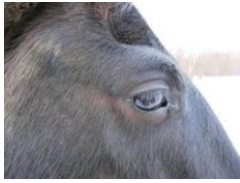


Polo's Eyes



He had a soft look in his eyes. I noticed it a hot day in August 2004. They say the eyes are a window to the soul, I believe that. I knew he was not a mean or untrainable horse. On the contrary, Polo was an intelligent horse with a huge heart.

I was hired by a family in Montreal to help them with a very difficult, unmanageable horse. Why me? I think the horse picked me and set it all up. That's how smart he really was. Actually we met through a mutual friend here in Manitoba. The family had heard I had a very unique way with horses.

Polo took naturally to the ground work I did with him and progressed equally well under saddle. He was certainly rude at times, but soon learned to keep his 16.2 h.h. frame out of my space and off my feet. By the time I left a week later he was a different horse. Calm and confident and the owners Eric and his daughter Raphaëlle were starting to build a better relationship with him. He had changed so much that Eric's wife, Fabienne jokingly asked what drug I had put him on to make him so quiet!

Surprisingly, as weeks went by Polo's new attitude and manners began to slowly slip into a serious pattern of aggression and disrespect. He started to unravel before their eyes. By mid winter, he was even difficult to lead from his stall. In two separate incidents he attacked Raphaëlle and a family friend in the round pen. He wouldn't accept a saddle; in fact he would attack it! The family was bewildered.

Eric called me in desperation. I told him to halt attempting to ride or any training activities for their safety. We made plans to have Polo come to my ranch, here in Manitoba for long term rehabilitation. It was an expensive proposition for them, but their love for Polo was strongly imbedded from the first day they got him as a weanling.

They had done their best, father and daughter, two rookies raising a foal. Then an injury to his hock in his first year decreed this horse would likely be little more than a lightly used pleasure horse. It was a lot of money to propose to spend on an unsound horse, one that somehow now seemed to have gone crazy. There were some considerations to ponder before they loaded him up to travel west. Could he handle the strain of the trip and schooling on his weak leg? Could he change or would they have to give up on him eventually? If he couldn't or wouldn't change, his future was less than promising. It was hard to think about that for this family, it was hard to imagine what else they could do. Would they ultimately be forced to have him put down? It was a grim thought.

He lunged off the trailer April 1st, 2005 and nearly dragged me down the lane to the ranch. That soft look was entirely gone. Here was a horse definitely unhappy with life. Anger, fear and anxiety exuded from every hair on his body. What had happened to him in those months after I left?

The details trickled out of possible answers from the owners, but the truth poured out of Polo freely as each day progressed. He had been abused.

Not by the owners certainly, but quite possibly at the hands of the staff at the boarding stable where Polo lived. While I was in Montreal, I had watched the newly hired resident trainer schooling horses. Patience and love of horses were certainly not expressed in his work with them. It was our best guess that his ego was also a little affected when a lady trainer from Manitoba was imported to work with Polo. Whatever his motives or whether it was simply poor handling and stable management, Polo's life had changed dramatically in the months since I saw him last.

Polo first needed to feel secure and simply enjoy his surroundings. His first days here were spent exploring pastures, making friends with my herd and establishing himself in their hierarchy. I discovered he was easily intimidated, and took the lowest position in the herd. Over time, he would rise in rank, which showed me his spirit was still intact.

As I began to slowly and patiently work with him he would display extreme emotions and behaviors that confirmed the reports from the family. Yet, I knew it was a façade, a defensive behavior instead of an offensive one. He was afraid and protecting himself in the only way he knew how. Like a cornered animal sometimes, other times like a huge, confused equine he really just wanted to be understood and loved. Each issue he had I worked through in a therapeutic way, assessing and setting up a process to get to the core of the problem. Hopefully I could erase the bad memories and allow him to replace these behaviors with new, constructive ones.

Saddling was a real issue. Polo would viciously lunge and attack and try to bite a saddle or blanket approaching him. It was suspected he was abused while secretly being ridden by the stable's staff or the trainer. To help him get over this I used a method called approach and retreat. A saddle or blanket was gently offered for him to inspect repeatedly in a rhythmic motion. It took dozens of these offerings repeated in a session to desensitize him to these objects. He simply got physically tired of attacking and knew that I was there giving support, in a loving, friendly way. In the end, he could be saddled anywhere with nothing on his head to control him. We also ensured he had a good fitting saddle.

Through feel, timing, love and methods that work to communicate with mind, body and soul he began to change. We would look into each other's eyes and truly understand each other.

He progressed steadily over the next months. Still, he would occasionally get flashbacks. One day I was using a pitchfork to remove some manure near him in a corral and suddenly and unexpectedly he turned to attack the fork! My heart almost broke right there. I could imagine only one reason a horse would irrationally be afraid of a pitchfork. Can't you? I reached out and hugged and rubbed this horse for several minutes. He had known it as a tool of pain. It was totally unexpected as I had swept and shoveled the

barn literally under his feet many times before. He certainly was never afraid of those items!

