the horse a message by mental telepathy. Most of his directing was done from his little camp chair, but when he worked one-on-one with a horse, I observed how he would move in and out, left and right, controlling the horse's movements with his own. This is what I had heard about so many years ago, what had brought me on this pilgrimage in the first place.

And when I talked to Tom, one on one, that's what I told him. I explained how I overheard a conversation between Jack Brainard and Monte Foreman, two famous horsemen especially well-known in reining circles. Jack had been to see Tom out in Nevada, and went on for at least an hour about how he'd watched

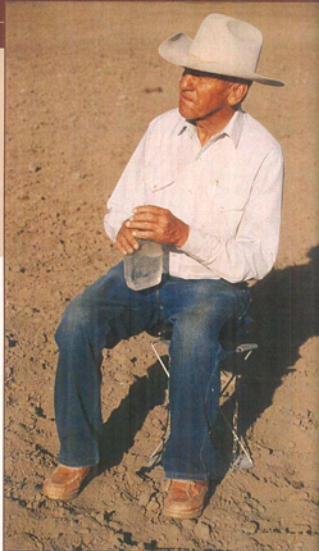
Tom position himself in order to work the horses — how Tom observed each nuance, adjusting his own stance or posture, and how the horse would tune into him. Jack said that Tom believed animals could read people's thoughts, and that if people would try to do the same, and see things from the animal's perspective, they could create an environment of willing communication.

I told Tom how much just hearing that conversation 15 years ago had affected the way that I approached animals, and, to some degree, people. It was the reason for the seemingly instant gratification I had later as a professional cattle photographer, as well as the reason I had enjoyed that work so much. What I was trying to say was, "Thanks."

His eyes looked straight into mine throughout this monologue. Then we sat together in comfortable silence. Finally, he said:

"Every now and then, somebody says that they heard about me, and they seem to be thinking pretty good about it. I tell them, perhaps it might be better to hear about me than to find me."

I gave you a little white space there so you could think about what Tom said. Maybe he was apologizing in case I was disappointed that he was human, and didn't do anything more magical than a string trick. Or perhaps he was saying that it's more important to spend time alone, looking inside yourself and inside the animal, than it is to make a pilgrimage. ♠



Tom directs from his camp chair.