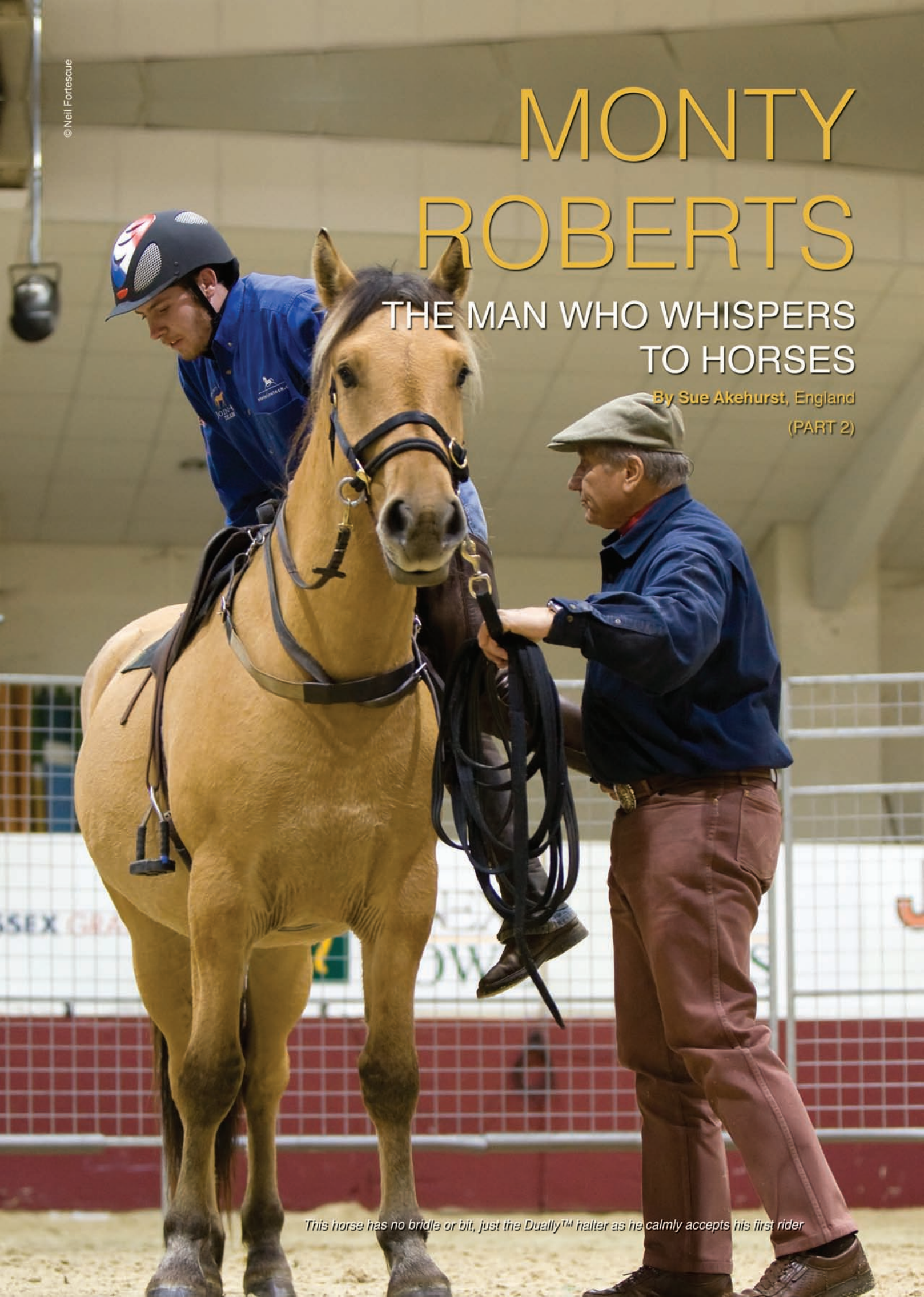

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MONTY ROBERTS

THE MAN WHO WHISPERS TO HORSES

By Sue Akehurst, England

(PART 2)

This horse has no bridle or bit, just the Dually™ halter as he calmly accepts his first rider

MANY PEOPLE WANT TO GET A PROBLEM SOLVED BY TAKING ONE GIANT STEP RATHER THAN MANY SMALL ONES. YOUR TECHNIQUES, CERTAINLY AT THIS KIND OF DEMONSTRATION, HAVE BEEN CRITICISED AS BEING 'QUICK FIXES' OR 'FLOODING' THE ANIMAL. IS THIS THE BEST WAY?

