

Organic Horse Care with “Discover The Magic”

In THH issue 31, we introduced you to Tony Royal and Cynthia Royal, and their company, “IMAGINE - Discover The Magic.” This exciting group of barefoot liberty exhibition horses and trainers/performers is touring the country and preparing for a permanent Las Vegas show. We were especially impressed with their natural care philosophies that really took natural training to a higher level. But just how do they do it? Cynthia answers all these questions and more in this inspirational article.

Q: Some people claim that traveling performance horses can't go barefoot because of the various footing and stabling challenges—but you seem to be proving that wrong. Briefly, what do you think has been the secret to your success?

Cynthia Royal: The secret to our barefoot success is, I believe, an issue of overall natural health care based on simple common sense tenants of:

- providing forage (hay) feed that does not overtax the body
- turnout whenever possible AND with others of their kind—we only keep the horses stalled for the several days we're at a show or clinic
- refraining from supplement overload—only giving each horse exactly what vitamins, minerals and nutraceuticals are right for him, based on his activity and age
- ensuring the hoof (and the rest of the horse's body) receives enough movement to move body fluids and encourage normal growth and wear through ample exercise (achieved by turnout and training)
- giving hoof maintenance (i.e. trimming) on a 4 week schedule, with touch-ups whenever necessary

Q: How did you come to develop a natural care philosophy? Did you used to keep horses traditionally, and wake up one day (like many folks do!)—or have you always leaned towards a natural attitude?

Cynthia: Whether it was the question of humans' place on this spaceship Earth, the paradox of how each religion considers “their way” to be the only way, or the question of whether are we alone in the universe (not!)—I was BORN questioning.

Like most, I was trained to “think” rather than “feel;” yet there has always been a high level of intuition emanating from my body. As I've come into my own personal power through connection to source, I've learned to embrace what my intuition tells me is right, backed up by grounded research, which is so readily avail-



Photo courtesy Joe Camp

Cynthia and Tony Royal just adopted a herd of approx. 30 Arabian horses, and here she shares a special moment with one. See page 3 for more.

able through print and internet literature.

Questions like: why we use on our horses such contraptions as bits, spurs, heavy saddles, bulky saddle pads, metal shoes, feeding them grain, keeping them in stalls; OR more basic like: how we communicate with our animal friends through round pens, pressure-point targeted rope halters and fiberglass sticks are all questions I've asked, insisting on—yet usually not finding—grounded information for why something is done. In the end, I am not afraid to discard any practice that does not feel right and cannot stand up to substantiation. Because that's the way something has always been done is simply the easy path, not the right path.

This probably circles back to my belief system that we are here to grow, to become better, to do better, to achieve something, create something, attain something, learn, teach, shine. And this is not done through the status quo.

If one takes the time to place the domesticated horse in a situation that is as close to natural as possible, which includes allowing the animal to roam free with other horses, and feed with his head down for the primary part of his day, one quickly finds that not only will the horse get enough exercise to keep his body functioning well, but his mental and emotional state will vastly improve, as well. I lead into this because that is one aspect of our domesticating the horse which we have sorely failed—**gifting the horse with what he needs most to feel safe and secure.** And what is that thing he needs most to feel safe and secure—it is to be part of a herd. And regardless of whether they have 4 legs or 2, he can only feel part of a herd if he can spend time with, communicate with, and have a relationship with another creature who is able to speak HIS language and partake in elements of HIS culture.

Most of us don't think of animals having **culture** like us, but they DO! With all animals (although they are equally as smart as us, but demonstrate it in different ways), what we need to realize is that we are the only species with the capability to learn other species' language. They cannot speak verbally, but we can learn to speak horse (and dolphin, and dog, and bird...). Horses language is the language of body movement, of positioning, of territory. We can learn to use our bodies in ways that have meaning for them. Equally important—we can learn to approach, say hello, form a bond, and become their leader in ways that are natural, accepted parts of their culture. Their culture is comprised of ritualistic behavior, the same as ours. For example, all animals have the equivalent of the human hello or handshake—it just doesn't always involve touching, or even hands! But through learning elements of their culture, we can speak as clearly to them as if we were using words to another human.

