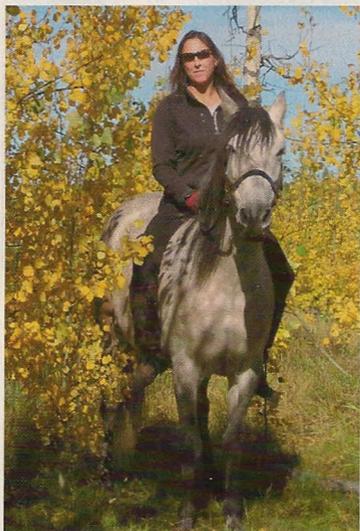


Making a Horse Look Beautiful, From the Inside Out

By Barbra Ann King

When I was a young girl, my father used to say to me, "Beauty is only skin deep." I wasn't sure what he meant at the time, but he sure repeated it often. As I grew up, I slowly started understanding what that meant.



I believe this applies to horses, too. In my rehabilitation program, I work with horses that have been "damaged" on a physical as well as mental and emotional level. As I earn their trust and help them have stronger self-esteem and confidence, I notice changes in their physical appearances. Over time, they look prettier, more expressive and happier. One horse in particular was quite old and her body showed all the signs of aging: sway back, hollow eyes and lethargic. Her mouth was a hard line with tight lips and her

eyes were mean. She was owned by a young girl that simply adored her but rarely came out to see her and when she did, it was always for a very short period of time. As the visits grew fewer, I watched the old mare isolate herself from the herd. My family and I started caring for her as one of our own. We told her that we loved her and appreciated her horse wisdom around the other horses. We groomed her and gave her treats. Within a short period of time, she held her head a little higher, she welcomed the petting and treats we had for her. Her facial expression started changing until one day, we saw her as a beautiful horse, warts and all!

Competitive riders always try to make their horses look beautiful. They wash, comb and braid their horses for hours before a competition. Their tack is spotless as is their outfit. They ask for big movement, bouncy steps, and long strides from their horses while they are forced in unnatural collection. These riders spend many, many hours training their horses to impress the judges in the show ring, thus earning points and admiring looks from the public. No matter how much time you spend and no matter how extraordinary

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the trainer is, you cannot force a horse to show his inner beauty.

I was recently observing one of my students compete in a horsemanship competition. All the horses were obeying their riders and going through the motions as told, but not a single one seemed happy. Their heads were tied down, they had bits that were way too severe for the inexperienced hands holding the reins and the heavy western saddles they were wearing prevented them from having full shoulder extensions and movement. They all had expressions on their faces that showed resignation, unhappiness or total boredom. These horses knew the drill and could have done just as well with a sack of potatoes on their backs, all except for the horse my student was riding. Her mare was unable to be ridden for the horsemanship event. Instead of withdrawing from the competition, the student borrowed a trail horse from a friend that works on a dude

ranch. The horse came with a very severe curb bit and because there was no time to try her in a bitless bridle, my young friend decided to leave the bit and ride using the Relationship Riding method.

As the competition went along, we witnessed this mare change before our eyes. Everyone around us in the stands noticed it too. She was ridden in a treeless saddle by a grateful rider that appreciated her every effort. No one believed that this horse and rider had only known each other for one hour! I'm sure that the fact that the horse was not ridden by a rider yanking on her mouth and kicking her flanks made a difference. Also the fact that she was being respected and not dominated made this mare want to follow the only leader there for her. The one thing my student did have time to do before the competition was establish True Equine Leadership, as taught in the Relationship Riding method. As spectators, we were

privileged to witness a beautiful partnership develop.

Do you tell your horse that he is beautiful, that you love him and that you miss him? Do you ask permission before getting on his back? They do understand and hear us; all we need to do is speak up. Enjoy the journey!

Barbra Ann King is an internationally known horse behaviour specialist, founder of the Relationship Riding® method and a published author living in Alberta. She specializes in rehabilitating horses and optimizing performance. She travels year-round sharing her passion with like-minded horse owners and offers video consultations for troubleshooting through her website www.relationshipriding.com.

(See Relationship Riding Academy's listing in Saddles Up's Business Services under "Trainers")