▲ *Giving of feet increases the vulnerability, so is a way to gain a starter horses' trust*

Number 1, they do not understand what flooding is if they say this. I do nothing in the way of flooding. All the scientists I have worked with say "flooding? You don't do any flooding". Flooding is to cause the same problem to happen again, over and over, so they get used to it. I don't do that at all. So flooding is out. Every time I go into that round pen on every demonstration evening I say "I am not here tonight training, these horses will not be ready for the Olympic team tomorrow. What I am trying to do is give you a road map of where I would like you to go, in order to successfully get through your life with this horse, the relationship with this horse." I said it to my owners this afternoon, "I am not training tonight, I am here to give the folks education and a road map." Now if I am going to give a road map I have to go through the problem. Sure, I would love to break the problem up into about 6 different pieces and take a week to do it. But I am not here for a week! So I do the best I can to cover the gambit of the particular remedial problem, or the starting if you will, so that there is a road map and the road map goes from A to Z as far as that particular problem is concerned. Is it too fast? Yes, it's too fast. I do a 3 hour demonstration, I would love to do the 3 hours with one horse, but the audience would all be gone! They would also justifiably say "I came here to learn something and I have this problem and this problem and this problem and he didn't do any of that he just did the one thing!" So I do the best I can, to break up the evening and to give the people the best, and most broadly based education that I can.

Next though, I only have the horses they bring me to deal with! So if you have a horse that bucks and no one brings me a horse that bucks, I can't do a horse that bucks! So, for example this afternoon I had a prospective horse shown to me that was a remedial farrier horse. It was supposedly 'Extremely' difficult to pick up the legs. We were picking up his legs in five minutes! It wasn't a problem at all. So I am glad we didn't choose it for the demonstration. But we won't have a remedial farrier horse tonight. Somebody here today will say 'well he didn't do a remedial farrier horse, I wish he did'. But I didn't have one, the one I had was too easy! What I have got tonight is a rearer, a bucker and what I have on my sheet is a 'serial spooker' and then I have a starter and one that takes two and a half to three hours to load!

So we are in for a long night?!

Yes we are! (He laughs!) Loading is still the number one remedial problem on earth so I do try to have a non-loader at every demonstration. Nobody, nobody has done more loaders for the public than I have. 2,400 now. Not one failure, not one injury, knock on wood, you never know it can happen. But so far, not one injury due to loading, not one failure due to loading. So they are getting a lot, and these are criticisms coming from an extremely small number of people with specific complaints, and that is fine, that is fine. But do a cross section and see what happens and you will find that 95% loved everything and 2% loved nothing and a few thought something was good and something wasn't so good.

Regarding 'flooding' can you explain more about what it is and how it isn't a part of what you do. In your opinion is there ever a place for 'flooding' an animal?

Flooding was developed by the German's after the Second World War. They found psychologically traumatised people who had been through the war. Then they experimented on them with this thing of flooding them with their experiences. For example, rape victims, they raped them over and over again, and they found that they then didn't mind being raped! They then went off to be prostitutes! I don't do anything like that! Another example, people that went into bomb shelters became claustrophobic, so they experimented by locking them in closets and they kept them in there for a month, pushed the food under the door, pushed the pan out and left them in there. I don't do anything like that in my training. Now it is true that when it is a spooky horse, I bring him something that he finds spooky. But I don't invade him with it, it is incremental, and I get him to gradually learn to accept it. So I can't, under these circumstances, accept any criticism about flooding. It just doesn't exist for me. And I suggest to you that it is a horrible practice that no one should embrace.

"THERE ARE A LOT OF CRITICISMS THAT I RECEIVE. A LOT OF THEM, MOST OF THEM, FROM PEOPLE WHO ARE DISINGENUOUS, THEY DON'T JUST CRITICISE FROM A LOGICAL STAND POINT, BUT THEY ARE "LOOKING" FOR THINGS TO CRITICISE."

Can you really shape behaviour when you have these horses in these demonstrations for such a short period?

You know, as a matter of fact, I would like to tell you 'no', I would love to say no, because I say I don't train and that you have to go home and DO these practices over and over again before they are considered successful, and I would love to make it that clean and just say 'No'! But, in fact, too many people call and say "you know, from the time I got that horse home, he was a different horse. You really changed him". I get this, with 20-30% of the horses. I had a horse the other night at a demonstration at Greenlands, in Carlisle. The horse came in the lorry and they say it crashed and bashed and banged and kicked the whole time coming. It was loaded by several guys who just forced it on to the lorry. I put it through my loading process and the horse went sweet. He really went sweet and he loaded and loaded and loaded and then we got a call back saying "he stood like a lamb the whole way home. He was sweating desperately, it was dripping off him when he got to the demonstration, but when he went home he was completely cool and he handled the whole thing". So the answer is 'Yes' I can shape behaviour in thirty minutes. Is it 100% of the time? No, not at all. Is it 20% of the time? Maybe, something like that, but I really get a behavioural shaping modification.

