

# ***Weeklong Report by Crissi Tomlinson***

## ***Flagstaff, Arizona***

I had ridden in several four-day clinics with Mark in Flagstaff, Arizona, and liked the idea of the more private setting and extra day of learning the weeklong clinic offered. I decided to bring Zephyr, a gelding I had bought the previous year. A friend of mine rode my other gelding, Jack, at the same clinic. I originally thought that Zeph and I would work on things like getting more impulsion in his gaits, lateral work, being able to soften to the bit, and his anxiety about being out on the trail.

What actually happened was quite different.

The first morning, my friend, riding Jack, walked down the road and I followed with Zeph. Jack has a very fast walk, and was soon out in front of us. Zeph was getting nervous, and as we walked by the round pen with a horse cantering in it, Zeph decided he had had enough. He threw his head in the air and started prancing on the spot. I reacted by standing in my stirrups and freezing. Mark called out to me, telling me to look toward him (my gaze had been on Zeph's increasingly-closer neck) and ride. As soon as I did that (and sat down) Zeph was able to put his feet on the ground again. We walked toward Jack, with Mark pointing out that for right now, Jack was his "safe" zone.

For the next three days, Zeph had lots of impulsion and he was doing some great lateral work at the trot as he tried his hardest to bolt to his buddy. Mark had Jack and my friend start close by, but then work out slowly. My job was to breathe, focus and stay soft (as opposed to freezing, like I did the first time) atop an equine tornado as he tried to bolt. With a lot of help and encouragement from Mark, I learned what focus and blending (which only happened when I was soft) feels like and how with it, Zeph started to check in with me, instead of being so anxious about his buddy leaving. When I stayed soft and breathed, not only could I feel more of what was going on in Zeph's body, but I could become more aware and help redirect the energy that Zeph was expending. With breathing came awareness, with awareness came focus, and then came softness and with softness came the realization that there was no need to fight what Zeph was offering. For three days Zeph was in non-stop motion, in every direction. Each day, however, brought improvements; by day two Zeph was backing up instead of trying to bolt to Jack, day three started out with a lot of movement and ended with us standing in the sun together for short amounts of time. Each day Zeph would still get nervous, but it never went as high as that first day, nor did it last as long. I also realized that when I got tense and nervous along with Zeph, I pretty effectively blocked any help I could give him, AND missed out on the tries that he did offer me, which would, in turn, raise his anxiety level.

Day four was the big turning point. We started the morning with some instruction from

Mark on cadence: how to tell which foot is getting ready to leave the ground and how to influence that foot's placement. We then worked on making my cues for that foot smaller and smaller, until Zeph and I were connected in a way I had not yet experienced with him. All that morning, Jack was far away. And all that morning, Zeph and I were okay together. Mark pointed out that with an increase in my focus and connection, Zeph was bound to follow because he couldn't pay attention to his friend and to what I was asking of him. Toward mid-afternoon, Zeph decided that standing in the sun might be a pretty good idea. For the first time in four days, he came to a standstill, cocked a hind leg and put his head down for a nap, with me on his back and all the other horses walking around him.

On day five, a friend and I talked after the morning meeting, while everyone else was getting ready. By the time I came out to the trailer, Jack was gone. Zeph, still at the trailer, was frantic. Mark had an eye on him and mentioned that even though Zeph was throwing himself around, he knew where the end of the rope was, and wasn't fighting being tied. Mark decided to bring Zeph down to an empty pen to help him work through his anxiety in a bigger space.

Zeph was unable to be still. He was pulling on the lead line, trying to find Jack, halfway rearing, trying to bolt. Mark led him toward the pen, and had to snap the lead shank and move him backward several times. Mark explained that since Zeph was so frantic, and he wasn't paying attention to who was on the end of the lead rope, Mark had to match his energy to Zeph's. In essence he was saying, "You can go ahead and be frantic but DON'T RUN ME OVER." In order for Zeph to hear what Mark was saying to him, and in order for Mark to be safe leading, he had to bring his energy up as well. The key, he told me, was that none of it was done in anger or with any rise in emotion. The softness was still available from Mark to Zeph.

