

# The Art of Play

**Part One of Two.** – These two articles Horsemanship Magazine.



There is far more to play than first meets the eye. Play provides us with an excellent opportunity to fully engage with our horses on many levels: cognitively, physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. It teaches horses and humans about sharing a learning experience. In horsemanship play is a wonderful tool in development of a shared language as it opens up two way communication. It builds self-esteem and self-confidence in both equine and human participants which enriches a shared supportive relationship. Play is wonderful for building mutual respect, trust and bonding.

If you want to ignite cognitive development in your horse play is a great way to encourage your horse to think. Horses are very able to cognitively process, problem solve and think things through. Play allows horses to explore the world and is fabulous for conquering their fears. Using play you can help your horse think, to look to you for guidance rather than react. Play is great for spook

busting and bomb proofing your horse. Horse and human together through play around facing fears, develop new competencies, enhanced confidence and a resiliency in facing future challenges. From practicing spook busting games as a partnership, you and your horse will have tools and strategies in dealing with scary situations. Once practiced and skilled you will view tricky situations as golden training opportunities not to be feared.

Play in horsemanship teaches humans about patience and understanding. As for true horsemanship play should be 50 / 50 with the horse. So here it is essential we listen to the horse, as to what type of play an individual enjoys. When we observe natural play in our horses we are given a unique opportunity to see the world from their view point. Horsemanship is looking into their world so we can learn to communicate more effectively. There is a place for human led structured activities, but be mindful to incorporate time for horses to select and decide their own play.

Play builds active and healthy bodies. Physically play enables participants to practise certain physical movements so it is great for developing better reflexes, balance, core strength, coordination, increased joint mobility, flexibility and muscle tone. Physical exercise makes you feel good as it raises the levels of the natural mood-enhancing hormones. Plus it can be one useful tool in burning calories keeping waistlines in check.

Despite the many benefits of play, many don't place a high value on it. Many people lead stressful, hurried lifestyles and opportunities to interact with their horse are often about training for an equestrian discipline, or human led agendas. For us, play is a wonderful way to get off the wheel and practice emotional well-being. Many horses are managed to meet their physical needs, and have abundant resources and live in relative peace, however due to management practices they may not be receiving the full benefits of play. Some people are unaware of how play can be a wonderful part of enhancement of training their horse.

Play is so important to optimal equine development. It helps horses to adjust to schooling as it enhances learning readiness and learning behaviours. Through play horses develop emotional maturity and the ability to concentrate. Exploration is the heart of play and it is the ignition to curiosity and problem-solving skills.

Too many of us get hung up on being serious with our horses. Letting your hair down, laughter and joy in play is a wonderful way to spend time with your horse. Play should be a cherished part of horsemanship. It sets you up for a meaningful close bond and friendship with your horse. It is sociable, rewarding, motivating and sets us up for success mentally, physically, socially and emotionally. Most of all play is fun.

# The Art of Play

## Part Two

Play is a lifetime need for both horses and humans. Just think about the proverb “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” It means a life without play becomes boring. Two legs or four, life should be about having fun. Yet how easy is it to get hung up on being serious with our horses and not engaging in fun play? In this article I am going to touch on the types of play you can tap into for use in horsemanship.

### Horses Playing Together

Horses often engage in boisterous play. It is a very natural thing for horses to do. Humans can humanise the behaviour and see it as squabbling or something negative and often horses are separated because the human is fearful of injury to one or both horses. However there is no malice or conflict going on. It is normal healthy behaviour. It is deeply encoded into your horse's ancient DNA. One aspect of this play is about practicing survival moves.

Horses rarely injure each other during play as the herd is a co-dependency structure. There are rules and manners to be observed in equine natural play and horses rarely overstep the mark. Play crosses social hierarchies, it is the time you will see mutual agreed fun between individuals in the herd no matter difference in hierarchy. It is about fun, communication and give-and-take. However there are cases of horses that are not socially herd adjusted where play can get out of hand. (This is more of mans' making by how that horse was raised and managed.) Play actually strengthens bonds in the herd and is often about testing each other. This testing is herd etiquette and helps to establish boundaries to prevent confrontations within the herd. This play helps strengthen and stabilize the herd and pair bonds. All horses are born with a desire to play that gets developed through herd etiquette and language. Through play horses learn the skills of communication, intent, energy shift, breathing patterns and body language. Some play is like a dance. Not all natural play with horses is boisterous some is very gentle and subtle. Herd play only occurs when horses feel safe and are relaxed. Any perceived danger or threat play will instantly stop. So time spent watching how horses play is very important. A lot of natural horsemanship groundwork taps into natural play, the rituals, language and etiquette.

