

Clinic Report

by Amanda Barton, United Kingdom

Okehampton clinic 13th – 17th July 2005

I rode for two days with Mark Rashid at a seminar at The Grange Equestrian Centre, Okehampton in the UK. The horse I rode is my grey mare, Teagan. She is Thoroughbred x Connemara, 12 years old and primarily an endurance horse but we also do some dressage and jumping.

Softness vs. lightness

Mark talked about the feel in the rider's hands and said that there should be a certain quality and consistency in the feel. He said that for him this was the difference between soft and light. All through the clinic he used the word soft saying that soft comes from the inside of the horse and light comes from the outside. He said that "If we are looking for lightness you are looking only on the outside of the horse so you never get to the inside. The really good stuff is when the horse gives you everything from the inside out; this is where anything becomes possible. I want to bring the inside of the horse out. It is the inside that they are born with when they are running around the field and having fun."

He stressed that once you get to a certain stage, riding is not about technique. "Technique will only take you so far, then you have to be a student of the horse. A student of technique will only get so far, just like martial arts, you can be really good and a master of technique but the art is what you study, there is more to an art than just technique. You are looking to reach the inside of the horse, to find the brightness, so that you can put a foot anywhere and the horse is right there. You can't technique that into working."

Kathleen told a story about some things she had experienced riding Mark's horses that added to this theme.

"I first rode one of Mark's horses, Smokey, a couple of years ago at a clinic. When we ride at clinics, we teach on horseback and basically stand still for a lot of the time, backing up or side passing over to students to talk to them. When I had seen Mark riding Smokey in the past he just stood there but if Mark needed Smokey to go somewhere they just went there. So I thought, great I am going to have a couch! So I get on Smokey and I can't stand still. For 3 days we ran into horses, walls, people, and I could not get Smokey to stand still. I was thinking, what is wrong with this horse, he stood still for 8 hours before, what changed? Well hello!!!! I realised that I had gotten sloppy and I did a lot of things that didn't mean anything so I had a lot of white noise and my own horse had learned to blow it off. When I did mean something I had to use a

cue as the smaller stuff had no meaning. Changing your focus meant something to Smokey, he looked to where your focus had gone, keeping your focus meant go over there. On the 4th day I had figured out what was going on. Nobody was saying anything as they wanted me to figure it out!

I rode Mark's horse Mouse a couple of weeks ago. My feel is a lot further along than it was a few years ago and with Mouse I could feel a lot of stuff that Mark talks about. I got to feel what that feels like, with Mouse you really do think about going somewhere and he goes there, you think 'I'd like to go to the gate now' and you go to the gate, 'I'd like to trot at B and you trot'. The most interesting thing was when I thought 'I wonder how little it will take to go forward'. Inside I felt him make this little circle, not moving his feet just really subtle with his body, to say 'which way do you want to go?' He offered each direction and when the forward came up again in the direction I wanted to go, I just took it. You could take the left foot to the left or the right foot to the right just by taking that direction when it was offered.

I was asleep at the wheel within about 3 minutes, I wasn't riding. I know that when Mark rides he pictures the feet so I did that for a while and then I just sat there. As a result Mouse moved a foot off centre so now I had to correct him for something that I had allowed as I was asleep at the wheel. The next time I pictured those feet going straight or left or right. It was pretty sobering."

Mark summarised this discussion by saying that "you have to think about the feet all the time, this work comes from a different place. It's the way you live, it's the brightness that you bring."

I have recounted this story as faithfully as I can from the video of my session because it spoke so loud to me. Mark talks a lot about coming to this work with a mind like water or a pool that should be crystal clear. If you have other thoughts going on in your mind this is like throwing pebbles into the water all the time. Don't think too hard. Don't get too busy. Unless the pool is clear it is difficult to access the inside of the horse and find that brightness in both of you.

Using energy rather than physical cues

I had ridden with Mark at the start of 2005 and we had been working on using my energy to ask for changes in the horse, such as transitions or sideways steps, rather than any physical cue.

We talked about building on this during the clinic and Mark said that the key for all these things to happen is softness in front. To start with we need to concentrate on softness, don't let the softness go, this is the first thing to worry about. Don't even think about anything else until softness is established. After that you can do anything you want to do.

When you ask the horse to get soft ensure that you have intent in what you ask for. Every time you do this work you will set it up in exactly the same way. The horse needs

to know that whenever you touch the reins he needs to be soft. Don't be afraid to be proactive.

Tap into the inside of the horse for more extension

Kathleen had already talked a little about placing feet solely by thinking about where they are and Mark said that we were going to have some fun with this! He said that the trot wasn't bad but it would be nice to have a little more extension. "Let's see if we can tap into the inside of the horse just for the fun of it!" He asked me if I could feel the hind feet and say where they are landing. It felt to me as if they were landing pretty much underneath the back of the saddle so he asked me to picture her hind feet landing just behind my foot, another few inches further forward from where they were now. Don't do anything, just feel the foot reaching further underneath (and keep breathing!) Some changes started coming, a few strides had more extension and a better reach from behind.

This worked as a good start but Mark asked if there was a hair more in there? He asked me to picture where the foot is going to land in relation to me. Mark said that when he rides he can see the picture clearly. He can see the sand coming up in the arena and even when he is looking forward he has a picture as if he is looking down through the horse and can see the feet and what they are doing. Once it is feeling good and you have been working on the hind quarters for a little while open the shoulders up. You are looking for a floating feeling.

You want to picture the horse bringing the stride further underneath the body that should also increase the stride in front. It's like a picture in a tape and it runs over and over again (with no pebbles in the mental pool!). There will be a change in the footfall & a change in the sound. Mark asked the spectators to watch the flow of the front legs as the shoulder should be moving the foot, rather than the other way around. The movement should be more of a flow and a reach that starts at the shoulder and moves down through the foot. It starts with a few strides and then it grows.