Mark got Zeph down to the pen, unhooked the lead line and Zeph bolted to the part of the fence that got him closest to seeing Jack. He started pacing, and pretty soon had a deep groove where he was weaving back and forth while whinnying, throwing his head and banging into the rails. Within five minutes he was starting to sweat. Within fifteen minutes he was starting to lather between his trembling back legs. And twenty minutes later, he was dripping with sweat from every part of his body.

Mark told me to watch the patterns that Zeph chose, and to watch how and when he tried to soften. He also mentioned that we had the previous four days to build on and Zeph had found out there is a soft place away from all this anxiety. After thirty minutes, Zeph was slowing down, but still sweaty. Mark talked to me about patterns, and the fact that the pattern now had control of the horse, not the other way around. After a bit, Mark got up on the fence, right in the middle of Zeph's weaving back and forth pattern and asked Zeph to go around. At that one small request, there was a change. Zeph looked at Mark as though seeing him for the first time. His feet stopped, he flicked his ears, and then turned to his left, came toward me (still standing on the outside of the pen) with his head down before trying to resume his anxious pacing. Mark stayed on the fence, so again Zeph had to think about where to put his feet. This time he stopped close to Mark, and Mark took his halter off. This sent Zeph back to pacing, but there was

Mark, sitting on the fence, asking him again to not run into him. Zeph had to change the way his feet moved and then he turned around, noticed the water and hay that were there waiting for him, took a quick bite of hay and then turned to try and pace again. This happened a few times, then Mark got off the fence and brought back four large orange rubber cones. He put these in the pen right where Zeph was pacing; one on the left, one on the right, and a couple in the middle. He explained that now Zeph had come down a bit and was starting to think, the best way to help him break the pattern further was getting him thinking about where to put his feet. So, in essence we were giving him permission to feel however he needed to AND think about his feet at the same time, and making sure he wasn't hurt by giving him objects that were soft. After ten minutes of walking around all these objects in a 12 x 12 pen, Zeph was setting up another pattern. Mark changed the configuration again and this time, after a few times of Zeph putting his head down to look at these objects and stepping around them he took a big drink of water and started to eat.

It had taken Zeph two hours to figure things out for himself. He went from being so anxious he was drenched in sweat, to eating and drinking and not even bothering to whinny back when his buddy called to him. He was quiet, and though he tried to keep an eye on his buddy, pretty soon decided that eating and drinking were better. I sat in the sun the remainder of the morning and watched him start to enjoy the sun on his back and the endless hay. It was fascinating to me to not only see this transformation, but to hear the reasoning behind it, and be shown that there was a way out for this horse. That, just like the previous four days, we can give Zeph permission to have whatever emotions he needs to have and yet also give him help through it.

In the afternoon, I moved Zeph from the pen to the trailer where Jack was tied up. They both ate lunch, and then I put Zeph back into the small pen when Jack left. He went back to nibbling the grass. Mark came by and took some of the objects out of his pen, leaving him with a couple of cones. Mark explained that they were not necessary any more. We then decided that since the round pen was free, we would put him in there. Zeph was fine there, too. Mark told me that the problem wasn't completely cleared up for him, but that we had made a great start on it in the five days we had. We also talked about how to continue once I got home.

For the first time in over a year, I began to think that Zeph and I might have a pretty good chance to get together and understand one another better. I also found out that my focus and presence are what is required, and that Zeph needs those things far more than any training I thought I could give him.

In a way, we worked on the things I thought we needed to work on, but I found out how much I had missed about Zeph, too. I had known about his anxiety, but had not understood what was behind it. In the past, when it did arise I tried to make it go away. What Mark taught me is that Zeph is allowed to have his anxiety, and there is a way for me to help him THROUGH it, instead of fighting with him or letting him flounder around on his own.

Funny, I had thought that by keeping Zephyr calm (and thereby keeping me calm) we

could build more trust between us and then he wouldn't get quite so nervous. It turned out to be opposite: when I allowed him to have his say about what he couldn't handle and then found a way through it, we could come together as a team. I went from focusing on all the external skills Zeph was "deficient" in, to realizing that until I was working from my inside, from my own softness, I could not in any fairness ask Zeph to do the same. One of the biggest lessons that I have brought home from this experience, is that what we think is important for our horses to learn, is not always what our horses need to learn.