Do horses learn by observation, can they mimic each other and are they influenced from peer pressure?

They do not learn from observation, they just don't. Scientists have been through the whole thing about crib biting and weaving and all these things. They don't learn one from the other, they just don't. But peer pressure, that's another thing because they do live in the herd under peer pressure. That would modify their social structure where they might be a bully in one group of horses and a coward in another group of horses. So yes that is the difference. They are definitely affected by pressure but they do not learn by observation.

Are there any other criticisms that you receive that you would like to address or comment on?

Oh, there are a lot of criticisms that I receive. A lot of them, most of them, from people who are disingenuous, they don't just criticise from a logical stand point, but they are "looking" for things to criticise.

There is one scientist who says "a manikin rider on a horse is cruel, it's destructive and it doesn't work, it makes them worse". I submit to you that that man has never ridden a bucking horse in his life. I submit to you that he has never used a manikin rider. Because I have! Hundreds and hundreds of horses all over the world whose lives have been saved from this technique. We just had one up at Gleneagles, that was definitely going to go to the butcher. I had a manikin rider on him then we had a rider up and he was walking around perfectly fine and the owner was floored by it all. So that kind of criticism is just awful and they are just taking shots with that and calling themselves scientists when they do it. I have an English Scientist who is working with me who is World-renowned and he is just blown away by how effective my work is from a scientific stand point.

There are many ways of training animals, one which has been likened to your work is 'Clicker Training'. How is clicker training different to your training and do you feel 'Clicker' training is a positive way of training animals?

'Clicker training' is a training method used on many animals. It is based on behavioural psychology that relies on marking desirable behaviour and rewarding it. The desirable behaviour is usually marked by using a 'clicker' which is a mechanical device that makes a short, distinct "click" sound which tells the animal exactly when they're doing the right thing. The trainer needs to click at the moment the behaviour occurs. After "clicking" the trainer gives the animal something it likes, usually a piece of food. The process being that the animal will associate the sound of the click with something it likes. Since it wishes to repeat that, and get more food for example, it will repeat the action it was doing when it heard the click.

I have had clicker trainers come to my

▼ *A remedial horse with a severe bucking habit, learns that manikin riders can't be moved!*

▲ *When the giving of feet is accomplished with no pain, trust is increased dramatically*

▲ *The horse is allowed to first feel and move with his very first saddle without a rider*

▼ *Just 20 minutes after beginning to start this horse, a rider gently & calmly mounts*

farm at my invitation. But lets call it 'marker' training. I believe in 'marker' training and I do marker training. I've shown these clicker trainers how I could get the horse to do the thing they were after, faster and more effectively with my marker than with their marker. Because I do not believe that food is a good reward for horses for training. I don't think it is nearly as effective as other markers are. But marker training is wonderful. I don't have anything against clicker trainers; I do have something against feeding from the hand! Because Clicker trained horses bite! They just do! I know plenty clicker trainers say "No, mine don't" but they do! When I see them, the horse tries to undress them right away! "Well, he's not really biting me, he's just taking my shirt off!" Well, ok, call it what you want, it causes biting to feed a horse from the hand. Period. So, I showed the clicker trainers ways that they could mark, even with food, without feeding from the hand. With an apple, or carrot on a stick and let the horse take it off type thing. Most of them went away convinced that they loved their clicker training but that they were going to modify it. See, most clicker trainers will tell you we are the only ones that work with no violence at all. "Our work is completely positive reinforcement". Those are the things they'll say. But I don't believe in totally positive reinforcement, I think negative reinforcement is a very good thing. It has a negative name! But negative reinforcement does not mean that you have to be mean to the horse or negative to the horse. It means that you remove something, instead of adding something to. The removal of, for instance - the rein, when you ask the horse to turn and you put tension on the side of the mouth; when you release, that is a reward through negative reinforcement. It's not positive reinforcement, you didn't add anything, you took it away. So that's negative reinforcement. Negative reinforcement has a bad name, but it's a good act. But you must balance positive and negative reinforcement. You can't go all to the expense of another because I don't think you will have a balanced horse when you do. **HT**