Q: Please share with our readers your own natural care program for your horses: what is their diet, and how do you feed them?

Cynthia: We are all about organic, both in our lives and how we keep our horses. However, I don't mean “organic” in the sense the FDA has imbued on the word. What I mean by organic is “**in its natural state.**” In other words, I am a firm believer that the natural state of a creature or thing, if left without human intervention, will be the best situation for that creature or thing. This thinking is not based on a premise of divine creation (that everything is created in a state of perfection), but rather quite simply that human science should not assume to replace genetics that have developed over millennia.

The obvious example, when talking about horse care, is to look to those in the wild. There are populations of wild horses all over the world that manage to not only survive, but thrive, without grain feeds, shoes, blankets or stalls—yet those are routine things we do to our horses, when in our care. I believe it is important for people to know, while we consider our horses domesticated, they are not like a cat or dog, in that they will revert quite quickly to wild upon release, and without any need of the care and accessories we used to use on them.

The true nature of the horse—to be a nomadic, herd-based herbivore—implies he is meant to be constantly moving, in a social group, with his head down, grazing forage. As an herbivore, rather than a carnivore who can survive with infrequent, large, high-calorie meals, the horse is meant to be frequently eating low-caloric foods of great variety. As a nomadic animal, he is meant to be moving while he eats, getting a large variety of forages. As a herd animal, he is meant to be in the presence

(cont. on page 20)

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of others when he eats—something we should be able to relate to.

Now, depending on the amount of time you can dedicate to your horse’s care, this can be a challenge. However, we’ve found there are always small things you can do that will have great benefits toward filling your horse’s natural needs. Things like ensuring your horse gets at least a few hours of turnout **daily**. Providing lots of lower calorie forage (hay), rather than loading him up in 2 meals with the equivalent of equine Haagen Daas. Maybe it means feeding him a base of bermuda or field grass hay with a handful of orchard, timothy or alfalfa on top. Maybe his forage (hay) should be spread around his paddock, stall or pasture. This gives him mental stimulus, takes more time to eat, keeps him moving and the fluids pumping in his hooves, keeps his gut churning, and also keeps his respiratory track free and clear from the head down position. Maybe it means discontinuing unneeded supplements, speculatively chosen and only needed if he were in full-time competition.

Whatever the menu, it **always** means feeding him in a **HEAD DOWN** position. When at home base, we feed our horses out of big metal water troughs that are about 24” wide X 36” long X 30” high. Or when we’re at a show, we feed the hay on the ground. Either way, we always provide fresh water in small buckets or auto-waterers, rather than a large trough where the water can get tainted with algae or debris.

Q: *What are your horses’ exercise programs and living conditions?*

Cynthia: We should be the poster children of how to work in organic, natural horsekeeping within our 100 mph lives. For the past several years, we’ve been on the road about 30 weeks of the year on our **Follow Your Dreams Tour**. We’ve gone all over North America—several times!!! In addition, we have plans for a permanently-based theatrical show in Las Vegas, where the horses will be performing 40+ weeks out of the year.

Despite these constraints that are WAY above the constraints of the average horse person, we make the lives of our horses as organic and natural as possible. First, we allow them to be horses whenever possible. This might mean turning our traveling comrades out for a group romp at midnight in the arena of the huge coliseum we are at for a show. Or it might mean taking them all for a walk around a fairgrounds. At home, it means they are turned out for half the day, each and every day, which sometimes, in the arid desert we live in, means they are turned out at night. An important note is that our troupe is comprised of geldings and stallions, and even our stallions are allowed turnout with other geldings AND stallions. We do not believe in condemning stallions to a life of solitary confinement, but integrate them into turnout



Photo courtesy Cynthia Royal

Cynthia demonstrates their style of training: with no bridle, spurs, saddle or horseshoes, and a horse that looks so happy.

groups with other stallions of their size, age, and social standing.

