



‘To understand the horse, you’ll find that you’re going to be working on yourself.’

— Ray Hunt, Natural Horsemanship trainer

The Cowboy Way

Horse training goes natural

Move over, Monty Roberts: Oregon has its own “horse whisperer.” Oakland, Ore.-area cowboy Bill Martineau has been gentling horses from Eugene to Roseburg for more than 30 years.

Tall and lean with a weathered face and a western drawl, Martineau wears the quintessential cowboy hat and a belt buckle to match. He leans up against his Chevy truck and eyes the colt he is about to saddle up and ride. Flash, a sturdy chestnut-red horse with a buck that looks like it belongs in a rodeo, eyes him warily back.

Martineau calls himself “retired” but still gives clinics on starting colts, trail riding and “de-spooking” — teaching a horse not to be afraid of new things. His clients include everyone from rodeo competitors to English hunter-jumpers.

For years cowboys “broke” horses by lassoing them, tying them up and riding out the bucks. It wasn’t very nice or gentle, but it got the job done.

Martineau himself started out that way. But in the early ’70s, he went to a horse training clinic with a man named Ray Hunt, who began to change the way Martineau thought about how to work with horses.

Hunt is known for sayings like, “To understand the horse, you’ll find that you’re going to be working on yourself.”

Hunt started off learning from Tom Dorrance, a rancher born in 1910 in Eastern Oregon. Dorrance, who died in 2003 at the age of 93, was known as the grandfather of the “natural horsemanship” movement.

“You start with what they need,” says Martineau as he demonstrates starting a colt the natural way using a rope halter and a lightweight fiberglass pole. Flash needs to learn to go forward when Martineau clucks.

“If he’s not movin’ his feet when I cluck, I’m obligated to spank him a little bit.” He taps Flash on the rump with the pole, and

Flash trots briskly forward. As a reward, Martineau stops the colt and scratches his shoulders.

There are four rewards, according to Martineau: Release of pressure (a tap from the pole is pressure); rest; rubbing and scratching the horse; and verbal (telling the horse it’s a good boy or girl).

Patting a horse hard with a good slap is not a reward, the cowboy cautions, “You do that with a wild horse and he’ll run off, kickin’ you when he leaves!”

He demonstrates the right way to “love on” a horse by scratching Flash’s withers — the area on a horse’s back where his neck meets the backbone — and his forehead. Flash soon looks a lot less wary and, in fact, pretty darn happy.

Martineau de-spooks a horse by rubbing him with the pole and putting the lasso around him. Sometimes he uses hula-hoops for the de-spooking, putting them over the horse’s head and rubbing them on his body. When Flash feels the lasso tighten around his mid-section, he does his best to buck the lasso off. But soon he decides he’d rather rest and be scratched.

Before Martineau learned natural horse-

manship, he thought the goal of not hurting the horse or rider while “breaking” a horse was “kinda sissy,” but “a couple years later” he decided “it was kinda smart.”

Using his pole, lasso and rope halter, Martineau works with Flash from the ground, getting him to respect the handler’s space. “I detest the rude horse,” he says. He also teaches the horse to gently give to pressure and develop what he calls “a soft feel.”

Every time he introduces something new, he repeats it with the horse several times. The first time the horse does something right, he says, “I kinda look at it like an accident.” The horse needs to repeat it “a half-dozen times

or so” before the horse really understands.

He lets Flash rest to give the horse time to process what’s going on.

‘If he’s not movin’ his feet when I cluck, I’m obligated to spank him a little bit.’

— Bill Martineau, horse trainer

“If we get him all goosed up cluckin’ and whippin’,” he says, “we gotta give him some time” to relax.

The “whipping” in natural horsemanship isn’t the cracking bull-whip of the old-fash-

ioned cowboy. It’s the tapping with a light pole.

Even more important than the pole is Martineau’s body language. To get Flash to back up, he walks towards the horse with his hands chest-high, staring at Flash with his shoulders squared, “like a predator.”

Then Martineau drops eye contact, lowers his shoulder a little and approaches the horse at a slight angle. This time Flash stands still and waits to get “loved on” with scratches and verbal praise.

Soon Flash is following the cowboy like a well-trained dog, stopping when he stops, walking when he walks.

Then Martineau swings his old leather saddle up on the horse and tightens up the girth straps. This starts a new round of bucking that again ends with resting, praise and petting.

When the cowboy finally swings aboard, Flash looks like he’s been a cowpony all his

life. He’s soon trotting forward at a cluck and stopping at “whoa.”

Sitting on the relaxed horse, Martineau looks thoughtfully at the 4-foot-high fence around the horse arena. “I’ll try hard to keep him in the arena if he runs off buckin’. I don’t want him heading for my truck,” he says dryly.

Flash just cocks a hip and lazily flicks a fly with his tail. Another horse started the “natural” cowboy way. **EW**