



# THE MAN WHO LISTENS TO HORSES

## INTERVIEW WITH

# MONTY ROBERTS

### (Part 1)

By Sue Akehurst

Monty Roberts, known as the Man Who Listens to Horses, has led an extraordinary life. An award-winning trainer of championship horses, best-selling author, Hollywood stunt man, foster dad to 47 children (in addition to three of his own) and creator of the world-renowned and revolutionary equine training technique called Join-Up, Monty Roberts could now, in his later years, be resting on his laurels - but that's not his style.

**“MY GOAL IS TO LEAVE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE THAN I FOUND IT, FOR HORSES AND FOR PEOPLE, TOO.”**

Roberts has won countless awards and received immense worldwide press coverage, put three books on the New York Times best-seller list, trained some of Queen Elizabeth's equestrian team in London and been awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Zurich. But if you go looking for Monty Roberts, you won't find him lounging in his favourite chair high-up in the hills overlooking his horse-training farm in the beautiful Santa Ynez Valley.

The man who listens to horses is more likely to be found somewhere on the globe continuing to spread his message of non-violence. You're more likely to find him speaking to incarcerated youth in a juvenile detention facility, gentling his 15,000th horse at a demonstration, teaching his techniques to the growing number of students at his Equestrian Academy in Solvang, California or advising executives at Fortune 500 companies.

**How did your passion for horses start and when?**

My passion for horses started before the age of consciousness really; my mother was riding whilst she was heavily pregnant with me. And some 2 or 3 weeks later she was riding again with me strapped to her. They tell me I rode with her as she gave riding lessons; and then at about the age of 2 I could ride on my own, literally riding a horse without any assistance. Obviously they were probably watching over me pretty closely at 2, and they also tell me, by the time I was 3, I was just going with the rest of the kids wherever they rode - and so I was actually giving lessons to other children when I was 6 or 7 years of age.

By then I had already had an extreme passion for horses, a passion to stay away from violence; violent acts were perpetrated on me at the age of 4, 5 and 6, and I was a victim of domestic abuse from the age of 4. The more domestic abuse I suffered, the more passion I had for horses, because they took me away from that horrible experience. My passion for horses preceded what you would call the age of reason when children can decipher things for themselves, I was



*In 1989 Queen Elizabeth II invites Monty Roberts to Windsor Castle to demonstrate Join-Up and train her staff*

already in love with a horse and the horse was my protector before the age of reason. (Monty Roberts had had approximately 42 bones broken in his body before the age of 7).

**How do you assess your horses before you start working with them; what goes through your mind?**

Well, what goes through my mind before I start to work with a horse is very similar to what would go through the mind of a psychologist or a psychiatrist as they meet a particular patient in their office. You look at them, you begin to hear a story and the learned psychologist or psychiatrist will pick certain things out of that story that they begin to hear; these things are keys to the problems in that person's make-up and it could very well be that that person doesn't even know their own problems so well. And it is very often the case that even if they do know the problem they tend to twist the problem into their own understanding, this isn't so bad, when maybe its very bad, this is ok, when not ok at all and this is horrible, when really this isn't the most horrible thing that they suffer. Horses are no different. I look at them, I ask them questions in their language and they answer the questions, and I then seek portals or windows that I can pass through to get to that psychological make-up of theirs. Next I can answer the questions that they've come to deal with from their past - I can answer those questions and attempt to put them at ease with their phobias if you will.

**Do you always start your methods with the Join-Up process; is that the first thing that you would do?**

First you have to define what Join-Up is. Join-up can be defined as that process where you send horses away and they go round and so forth and so on. Yes, that's the full story of Join-Up. But in my opinion the true definition of Join-Up is when the horse chooses to be with you, trusts you enough, to be with you of free choice, more than even to be away from you. That's Join-Up, and that's the true definition. So what you do to gain that can vary a lot. One of the things is to send them away, have them travel about a quarter of a mile, then have them go through the communications litany and then have them come to you. Or you can do it another way, or another way, or another way. There's a lot of ways to get that horse to trust you enough. Some are longer than others some are this, but the true Join-Up is when the horse chooses to be with you rather than away from you.



▲ Monty Roberts, Champion Western horseman & award-winning championship horses trainer

**So your basic techniques would be to Join-Up, to send them away etc, but you would change and adapt the techniques according to the horses' responses?**

That's right. You will see me do Join-Up without a round pen at all, with just the Dually halter, you will also see me do Join-Up in the round pen, the full litany of it, but you will also see me using Join-Up from the saddle, on a trained horse, and you will see Join-Up from the saddle on a very young horse, ridden for 4 months, then you will see Join-Up from a champion dressage horse from the saddle and a champion working hunter from the saddle. So you will see it in a lot of ways.

**Would you say that your methods are the best methods to communicate with**

**and train a horse & if so why?**

My methods are the only methods, for me, today. But if you show me a better method, it will be my way tomorrow, so I guess you could call me a thief of good methods. I will steal any good method from anybody that I see will improve on the methods that I am currently using, that's how you get better. So if you keep an open mind you never know where you are going to improve it, and I've made a lot of changes. A new method that I am using is one I've only learned a very short while ago, and that's pretty amazing. All these thousands and thousands of horses, I must be pretty dumb not to have figured this out before! And there are two things that I have learned in the last year that have profoundly changed my opinion of how to deal with certain phobias. That's pretty

**“A GOOD HORSE TRAINER CAN GET A HORSE TO DO WHAT HE WANTS HIM TO DO. A GREAT HORSE TRAINER CAN GET A HORSE TO WANT TO DO IT.”**

strange when you figure that I've dealt with some 70.000 horses in my career!