As for exercise, they get exercise each and every day through turnout, training or practicing our acts. Further following our tenant of “natural is best,” we no longer load them up on sheets and blankets—UNLESS we just drove from San Diego to Nova Scotia and their slick coats will not protect them from the cold. Nor, when performing a mounted act that requires tack, do we use heavy saddles or other gear. Instead, we ride bareback, with custom-made suede bareback pads (contact us if you are interested in obtaining one) or use the wonderful, washable, lightweight Wintec saddles. We go bitless, or even bridleless, whenever possible, and you will never find one of our cast in a pair of spurs, because if you need spurs, you’re going to get off that horse and develop communication and a relationship on the ground before we ever allow you to ride.

Q: *What is their hoof care regimen?*

Cynthia: I think our situation proves anyone can achieve the benefits of barefoot for their horse. OK, so we’re in a different location somewhere in the North American continent almost weekly. We don’t employ someone specifically to care for our horses’ feet, and we don’t do the primary trims (yet) ourselves (although we are moving that way, thanks to the insight and training of Ove and Caisa—see www.SwedishHoofSchool.com).

What we do is find a farrier wherever we go that is amenable to working with us to trim our horses, under our guidance of what we want done. Find the bars, remove dead or overgrown sole, a little off the frog particularly if hard/dry, trim the toes, ensure the right hoof/pastern angle. Not complicated really, and what we find is that by doing this, the hoof will “naturalize” itself—get back into the right load-bearing, fluid-pump-

ing machine, by ITSELF.

When we get a new horse (and we have a lot of new horses coming into our program, to attain the 40 needed for the Vegas show) the first thing we do, within days of arrival, is pull their shoes. Doesn’t matter if they have eggbar shoes on or some other contraption, reports of founder, navicular, etc.—off go the shoes. There may be a few ouchy days controlled by temporary use of anti-inflammatories, but in all cases, the horses’ hooves become, well, normal horses’ hooves in a very short period of time—on average 60 days. Now realize, we also put them on the diet they were meant for—meaning forage (hay), AND we ensure they get ample movement from turnout and exercise.

Q: *Have you encountered any difficulties or “learning experiences” while taking your horses barefoot?*

Cynthia: We’ve had some pretty ugly feet come our way: foundered, with coffin bone rotation that came loaded up on pads and shoes on the front; egg-barred hooves that looked more like ping-pong paddles than horses’ feet. Off go the shoes, right diet, exercise—voila.

I think the most surprising thing has been people’s reaction when they see us at shows, and realize we tour that way. Our horses are on trailers for enormous periods of time, then in concrete or asphalt floor stalls at shows, walking across concrete or asphalt or gravel to go from show stable to coliseum to perform, then on various, usually less than stellar footings in the coliseums when we do clinics and/or perform. Then back at home, they are on rock-hard packed dirt common to the arid desert area in which we live—then we do it over and over and over again. So folks are a little surprised when they’ve gone under the assumption that their horse—who maybe sees 2 or 3 different surfaces between its paddock, the arena, and maybe a trail—needs shoes every 6 weeks at \$125 and over a pop!

Q: *What has been the most unique challenge regarding your travel schedule?*

Cynthia: Let’s just say I’m very looking forward to the permanently-based show in Las Vegas. Even for an adventure junkie like me, touring is hard by any stretch of the imagination. Living in a trailer with my partner, 3 cats and 3 horses for months on end can be a challenge. I’ve found the greatest difficulty in simply not being able to pull our large travel rig into eating establishments of the healthier variety! I’ve been amazed that truck stops haven’t learned to cater to the palate and income of the highly mobile and prolific RV crowd.

But the toughest thing for me has been to work in my regular exercise of weights and bouncing on a small trampoline. Although we carry them with us, I rarely find the time!

Q: *What has been the greatest benefit of keeping your horses barefoot?*

Cynthia: The greatest benefit to me is knowing I'm doing right by our horses. Humankind has taken so much from the horse. Taken without asking. Taken by force. Taken by restraint. Taken, taken, taken. It's our turn to give a little bit back, in whatever way is possible for us. We can only work within our constraints, but with a little creative thinking, we can give back to them in ways that are important to them, and let us go to bed at night feeling good about our impact.

