



# Before You Build — Deconstruct

by Tom Moates

**Honestly,** when I traveled to Salome, Arizona, from Virginia for two weeks to learn from clinician Harry Whitney, I expected to build on the solid foundation I'd worked on for several years to lay up toward the Better Way with horses. I figured the base was solid. After all, I'd obsessively worked to read, watch, attend, and practice all I could toward learning the Better Way with horses. This opportunity I figured would be the beginnings of the structure to be framed on top of that base. But...that's not what happened.

What I got was just the opposite. I got deconstructed. I got those foundation stones torn down before the first sill was upon them, and a whole new floor plan presented to me. And, to make it worse, I was aware of it the whole time. I knew it was happening to me because I participated in it.

It—this deeper understanding I sought—actually began to make sense, but I found I had to be willing to let go of much of what I had carried to the Arizona desert with me.

How do I tell this story? It is one of those that is about the intangibles, like feel. How do you put the invisible into words?

No one can possibly say it better than my mare, Sokeri, said it to me the day I got back from Arizona. Soke (pronounced So-kay), for short, had been with me for several years. She is the first horse I ever had, and from the first day I worked with her in the “natural horsemanship” ways. I had not done much with horses before her, so everything in the horse world was new to me. She came “broke,” which is a good way to put it since she was completely shut down and accustomed to being dominated. I explored natural horsemanship from a variety of sources, and that whole beginning is shared in my book, *Discovering Natural Horsemanship, A Beginner's Odyssey*, if you care to read the gory details of the complete novice trying to get better with horses. I finished that book on a Friday, and left the very next morning at 3 a. m. for Harry's. I had no idea how poignant that timing would be.

All the work I did with horses leading up to Arizona was progress of a kind. The mare opened up in time, and we worked through many technical details. I learned tons from all kinds of sources and experiences. Pressure and release was working for us pretty well from the ground and the saddle. I could send her around the round pen, changing speeds and then back off the pressure and bring her in to me. The signs from her indicated to me in my mind that we were getting on great. She listened fine. There were still some problems, and trouble would resurface in areas I had already cleared out, which I thought was weird, but it seemed clear that our rela-

tionship was fine and she trusted me.

Then I watched Harry for ten hours a day for two weeks. What startled me at first was what he didn't do. The first day I watched Harry in the round pen, I could hardly believe how little he did at times that day. I was pretty dumbfounded. I'd seen a range of clinicians, and always they seemed to be driving a horse around the round pen, or worked on lead with some exercise, but always busy—often Harry just waited. One horse provides a great example of what I mean. The gelding was trotting circles around the fence of the round corral, nose in the air. Harry just stood there summing-up the situation, then he made the big move...he slapped the end of a lead rope on his chap. The horse looked at him for a second, then went back to what he was up to before.

“This horse's thought is out there,” Harry said, pointing out that the horse's eyes, ears, and mind were directed out of the round pen. “I'm just gonna say, ‘hey, it's better over here.’ (that was what he meant with the simple slap of the chap with the rope.) This horse doesn't feel good inside. That's why he thinks it is necessary to run around and try to get over there. He thinks it's out there, but really it's over here with me. It'll feel better to him over here. He'll figure it out.”

And, oddly enough, with nothing more than a series of slaps on his chaps (and light ones at that), the horse began to look his way more and more. Then, the horse slowed to a walk along the fence. Before long, he left the fence and circled closer to Harry. Finally, the horse stopped and decided to see how it felt by Harry, where he got his nose stroked and neck rubbed.

This took awhile, and I could see the chap slaps were well timed to points where the horse was leaving with his thought. Thus, the whole series of slaps just brought the horse's attention back in toward him. Altogether they amounted to a simple conversation, reinforcing what Harry wanted to say to the horse. It was startling to me at that moment, because every other clinician I'd seen would have had this horse standing there by him in less time, but would have accomplished it with way more pressure.

I'd never seen a horse brought around to a person with such a gentle touch. I'd seen horses driven around a round pen a hundred times with coiled rope slapping against chaps, or flag whipping around. Even if done gently, it was still done in a way that drove the horse. It wasn't so with Harry in this instance, and it created a whole new reference point on the soft end of the pressure spectrum for me that I never knew existed. He wasn't driving the horse at all. He was just standing there. I don't remember ever being so fascinated to sit



and watch somebody just stand there! But, the way it slowly unfolded was completely the horse's decision to move or not, and at what speed. It was fascinating for me. Harry made no demands on the horse at all; he just said, "Hey, I'm still over here if you want to come try to feel better," every so often with that gentle chap slap.

If you drive a horse forward around the pen, then back off that pressure, you create a vacuum that sucks the horse in. It's a trick that works, but the horse has very little choice in that scenario really because if the pressure applied is hard enough to drive him forward, then it is certainly hard enough for him to desire relief from it. The conversation is something like,

"Go this way because I say so...go...keep those feet moving...no, you can't stop yet, not yet...go some more...okay, there's an ear turning my way, he's getting tired of being pushed forward, bet he's ready to listen to me

now...so stop and come here now!" Bingo, horse is hooked on. But how does he feel about what just happened inside? Did he feel it was really a choice? Because now he follows you around wherever you go to keep from going out on the fence again, does that really mean he's emotionally settled with you and the situation? Will it carry over in a positive way to other parts of the relationship?

