

# Learning to speak horse and play horse games by horse rules

Special to The Sentinel

DUNSTER — Horses use few sounds to communicate. Most of their communication with each other is based on body language. How 'speaking horse' and understanding herd dynamics and equine psychology can positively influence the relationship humans have with their horses was the focus point of a workshop on equine behaviour and body language held at Falling Star Ranch in Dunster on Saturday, May 11.



PHOTO SUBMITTED

Birgit Stutz talking about facial expressions and swirls

The half-day workshop, which was taught by Chris Irwin gold-certified trainer and coach Birgit Stutz, focused on teaching people how to properly read equine body language, the importance of awareness of one's own body language, as well as horse psychology. Participants had the chance to observe horses in a herd environment and learn about herd dynamics and behaviour, how horses interact with each other and why horses do what they do, as well as the differences between predator and prey behaviour.

"Body language is essentially energy, and energy is movement, and since a horse's movement originates in the hind end, we need to read a horse's body language from back to front," explained Stutz.

"We need to learn to read and interpret every message from every body part from back to front and then add it all up for the big picture. Body language, however, is not a static thing, so the messages may change constantly. There are three energies that come into play when communicating

with horses: impulsive/pushing/herding energy, blocking/boundary energy, and passive/drawing energy. These three energies should always work together to shape the horse into a feel-good position consistently," she said.

"We need to know which energy and how much energy we need in order to establish that bond of trust and respect, build confidence in the horse, and engender willingness in the horse. Too much push, and the horse will never truly trust you. Not enough, and the horse will never truly respect you," she said.

Stutz said it is important to understand that a horse's body and mind are hardwired.

"Frame of body is frame of mind. How they are shaped is how they feel. Horses don't lie. They don't separate how they feel and how they act. For that reason, horses read humans the same way they read each other: through body language. As soon as a horse starts interacting with a human, everything means something," she said.

"So if your body is sending a message to the horse, the horse believes what it is saying, which may be completely different from what you intended. We may think we are saying one thing with our body, but the horse reads something completely different. This is very confusing for the horse. We need to learn to communicate clearly with our body language so as not to give the horse mixed messages," she said.

As well, often times our own body language is inadvertently sending messages which are considered rude in the horse world, for example sending impulsive energy into the horse's head and neck. This is very stressful for the horse and can cause anger, fear, stubbornness, defiance, and sullenness/poutiness, she said.

"So learning correct body language is of utmost importance, not just in order to be clear and fair to the horse, but also in order to develop a positive relationship with a horse, build trust, respect and confidence, and become a benevolent leader to the horse. Horses live in the moment, so how they feel can change very quickly. This requires the human to be highly aware, not just of the horse's body language and their own, but also of the environment," she said.

Stutz said in order to properly use equine body language, humans need to re-program their bodies to change their innate predator behaviour and adapt it to the prey behaviour of horses.

"Humans, who are essentially predators, tend to be focused and generally take a direct approach, to go in for the kill or to tackle an opponent. Horses, on the other hand,

are prey animals. They have a high level of awareness and are highly in tune with their environment. These traits are in their DNA, even in domestic horses, and are essential for horses in order to survive," she said.

"While it is in the predator's DNA to pull on things, for example to pull on a horse's lead rope to make it go forward or to pull on the reins to turn or stop a horse, the language of prey is to herd the body forward and provide boundaries in the front. Horses don't pull on each other. They don't understand pulling, and it only causes resistance. Horses push each other around to establish dominance. It is the human's responsibility to learn how to speak and understand the language of equus and adjust to the horses' prey animal behaviour. Verbal commands are secondary when communicating with horses," she said.

Stutz also covered topics such as how to approach a horse in a user-friendly manner, how to correctly halter a horse without being offensive to the horse's personal space, as well as feeding aggression. Participants were also taught how to set boundaries and how to be assertive without being aggressive, as well as how to help timid horses become more confident and how to get pushy horses to respect a person's space.

The workshop ended with a demonstration on proper round penning techniques.

"Round penning shouldn't be chasing your horse around until he's physically and mentally tired," said Stutz.

"Proper, horse-friendly round penning should be turning your horse loose in the pen, paying attention to his every gesture, to every move he makes, and responding appropriately with your own user-friendly body language, with just the right push, in just the right place, at just the right time," she said.

A workshop participant from Tete Jaume said learning equine body language has helped her become more confident and safe around horses.

"I didn't grow up with horses," said Elke Vogelwohl. "When I got my own horse I wanted a relationship based on trust and mutual respect. I also wanted to stay safe around them and have fun hanging out with them. Yet little did I know how they communicate with each other, besides the pinned ears, swishing tail and little things like that. I thought there had to be far more to their body language and there certainly is much more. The workshop was an eye opening experience and a lot of fun. It has made a huge difference in how I interact with my horses now. I do not feel intimidated, helpless or scared anymore, and I know my horses are much happier too. There is no more guess work."

## Lifeforce: Take Your Reiki Level One in Valemount!

By DONALDA BEESON  
Contributor

VALEMOUNT — Learn the Japanese art of Reiki, a way of working with universal life force energy towards well being. Accomplished Reiki Master Linda Mullen will return to grace Valemount with her ever-present presence, and offer Reiki Level One from Friday May 31 to Sunday, June 2.

Reiki, as described in the manual, "is a gentle awakening to self-care and the innate ability to connect to the Divine. The teachings of Reiki offer methods of attuning ones' self to wholeness of mind, body, emotion, and spirit."

Mullen details further, "Reiki Level One is all about self care and assisting others — firstly for Self and then it naturally flows out to all the many relationships we have with Life. One might view Reiki as a sharing or acceptance of unconditional love — love being a creative force. Reiki can be offered through touch, thought, speech... the many ways humans communicate with each other."

The self-care methods shared in level one are: aura cleansing and care, energy balance through the chakra system, the method for giving a full body treatment (allowing everyone

to both give and receive), immune system balance, and a short energizing and clearing treatment. Throughout the weekend, there will also be guided visualizations, meditation, and individual attunements to Reiki offered as a sacred aspect of the teachings.

Reiki can be used to treat a variety of ailments and concerns; "as my teacher spoke of it," says Mullen, it "is only limited by one's imagination."

There are three levels of Reiki before becoming a Reiki Master Teacher by apprenticeship. The first level is about self-care and hands on practice. The second level has three sacred symbols introduced, along with practices for each. The third level is a practitioner level — although many people take it solely for personal use — and it involves three more sacred symbols, taught along with practices for each.

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