His defenses were turning into trust, friendship and simple enjoyment of being with humans again. He started to bloom and everyone noticed his eyes. They were dreamy and soft.

Eric and Raphaëlle came to participate in a clinic with Polo at my ranch three months after his arrival. His manners, attitude and abilities showed them that their money was being well spent. Their biggest joy was riding him out on trails with me. They were completely happy with this new horse.

I shudder to think what another possible approach to his “bad behavior” would have resulted in. Instead of the patience, understanding and love I offered to help this horse through his problems, what if someone had taken the hard approach to “break him” of his man made habits?

His journey to recovery was truly a particularly rewarding opportunity for me to use my skills and intuition to free his soul again. I came to love this horse.

Polo is now a calm riding horse that although he will never be a long distance pleasure horse, or a performance horse, he certainly can carry his owners down many trails. He can be ridden bareback as well and is always ridden bitless. He has developed muscling that has greatly strengthened his weaker leg. He is happy and healthy. This giant black horse has turned into a wonderful friend, trail horse, dressage student and yard pet. He came to Seasons Ranch to know the freedom of large pastures with hills and forests and the way back to his true self. He went home with a new set of skills and many good memories. Raphaëlle can look into Polo’s eyes and see a friend.

And now...the rest of the Polo’s story – August, 2006 – to January, 2009
Written by Raphaëlle Stenne

After having spent a nice year long holiday in Manitoba, where Polo had his first chance to discover magnificent alfalfa fields and also to learn there are soft ways to communicate with humans and vice versa, he came back in Quebec. His new home, a stable filled with relaxed and quiet horses, was a nice place for Polo and I to become acquainted again.

Polo was obviously no longer the same horse; he was more patient, less aggressive and definitely more willing to make contact with humans. It was my turn to learn how to engage in a new relationship using a different language with him. Nonetheless, it was important to realize that my horse was certainly different but definitely not new; it was still Polo!

He was still angry when he was left inside too long. At this stable he was only out once a week! He would kick the boards of the stall to show his displeasure! I totally understood his frustration. It was difficult or impossible to correct those characteristic reactions. It

would have been unfair and dangerous to punish him for these outbursts. The good reeducation achieved by Barb would not make Polo tolerate this poor stable management. If anything, it made him oppose it more, he wanted his freedom again! It was not his fault and that pent up energy needed to find an outlet.

So, I tried new methods. The ones I learned from Barb when she came to Quebec and when I visited her in Manitoba, which was to bring Polo's attention onto new things, to make him focused and interested in his surroundings and the games I played with him. That way, I was kind of ignoring his bad behavior by "patching" them with these diversions and games. He was truly enjoying them! Of course going out of the stable only once a week was not good for him at all! So, we changed Polo's boarding place two more times before we found one that was good for him. Now he is a happy horse who eats more than he needs and is out in a pasture every day and only put in at night.



Anyhow, since he came back from Manitoba and we have spent many days together, he has learned to see me as a different person than I was before. I decided to focus my energy not on correcting his bad behavior but on make him appreciated simple things. So, the bad behavior disappeared because it wasn't useful anymore for him – he did not need to scare me to be free – he became a free horse in a way I thought he would appreciate to be free. So this method seems to work so far! However, it isn't because he didn't have bad behavior anymore or that I forgot what he was capable of doing, which is a very important thing to remember and more precisely, *the causes that created the bad behavior*.

Let me tell you something significant that happened last autumn.

Polo always hated to be lunged; I barely lunge him four times in his life. The other times I or somebody else try to lunge him, Polo chased out of the ring. That was many, many years ago. Still, I always remembered that detail - *never lunge Polo*, he hates that and it can become dangerous for me. But, I learned from Barb that it's not necessary to lunge your horse in the traditional way to achieve anything. I now know the true recipe is to find the neutral ground where both the horse and his human partner can exchange and learn from each other in *a very peaceful way*.

Anyway, one day 3 months ago, I was interested in learning new dressage techniques so I invited a new trainer to come to our stable. When the lesson started, the trainer told me he was going to start the lesson by lunging. I strongly suggested this was not the best idea, knowing the potential consequences this could have. Still, the trainer decided to do it anyway. So, what happened? The trainer was simply charged by Polo!



It happened not because Polo is a bad horse, but because there are things in life that Polo just can't stand, – like lunging. This is fine, everybody has something that bugs him in life; it's a part of their history and personality. But I wouldn't have been able to realize this major fact without having met Barb. She showed me how to fully appreciate and realize what finally a horse is in his completeness, and how to maximize our exchanges in the safest, most productive and friendly way. It is a way in which we

both can feel free to express ourselves and enjoy our partnership. Thanks Barb!

Raphaëlle

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