I struggled to think about both hind feet at once to start with but you have to or you will get an uneven gait! I didn't want to bounce from thinking about the hind feet to the front feet, or my horse couldn't focus. We worked on the back first for quite a while before we could do anything with the shoulders. Get the back end pushing, I thought, each step is push, push, push, reach, reach and then focus on the shoulders and open up the power that you have generated. Give all the attention to the back end so that she can open up. Concentrating on the front end gets the horse heavier. (Mark said don't worry it only takes 40 years to get this!)

Mark also talked about the rider's centre and the horse's centre. The rider's centre is a few inches below the navel, think about connecting this to the horse's centre which is right below you. Connect up the two centres so that you attach your centre to your horse's centre. When you rise you are going to bring her up underneath you so that you get more lift and more stride. Pick up that centre and take it with you.

Mark said that we must look for the change in feel, change in rhythm and then the shoulder will come through. Because these cues are so small you don't feel like you are giving any physical cues to get this done. The key to doing all this work is that we have to be able to get the horse to do the work using the least amount of muscles, if the rider or horse gets tense or tight there is less effectiveness in the movement. You are still supporting but are soft in the muscles that you don't really need, this makes it much easier for the energy to flow through.

This didn't work all the time by any means but there were a few strides which just felt different, they felt free and connected. This was not the same feel as I had experienced before when I had been working with traditional trainers and they felt that my horses movement had improved, there was a bit more to it than that. A totally different feel arises if you encourage the horse forward with your legs and cues than if you just move your centres together and the horse starts to respond to the mental images and your focus.

Leg yield

Mark asked me to experiment with the leg yield in exactly the same way. By getting in time with the feet but using no physical cues ask the horse to move sideways. This worked to some extent but felt a bit stuck and I was finding it hard not to cheat by using my leg. Old habits die hard! Breathing out as we started the movement helped a bit but this is still work in progress!

Power of breathing

Mark talked about the amazing things you can do just by thinking about your breathing. He told a story about one rider he had taught. This lady was an experienced dressage rider and she was having trouble with her lead changes, the horse was changing lead in front first rather than the change coming from the hind legs. After having tried a few more traditional things that had not worked particularly he asked her to experiment with breathing in time with the change. He asked her to breathe in as the new leading hind leg pushed off the ground and to breathe out to plant it back on the ground. She rode off, came down the middle of the arena and breathed in a big way, the foot came up and hit the horse in the belly, the horse went way up in the air and changed leads. It took less than 20 minutes to be able to do lead changed every stride or every other stride just by breathing.

Energy work and release

Someone asked the very interesting question as to what the release is if you are working with energy in this way and not using cues as such. Mark said that his feeling was that because everything is so small already what we would call a release is not necessary because the nature of this work is that it is in itself a release. You are just running the same tape over and over, it is a feel of these things happening. He said that there is a picture in his mind and he can see right through the horse and see the feet moving. "When I picture those feet, I picture them going some place different, a little longer

stride or a different direction. Before long that picture does not exist as you can just feel it and it just happens. The release is not really a release per say for me but when I want to change something I may change in my core.”

Mark asked me what I felt about this. I said that I was thinking about this issue a little earlier as my horse had been responding to my attempts at lengthening the stride and I really wanted to thank her for this effort. I had tried switching off the tape to give her a break but this didn't feel right, partly because it then took a while to get the tape up and running again but also because it just didn't feel right, like there was a space or we had got lost or separated. This is really hard to describe, but it fits with what Mark was saying when he talks about playing his tape all the time.

I also said that this was not like taking a feel on a rein in a physical way where you may release when the horse gives to the pressure, this has a totally different quality to it and does not come into the category of pressure and release. I described it as feeling that there is no expectation from the request so there is no negative to be released by a positive. It is just not like that.

Mark said that this sort of connection with a horse is what we are all looking for but it's hard to explain and most folk may find it hard to believe or understand. Even if this level of work is not possible (and Mark said that he truly does believe it is possible) its good to believe that it is, it is our dream, our goal. Kathleen's story about Mouse echoed the same principle. Mark said that it feels as if there is no difference between you and your horse, its just energy moving, I don't think there is a release. The release comes in the joy of the movement.

Seeing as we are delving into some areas that folk may already find a little bit unusual I will say why I really believe that communicating with horses purely on an energetic level is totally possible. I have ridden with Mark on two occasions and spent some time exploring the use of energy on both of them and on two complete different horses. During each of those sessions there was a split second while I was playing my tape that I had such a clear picture of the hoof coming up from the ground that I could almost have touched it. The picture was utterly instantaneous with the thought and the movement of the horse, there was totally no delay in the combination of the feel and the mental picture. I believe that was a second of the true connection I am looking for and I need to take that and build on it so that it lasts longer and is easier for recreate.

There was another question as to when you can start working on this with a horse

Mark said that it is there in all young horses, we just need to not take it out. Whether this works out depends a lot on how well you are able to control yourself, your mind and its stillness and your muscles. Some horses have had this taken out of them by the training process and it may be a bit more difficult to put back.

Braces

We also talked about braces during this session and how they are detrimental to this process. I have plenty of braces in my shoulders, hip and lower back that have been work in progress since the clinic. This was particularly affecting the canter which was feeling a bit stuck. When Mark asked me to release a little spot on my left shoulder it was amazing how much the movement freed up! It was such a tiny thing yet it made the biggest difference possible. Still more food for thought.

I would just like to give Mark and Kathleen a huge thank you for such a great time riding with them and I look forward to the next clinic!