**What are those two changes?**

I've done demonstrations where I deal with a horse that's terrified, he's frightened of everything. I've done them in a certain way and the funny thing is that I watched another practitioner, a professional, and that demonstration that that professional did was SO bad it was not to be believed. That person took over 2 hours to do something that I think should have been done in 15 to 20 minutes, and I couldn't imagine why that person couldn't see a better way?! I started thinking about how I do it, and then I thought of ways that could even be better - and seeing that awful way of doing things with whips, drove me to make my own way a lot better and I went home and tried my new dream, it was unbelievable, it worked like a charm. Don't know why I didn't figure that out before!

Then the other one has to do with a thoroughbred horse that was an absolute killer; I mean he was really dangerous. It had to do with getting a saddle on him and starting the long lining process and I did it the way I always had been doing it. This horse was going to kill himself and maybe me, it was unbelievable he was in the process of destroying a round pen, and I tried another little system of getting him to accept the saddle and the long lines and it clicked and it worked. It would be hard to explain to you but it is a different system.

**A horse that is started your way and a horse that is broken under more traditional methods; some people would say that if a horse is started it is started. Why is a horse that is broken your way in kind and non-violent methods, a better horse?**

That's a very good question and one that if I couldn't answer well, it doesn't leave me much reason to exist. But in fact the answer to that question I believe can best

be attained by putting it in human terms. For example: I have a Construction Company, and I hire a lot of day labourers and I want those day labourers to dig a ditch faster than anybody could ever dig a ditch, and I want them to, lets say, put more concrete in the ditch faster than anybody ever did. Those labourers are non-skilled, just workers. What I will do is every time they go slow I will hit them with an electric cattle prod and they'll go faster, and they will, until they get so angry that they don't care and go on riot. I get killed, and the ditch doesn't get dug at all. But we did have whips over the rowing crews and we certainly had whips over the slave cotton pickers in America. There has been abuse of people since Roman times, slavery is still going on today there are legal sales of slaves today. SO we still haven't learned that forcing someone to do something isn't as good as causing them to want them to do it.

The people that are revered the most in my operation on my farm in California are the ones who muck the stalls, they have the best job in my farm, they really do. You and I wouldn't say it's the best job because we don't want to do it but they love it! They are paid well by their performance and they know they are good; they are trained well, they know how to clean a stall really well, and they make more then anyone else on the farm. It's unbelievable, but I get a better job done and faster so I've caused them to want to do it. SO horses can be broken, and you can force the horse to do anything you want him to do. Because the horse is a flight animal, he will generally get broken and tend to do it as a good slave would do. But you will get performance just because they want to survive and you'll only get a certain level of performance, they are not going to be out there breaking



*Punished as a child for challenging his father's traditional methods, Monty remained undeterred from his vision* ▲

*Monty's methods encourage true partnership between horses & humans* ►





▲ Violence is never the answer. Join-Up is founded on a consistent set of principles, communication, & trust

◀ Shy Boy, a Mustang born & raised in the wild was "started" by Monty in the wild using no enclosures

their necks for you so they can give you break-through performance in order to give you the highest level of performance. There isn't that extra incentive to do better. But when you cause them to want to do it, then you get that extra incentive. That's why for my entire career I've produced more World Champions and more Major Stakes winners than anybody with any kind of broad base disciplinary career like I've had. Nobody in the history of horsemanship has done as many things at World Class levels as I have. Gaited horses, show jumpers, hunters, dressage horses, cutting horses, reining horses, western pleasure horses, western stock horses of all kind, western riding which is like dressage for western horses, and even driving race horses. Nobody has ever done all of those things and each one of these I can tell you about a World Class level horse that I trained. It doesn't matter what the discipline is, if you can work it out to get the horses' mind saying I want to do this, and if you can do that then you can produce better horses.

### Who taught you your methods?

A lot of people taught me my methods. Some of which don't even know that they taught me, some of which would deny that they ever taught me anything. I've had people say You know, he lied, I never taught him anything and they didn't even know that they taught me. But I can learn watching them.

So lots of people have taught me, I've learned from more people than you can imagine. There's a man named Harold Farren that taught me a lot & I have never even written about him that much, I think he would tell you, No, I've never taught Monty Roberts anything, but watching him ride his horses and do certain things I

learned from him. Red Neil and Don Dodge, taught me so much and in the end he said yeah, I remember he was around a little bit, but he was one of the strongest teachers I had. But the number 1 teachers, without any questions were the 4 legged Mustang horses; they were my greatest teachers.

As a frank teacher, Sister Agnes Patricia, my 8th grade teacher was profoundly instrumental in causing me to be everything that I am. She was amazing. She knew my father, and she trained me not to hate my father, and she gave me good reason not to hate him. Suggesting that he was raised the same way, and knowing that he was, and that these patterns of abuse follow families, this business of being violent follows families right on through and you have to break the chain, and it's not easy. I am imprinted, completely imprinted to violence. So often times I flash and I want to get violent. But it's no different really from an alcoholic who doesn't take a drink. I am not going to be violent because I've sworn off. But many people have taught me, I learn from all my students, I've learned from other professionals that ride and I see & pick up on certain things they do. The higher level you reach, the more observant you become of what works for other people. The little incidences stack up and then you say when you do this with a horse, he does that. **HT**

*To be continued..*

Images courtesy of Monty & Pat Roberts Inc.  
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*If you are interested in more information about Monty Roberts, his work, training methods, and purchasing any of his books or DVD's, or are interested in attending a demonstration with Monty Roberts in Cairo please email [sue@horsetimesegypt.com](mailto:sue@horsetimesegypt.com).*