## Playing with Objects



Horses by nature are inquisitive and curious. They love to explore and learn. So playing with objects is a very natural behaviour. It is how they learn about the world around them. This type of play can be extended to problem solving and interactive play with others with an object. However if the objects are available 24 x 7 the horse will become bored with the objects and no longer play with them. So keep toys somewhere safe and bring them

out only for play sessions. Ensure the toys you give your horse are suitable and safe and that you supervise play with objects. Some horses love toys they can pick up with their teeth. Others like toys like a big ball they can nudge, kick and chase. Others like toys they can stand on and paw. Some like toys that encourage them to think through problems. Some horse love to explore the contents of a box, unpacking items. Others will play with water from the hose. Some love the challenge of trying to negotiate new obstacles. It is about getting creative with playing with objects. This type of play can lead into the sport of horse agility.

## Walking and Exploring Together



Wild horses walk miles every day. It is probably one of the most natural activities you and your horse can enjoy together. It is totally different to walk with your horse than to ride it. It has a totally different feel and energy. The connection is different too. It's a difficult one to nail exactly into words but I will try. I am not talking about general leading for day to day purposes of moving from field to yard. I am talking about setting out for a walk together, the purpose to enjoy each other's company. You go together as a partnership, you and your horse, a little herd of two. Once you and your horse have mastered basic ground skills, you are ready to step out and enjoy going on walks together. It enables you to put your ground skills into practice; it reinforces them in a practical way. Remember that groundwork games are based on the language of the herd, etiquette and natural play. So this is putting into practice natural play in the

activity of walking together as horses would do. On walks you learn about each other. As you will come across difficult situations that are opportunities in works clothing to build confidence, mutual trust and strengthen your bond. So you grow your worlds together. If you are a dog owner how many miles per week must you clock up walking your dog? To start with try to clock up 30% of those miles with your horse; then reflect on the benefits. My Merlot was the first horse I discovered this delightful pleasure. We would often stroll off together for a walk. This is very gentle and on route there are opportunities to play, social interaction and natural treats for your horse to enjoy.

## Sweet Spots

Horses use mutual grooming in the herd to strengthen bonds. In the herd games can include mutual grooming. Studies have discovered that mutual grooming releases the feel good hormones. Horses have preferred partners they like to engage in mutual grooming with. So if we want to bond with our horse learning where our horse's favourite scratching spots are is another way to spend time together doing an activity that is enjoyable and fun. I am not talking about mud removal here; this type of grooming is totally different. This type of grooming is about asking your horse what type of touch and where he finds it pleasurable. Some love scratching with our fingers, or rubbing with a rubber curry comb, other a more gentle touch. When you get it right your horse will be blissed out. Your horse may well want to reciprocate and groom you. However humans don't always enjoy this as it can include being nibbled. Personally it is best to teach your horse to do this gently or provide them with something to groom like a mat or discourage them from grooming you.

## Learned Play



Horses are very able to learn how to play games either by training or from its own experiences of an activity leading to something rewarding. Horses learn very quickly and using positive reinforcement enables activities to become fun, rewarding and enjoyable. The horse then finds the play activity highly motivating. This is the ignition of intrinsic motivation. Are you are curious about the difference between a positive reinforcement and a negative reinforcement and the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in

horsemanship? If yes, you can read for FREE my series of published articles that appeared in Horsemanship Magazine on Motivation, you will find them in the resources section on my website. The skills for teaching your horse to happily play are about unlocking self-motivation (intrinsic motivation).

## Problem Solving Play

Horses are very able to solve problems. They have great minds, and are able to think and reflect on the world around them. They use their natural curiosity and learn by making discoveries. Often through play horses learn about solving problems. Sometimes this learning is from an accidental discovery. Other times horses problem solve because they have a vested interest in the outcome. Often horses learn via exploring and experimenting. I believe horses understand the concept of cause and effect and have the ability to think things through and make choices. Horsemanship for me is all about tapping into the mind of the horse. It is about helping the horse to think things through rather than react.

Play has so many benefits, it is fun, it involves a shared language and two way communication. It's about both parties enjoying the activity with give and take between both parties. Play isn't always high energy, sometimes it is slow and gentle, sometime it is mentally stimulating.