

Are You Unknowingly Harming Your Horse?

Owning your first horse can be a dream come true. Yet many new horse owners may find their new-found dream less-than-perfect as they struggle with issues of behavior, manners, training and respect. Perhaps they are inadvertently harming the very creature they've fallen in love with. Even though they're large, majestic animals, horses require a lot of gentle TLC. Unfortunately, many of the long-standing practices in traditional horsemanship may be harmful. Growing numbers of horse owners are seeking more humane ways to train, ride and care for their horses.

That's why Natural Horsemanship has become so popular. It's based on understanding the natural herd hierarchy or pecking order, how horses use body language to communicate and how the practiced application of 'pressure and release' can cause the horse to willingly work with you – respecting and obeying you as the lead horse. It also promotes a deeper bond between horse and rider, based on the creation of a trusting relationship. Building trust isn't always easy— that's why it's crucial for first time horse owners to make sure they're not unknowingly hurting their horse.

Here are five key things new horse owners must know:

1) A horse's mouth is sensitive. Many first-time horse owners assume they must use a bitted bridle to control their horse. But a metal bit can quickly become an instrument of torture in a horse's tender mouth. Consider trying a bitless bridle instead. They cradle the horse's head to let you apply gentle consistent pressure and release signals to 'tell' the horse where to go and provide exceptional control with less pain for the horse. Do your research – the effectiveness of bitless bridles vary with the design of each model!

2) Heavy hands hurt! New horse owners think they have to tug strongly on the reins to control the horse. This can cause pain and lead to health problems for the horse. Many 'behavior' problems actually stem from heavy-handed riders. Talk to a qualified trainer about the best way to hold the reins to avoid confusing and/or hurting your horse. Riding in a bitless bridle can also help you develop softer hands and improve your use of other aids like your seat and legs.

3) Saddles are NOT one size fits all. You shouldn't just walk into a tack store and buy the first saddle you see, or pick up bargain. A saddle should be fitted to your horse's size and shape. Call the tack store ahead of time and get instructions to correctly measure your horse. Ask about treeless saddles; they're softer, more flexible and more comfortable for the horse and rider.

4) Not all horses need shoes. Depending on where and how you ride and your horse's living conditions, your horse may not need shoes. Hooves help pump the horse's blood and some experts believe this function is enhanced when a horse is 'barefoot.' But it's best to talk with your vet and farrier about what's right for your horse's specific needs.

5) Reward your horse. Don't confuse intimidation with respect. Teaching your horse to obey because it's frightened of you does not lead to a good relationship. Spend time bonding with your horse. Hang out in the round pen and consider riding freestyle. Simply petting your horse is a good way to reward good behavior.

Zoe Brooks, a quality management consultant and horse farm owner, admits her first foray into owning a horse didn't start with the mutual caring relationship she expected. Instead, her horse Hazel pushed her around. That's when Zoe did some research and began using Natural Horsemanship methods and a whole new world opened up. Hazel was content to take trail rides outfitted in a rope halter with no bit. But as soon as Zoe tried riding her with a bit and bridle Hazel's personality changed and she became combative. That's what led Zoe to design the Nurtural No-Bit Bridle.

"When you think about the mechanics of shoving a harsh hunk of steel into a horse's mouth, it sounds rather barbaric," says Brooks, co-founder of Nurtural Horse. "The idea behind the bitless bridle is that if you remove the distraction and pain of a bit, the horse and owner are happier. Because bitless bridles are so much gentler yet still offer control, we've discovered they're especially useful in training young horses and new riders."

For more information visit www.nurturalhorse.com.

About the Author

Zoe was born and raised in the tiny town of Port Loring in Northern Ontario. She was a devoted horse lover from birth, explaining that some people are born with a love of horses and their souls feel complete in their company.

Zoe got her first horse when she and her husband Guy bought a farm. She designed and patented the Nurtural No-Bit Bridle after seeking a better way to ride her own horse, Hazel. Zoe is living proof that horse lovers come from all walks of life. She leads 'another life' in the world of quality management consulting for medical labs. She pioneered the concept of "Performance-Driven Quality Control," and is the author of a textbook by the

same name published by the American Association for Clinical Chemistry. Zoe is on faculty at The University of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark, NJ where she teaches an online post graduate course in Clinical Laboratory Data Analysis. Her quality control work has taken her across Canada, the US and to Korea, Taiwan, China, Thailand, England and Wales. She's served as keynote speaker and presented workshops in Australia, Finland and Bermuda.

In addition to her daily involvement with Nurtural Horse, Zoe also publishes articles and maintains a web site dedicated to laboratory quality management. She also designs and presents seminars, workshops, home study courses, CDs and software programs for quality management.

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