

What Is It With Women and Horses?



by
Julie S. Crawshaw

“Trying to balance the demands of family and work often causes us to lose touch with that part of ourselves that belongs to us alone. Horses, with their innate grace, dignity and beauty, help us to find it again.”

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“What is it with women and horses?” asked my neighbor, a retired cowboy whose last horse had died two years earlier. “Ninety percent of the folks you see ridin’ horses are women.”

When he was still ranching, did this man like his horse? You bet. Did he appreciate the contribution his horse made to his work? Without a doubt. He just didn’t ride unless he had cattle to gather or fence lines to check, times when he needed a horse to do whatever it was he needed to do.

I think this pretty much describes the difference between the sexes when it comes to horses: Men ride because they need to, women ride because we want to. The kind and quality of the connection between women and horses is simply different for women than for men.

Difference Begins Early in Life

It’s a difference that begins early in life. The young girl who won’t lift a finger to help her mother in the house will ride her bike through pouring rain in order to spend the morning grooming her pony and mucking out stalls, activities her brother would consider as punishment.

Part of the intensity of bond between women and horses is power. Sitting atop 1100 pounds of strong, graceful muscle definitely makes you feel powerful in a way that nothing else does—and despite all the societal changes that have occurred, few women enjoy the same level of economic and political power that men do.

If a woman has good self-esteem, a partnership with a horse will support and increase her feelings of pleasurable empowerment and autonomy. A woman with low self-esteem will likely use her horse as a means of expressing her anger and frustration instead.

A Dangerous Fantasy

A woman who kept her horse at the same barn where my mare Annabelle lived was one of these. Grossly overweight and deeply unhappy, she held the fantasy that her horse was so “spirited” that it took a truly exceptional horsewoman (her) to handle him. The problem was that her horse wasn’t spirited, he was a big overgrown brat with the worst ground manners of any horse I’ve ever known.

When his owner led this horse, he stepped on her feet. When she entered his stall, he shoved her with his head and shoulders. When she put him in cross ties—where she always positioned him so that his hindquarters faced into the barn aisle where other people and horses needed to move about—he pinned his ears and threatened to kick anyone who came near. Never having been taught about boundaries and appropriate behavior, he became a dangerous equine juvenile delinquent.

Even worse, not only did this horse’s owner fail to correct this behavior, she obviously enjoyed it. Instead of teaching him not to threaten people—or even just cross-tying him at the end of the barn aisle with his hindquarters facing away from other boarders—she always tied him in the middle of the aisle where he could do the most damage.

Whenever any one needed to pass this horse, his owner would shout, “Be careful, he kicks!” The thing that got to me the most was that she always looked so elated when she said this. With a big smile on her face and her chest all puffed out, her voice was as resonant as if she were an actress on stage playing to the last person in the back row—which in a sick sort of way, she was.

Asking this woman to tie her horse at the end of the barn aisle fell on deaf ears, as did suggesting that she teach him better manners. Thoroughly immersed in her "I'm an exceptional horsewoman with a spirited horse" fantasy, she reminded me of those foolish women you read about who fall in love with men who are serving time in prison. The men have been imprisoned by the state because they were found guilty of committing crimes. The women have been imprisoned by their fantasies that the men are misunderstood heroes instead of the criminals everyone else understands them to be.

The day came when I'd had more than enough of this silly woman and her ill-behaved horse. Not surprisingly, this was the same day her horse made the mistake of threatening to kick me. After planting the sole of my boot on his butt, I moved quickly to his side and used my right hand to grab the top of his neck hard, mimicking the feeling of the stallion hold that every horse on the planet intuitively understands and respects. I used my left hand to grasp and twist the soft end of his nose like a twitch. "Listen, you stupid jerk," I snarled in my meanest voice. "If you ever lift your foot to me again, you will not live to see dinner. *Do you understand?*"

His owner was stunned into silence. The horse was stunned into compliance. From that moment on, everytime he saw me he became absolutely immobile until I'd passed by. Thank heaven that such women and their horses are a small minority!

Horses Love Being Nurtured

Even when they receive it on a daily basis, horses don't take nurturing for granted. The son who loved being hugged as a two-year-old will become an eight-year-old who swears he'll die of embarrassment if you ever hug him in front of his friends again. The daughter who was calm and sweet at ten turns into a hormone-driven teenager whose histrionics over the slightest expressions of concern would put Mata Hari to shame.

Human kids may "outgrow" displays of affection as they mature, but horses never do. Our horses are glad to see us even when they know our arrival means they'll have to leave the lazy comforts of pasture or stall and the companionship of the equine friends to work at the equestrian discipline of our choosing. They love being groomed, having clean stalls, being given fresh hay and clean water and carrots and hugs. And they never, absolutely never, roll their eyes and groan, "*Oh, please!*"

Being with our horses nurtures us as well. It gives us a breather from our problems and allows us to re-energize the dreams that balancing the demands of work and family have caused us to lose touch with. Horses, with their innate generosity, grace, dignity and beauty help us not only to find them but to start living them again.

At the end of the day, our relationships with our horses are at least as much about the peace and freedom that comes from being accepted for ourselves than they are about anything else. Even when the schooling session, the riding lesson or the horse show didn't go well and we despair of ever becoming the top-notch horsewomen we so much want to be, our horses never blame us for our failings. They simply accept us as the imperfect beings we are and love us anyway.

Is there a woman among us who doesn't wish that every human in her life would do the same?

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