But, if like Harry in this example, you don't drive the horse in any way to begin with, then it is the horse who is choosing to go move around the fence at whatever speed and in whatever direction. You merely remind him that you are standing there by slapping your chap, without adding any additional direction. In this situation, the conversation is more along the lines of, "Hey, you out there running circles because you're bothered inside, here I am...you might try coming and standing over here if you get tired of running circles out there. Feels pretty good standing here in the middle nice and easy. Whenever you want to give it a try, I'll just be right over here." The result is that the horse really decides when he comes to the human. The horse works it out for himself with only the slightest suggestion from the human. He is not driven in any way, but is moving his feet only because he chooses to, not because the human insists, or even suggests it.

I saw the difference then. I understood for the first time how much it means to the horse to be given as much time as it takes, not just as much time as it takes as long as it doesn't take too long. After all this is a clinic.

This could take forty-five minutes, or shorter, or longer. The point is, I'd never before seen someone want to give that much time to letting a horse make a decision. In fact, I'd never seen anyone get in a round pen before without an agenda of how they were going to drive a horse's movements, however gently. And I think few realize how little choice the horse worked in a roundpen in the typical way truly has. Whether it is because in a show type atmosphere or clinic the trainer

senses the audience needs to see changes in the horse in five minutes for the wow factor, or a person just knows he can get results more quickly by intensifying the pressure and release, I had never before witnessed someone truly give a horse the time needed to work something like this out for himself. I began to see how the effect was more profound for the horse. He came to understand through his own doing how the difference in position and action feels, rather than being made to try this and that to be convinced one is better than the other.

This is just one example of many of equal gravity from my stay in Arizona—it would take another book to get down even

some of what I already see differently from before. But this example is important because it provides the insight into what Sokeri told me when I returned home to Virginia.

I knew for quite awhile before my return that the first thing I'd do when I got back was

put Soke loose in the round pen and stand there and slap my chap with the end of the lead rope. I wasn't sure what she'd do. However, I knew that whatever she did would tell me who I had been two weeks earlier to her. I would be holding up a mirror to myself and having a look. That mare and I had spent time nearly every day together for years now, and that, coupled with days, weeks, and months of fairly descent pressure-and-release training, seemed to have our relationship going pretty well. So, I figured it might be a little confusing at first to have me act a little differently, but we'd see what she did.

Within hours of getting home from the trip I was out in the round pen with her. I took up position in the center, which I'd done a million times before with her, then I gave my chap a half-way descent slap with the tail of the lead rope. I was shocked at her response. Sokeri took off and loped circles around the round pen. She trotted and loped for ten minutes, head up, thoughts as out of the corral as they could possibly have been. I just stood there realizing from the first ten seconds of this adventure that I was in the pen with a horse that didn't find any comfort being close to me. How odd! How completely wrong were my thoughts about how she had perceived me! How could I have missed so much?

I just stood there taking it in. Here was a horse that was not okay inside with the situation. She was both not seeking me for comfort, and lost because I had never before left her movements in the round pen completely up to her. I spent over an hour that day going through much the same thing I describe Harry doing above, except I never got her to settle down inside completely. She eventually did stand and relax a

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**Tom's Book *Discovering Natural Horsemanship - A Beginner's Odyssey* will be released in September 2006. Watch [www.tommoates.com](http://www.tommoates.com) for details.**



## Essay

bit, and I stroked her nose and neck, but it would take several trips to the round pen over the next week to get her confirmed in the idea that standing still next to me in the middle of the pen felt better to her inside than being out on the fence moving around.

While this was fairly devastating for me to experience in a way, getting through it has brought about profound changes in our relationship. When I come to the pasture now, she often follows me along the fence until I enter and she can be with me. That never happened before. It seems it means so much to her that I finally got it. She'd been trying to tell me all along, so the side-effects have been interesting too. I no longer get a head tossing/shaking deal when I ask her to go from the walk to the trot, for example. It is bizarre to consider I may never have seen how Soke was twisted up inside, or that years more may have passed before I figured it out, if I ever figured it out. Which leads to the next question: so what am I still not seeing? You bet I'm trying to figure that out!

There are certainly increments

of improvement we can make in our methods with horses if we genuinely seek to get better with them. There is no doubt that the type of pressure-and-release I used with Soke before the experience at Harry's was far better for her than what she had known previously in the mainstream horse world—I witnessed it before I bought her. But, I know the changes since Harry's have improved our relationship and her emotional self that much again, or perhaps even more.

The example presented here isn't made to say every horse should be worked this particular way in the round pen. It is NOT an exercise that is some silver bullet. It is just one small example of how one might rethink ways to improve things with a horse, and this one had particular meaning for Sokeri and me. The key is between the lines of this experience. It is to ask constantly, "How does my horse feel inside about things?" Providing a horse real choices, along with all the time it takes for her to truly figure it out for herself, is the key that I mean to illustrate. Now, I try to carry that into all I do with horses.

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