

Horse Training Through Feel Internship with Rayna Granger 2010

By Joanna Christian

I grew up training dogs and riding horses. I was taught in the old choke and release ways for dog training and the kick and pull ways of riding horses. As an adult, I acquired an Australian Shepherd and I knew I wanted to use gentle, kind methods for training him and was easily able to find humane, clicker methods that he loved. When I decided to get back into horses after about a 12 year break I knew that I wanted to find a similarly humane and effective method of working with my new gelding. I wanted a safe, happy and sane partner who understood me and felt happy and comfortable. I plan to ride long distance trails with my gelding, eventually riding across the United States along the American Discovery Trail. So having a horse that I was able to really communicate with and trust was very important to me.

I began buying natural horsemanship books, one of which was "True Horsemanship Through Feel" by Bill Dorrance and Leslie Desmond. Bill talks about how helpful it is to have a teacher to help you along. No need to reinvent the wheel, life is too short not to take help he says. I was having a hard time applying the things I read to the real live horses with which I was working. I decided I needed a teacher, and since there were none that I could find in my area that taught horsemanship through feel, I went on the hunt. I was hoping to find someone willing to take me on as an intern for a couple weeks so that I could really get a start with this training method. That is when Leslie Desmond's site led me to Rayna Granger.

Rayna and her wonderful family accepted my 3-year-old Friesian/quarter horse Seven, my dog Pi and myself for a two-week internship on their beautiful ranch in Tennessee. They treated us like family and made me feel right at home.

Training began immediately. Seven was a perfect horse to learn from because he is young, willing and green, but has been started and has some riding experience. Rayna taught me new ways of doing even the very most basic things, like where to stand so as not to crowd the head, haltering and un-haltering, leading, backing, lunging, picking feet, saddling and bridling; all through feel. One of my favorite things that I learned right away from Rayna was how to teach your horse to help you take off the halter by having him turn his head to where you are standing behind the shoulder and softly wait for you to release him by gently dropping the halter from his nose. This

early lesson really helped me to understand what the concept of "release" felt and looked like. I learned new ways of using ropes to help teach and prepare my horse for his life as a saddle horse. We spent a lot of time making sure that Seven could handle ropes around and under his feet, all over his body and under his tail. He learned to softly back off the rope if he stepped on it, what it felt like to be hobbled, how to ask for the release and how to handle a single leg picket hobble with a rope attached. All of these things will help us prepare for long distance riding.

Rayna taught me how to listen to my horse and to take his needs and abilities into consideration, building trust and communication between us. I now know how to ask through feel for a change in gate, a change of direction and a stop with my seat and body position rather by pulling and kicking. Seven is learning to understand those requests with softness. He is learning that no one is in a rush and that he can go at the speed where he feels comfortable. That we will support and help him as he explores a world very different from his life in the pasture.

Rayna was patient and helpful, even when I was frustrated, giving of her time and her experience. She has a great work ethic and is as honest with people as she is with her horses. I learned so much from her, and while I know I have a long way to go, Rayna gave me a good foundation and many new skills to help me along on my quest to be the best partner I can for my horse as well as the other horses that I am working with and will work with in the future. I could not have been happier or more satisfied with my experience.

I would like to thank her wonderful husband Bill, who provided many delicious meals and her beautiful daughter Shannon who always had a smile and something interesting to say. And of course, thank you so much Rayna!