Q: *It only makes sense that horses trained using natural horse language, without constraint, are only truly natural if their hooves are bare (of course!). Tell us more about your feelings regarding representing the natural philosophy as a whole.*

Cynthia: Talking about a naturalistic approach can take us into a whole different realm of possibility. For us, natural—or organic, as we prefer to say—also means **“not forced.”** When we're talking about our association with horses, we've taken that a step further to promote collaboration versus domination, offering the horse the choice of a relationship with us, rather than insisting on a relationship through force or restraint. It has meant looking at techniques typically used as part of our equestrian culture, and ensuring they meet this criteria.

For example, we used to use rope halters which all have knots strategically tied at pressure points. Well, if one considers the very definition of a pressure point as a sensitive place that responds when pressure is applied AND that pressure is just a lesser version of pain, then these halters are instruments of causing pain. And through the pain, we force the horse to go this way or that or stop. We can try to disguise it with ingenious names or pretty colors, but it is the same, nonetheless.

Same with bits. We can talk about this bit being less severe than that bit, a snaffle versus a shanked, ported bit, but either way, it is a cold, hard piece of metal on a soft mucus membrane. I'm certain we would all feel quite differently if we wore a bit for just one day.

Then there is the prolific use of the round pen, or tethering a horse at the end of a lead or lunge line, and circling him around you. First, any driving out is seen by the horse as being either a) driven out from the herd, or b) being pursued by a predator (i.e. YOU the meat-eating human). By virtue of their design, the horse cannot escape, but is brought back to you time and time again. In his mind, he has no choice, no opportunity to decide if he wants to be part of your herd. His only options are jump out or submit. As important is the fact that whenever a horse is pressured in this way, he sees the pressurer (you) as a bully, only solidifying the fact that he will never completely buy into what you

are selling—a huge cause of the resistant behaviors we see with almost everyone we meet.

Instead, we feel horse-human interactions should be based on communication and relationship. Using our approach, a peer bond can be quickly and effortlessly formed, and then **nurturing**, rather than dominating, leadership can be put in place using elements of horse language and culture. It isn't magic, nor human invention, but real “Horse Talk.”

We also don't feel this level of synergy takes years or volumes of training manuals or special gadgets to achieve—just an openness to a new way of thinking about horse training. Because we had the need to teach each and every trainer and performer that will be involved with our Vegas show how to interact with horses the way we do, we had to crystallize our approach down to simple elements that were easy to learn, quick and effective to use. So we developed our approach and put it to video, so everyone could have access to this information. (Currently there are two videos in the DVD training series called **Horse Talk: “Relationship,”** which gives all the basics, and **“Bridleless,”** which lets you experience the joy of free riding. Other volumes are planned: Force and Restraint-Free Trick Training, Advanced Relationship, Reining through Horse Talk, and Dressage through Horse Talk. These can be ordered at

www.IMAGINE-DiscoverTheMagic.com).

In addition, we will be introducing live, interactive webcasts from the training camp for the Vegas show early in 2009. There, you will be able to see us train live through the internet, and even ask questions that will be answered live. It will be a unique opportunity to see us train horses in all disciplines, including dressage, bridleless, reining, tricks and high school movements, driving—all based on relationship and collaboration, instead of force and domination. Imagine the possibilities!

So when we're talking about an organic, fluid, naturalistic philosophy, the most important thing to us is finding, developing, stretching ourselves to that place where horses and humans can truly live in harmony, joy and co-creation—in a state of collaborative partners, rather than under our domination. We truly believe our approach and philosophy is the next evolution in all equestrian pursuits. 🌱

To find out more about the Royal's, their Las Vegas show project, the Follow Your Dreams tour clinic and appearance schedule, their videos, or horses, please visit:
www.IMAGINE-DiscoverTheMagic.com

Upcoming 2008 clinics include: December 6-7 at Dale Creek Equestrian Center near Phoenix, AZ; December 13-14, Arizona Horse Fest, Scottsdale, AZ; December 20-21, Westworld (tentative), Scottsdale AZ.

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