

Using the Nokota[®] Experience to Connect Individuals with Their Communities

Sarah L. Lieser

Abstract: This article is a brief history and explanation of the Nokota[®] Experience, a horsemanship clinic. It describes how individuals experience personal growth during a five-day clinic working with unhandled Nokota[®] horses and how it empowers them to become better individual leaders to serve their schools, communities, and organizations. Included are testimonials from students who have been impacted by their participation in the clinic and descriptions of how it has enhanced their ability to serve the world at large.

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Keywords: Jack Lieser, Sarah Lieser, horsemanship, leadership, horses and leadership, Nokota[®] Experience, The Nokota Horse Conservancy[®], trust, mastering one's energy, character building and personal growth with horsemanship, learningcircle.com

The goal of this article is to share with you the amazing changes that take place when individuals and a herd of horses come together and learn to communicate with one another. It is truly an amazing experience, hence the name, The Nokota[®] Experience!

Working with Jack and the Nokota[®] horses last summer in North Dakota was a transformative experience for me. With Jack's guidance, each day I gained small insights about how I connect with my horse and the world. By the end of the week, those small insights had turned into a larger vision of how I could be more proactive in my life and take actions to create a positive impact in the lives of others, both human and horse. (Mari Rubens, RN, personal communication, November 2016)

During the week I spent at the Nokota[®] Experience it became very apparent to me that there's a parallel between horse behavior and human behavior. A lot of the reaction I get both with horses and humans is caused by how I present myself. Through working with the horses Jack taught me how to be more aware of my body language and the effect it has on those around me. By the end of the week I had gained confidence in my own ability to handle my horse and human relationships with a clearer focus on the kind of leader I wanted to be. (Kathy Heise, personal communication, August 2016)

What Is the Nokota[®] Experience?

The Nokota[®] Experience is a horsemanship clinic that has grown over the past seven years into a personal development and leadership workshop. In its beginning stages, it was designed to help The Nokota Horse Conservancy[®], which is based in Linton, North Dakota, get their horses gentled and ready for sale.

Jack Lieser, the professional horse trainer and instructor of the clinic, has a gift for teaching others how to establish relationships with the equine species. In the past Jack and I had organized “colt-starting” clinics together and decided that working with The Nokota Horse Conservancy® horses would be a fantastic opportunity for those who wanted to further their education in the language of the horse.

June 2009 was our first Nokota® clinic. Right away we began to realize Nokota® horses were special, possessing a heightened sensitivity that makes them perfect for the kind of work involved in our clinics. Clinic discussions were filled with insights and emotion. Students went through profound personal changes as they went through the steps of gentling an unhandled horse for the first time.

As the years progressed, we began to have a vision of the experience becoming a tool for change in peoples’ lives and decided to incorporate the things we were learning in our personal lives about self-development and growth, along with leadership skills for organizations and communities.

The action of hosting the clinic itself has pushed us to learn more and be more by expanding our world as we begin to see ourselves as leaders. It has also shown us how relationships are vital to the success of any endeavor in life and that we are all connected in our team effort to help horses and humans.

What started out as one thing has developed into another, and at times it can be a bit mystical, as is true for the history of the Nokota® horses. The Nokota® horses have ties to the Lakota people, specifically to the honorable Chief Sitting Bull, whose horses were confiscated by the U.S. government in 1881 and dispersed in the area where the Nokota® breed originated in the Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota.

I believe that for those who participate in this experience, there is the powerful presence of Native American culture, both past and present, that must be acknowledged and remembered respectfully. What I find beautiful is how the horses somehow quietly convey this memory, causing us to reflect deeply about an important time in our history. One can’t help but think they are helping impart some of the clinic’s messages about communication and awareness through a connection with something higher for a definite reason at this point in time.

We conduct the clinic on the lush open prairie outside of Linton, ND. We work under the big sky, surrounded by the sights and sounds of the past, with tepee rings and other artifacts as not-so-distant reminders of those that walked there before. The horses are brought from their pastures into an enclosed area where they are kept for the duration of the five-day event. A tent is set up along the outside of the makeshift arena for auditors to sit and watch, and for participants to sit under during breaks for meals and discussion time.

I find it inspiring to be in this environment along with students from all over the world who want to learn the language of the beautiful Nokota® horses and who have the courage and willingness to be in the arena with 20-25 unhandled stallions who have just been separated out of their herd,

often for the first time. Their faith in Jack and his assistants to guide them and show them what to do is amazing. I believe it takes a certain amount of emotional intelligence just to enter into the space with an open and willing heart.

The horses often play and rise up on their hind legs, pawing at one another with their hooves while squealing loudly. It is a powerful and intimidating sight. The energy amongst them is palpable, demanding keen awareness from the humans inside the arena. This energy may remind participants and onlookers of the drama found in their workplace or, sadly for some, a home life where awareness is necessary for survival.

Jack teaches students to become aware of their energy level and to observe how it is affecting the horses. He shows them how to use their energy by moving it up and down on a dynamic scale to influence the horses. He does this at the beginning of each day by having them walk into and through the herd. According to Katherine Turpin, a two-time Nokota® Horse Experience participant:

To walk through a herd of these very sensitive horses, we were encouraged to be aware of our energy and watch how the horses responded to it. It was my first inkling of my energy field. Walking through the herd was a fabulous opportunity to see how my energy directly impacted beings who are sensitive enough to reflect how ‘big’ (or ‘small’) our energy is. (Personal communication, May 2017)

This year, as one of the students walked through the herd, the horses immediately began to scatter. Chaos ensued because her energy was too strong and too directly focused. Jack had her soften and spread her energy in a more diffuse way, enabling her to walk through the herd to the other side of the arena while being accepted by the horses as non-threatening, but respected enough by them as not to push into her.

The opposite happened when a student went in with such low energy that she became almost invisible. Jack reminded her that in her personal life, she commands an audience as a speaker and teacher and to call upon the same energy she uses while on stage. Once she did this, the horses stopped pushing into her, respected her space and went about their business while accepting her as part of the herd.

This exercise is at the heart of the clinic. Each day the students grow in self-awareness and in their ability to influence the horses with their energy.

**The Skill of Mastering One’s Energy Is One that
Many of the World’s Greatest Leaders Possess.**

In her book, *The Power of the Herd: A Nonpredatory Approach to Social Intelligence, Leadership, and Innovation* (Kohanov, 2015), Linda Kohanov points out that many of our nation’s great leaders have also been exceptional horsemen. She uses George Washington as one example.

There are 13 character traits of horsemen and women listed in our Nokota[®] Experience Workbook (Lieser, 2016) that we feel are important to cultivate and be aware of throughout our interactions with the horses and each other. They are: humility, gratitude, patience, honor, generosity, kindness, strength, tranquility, trust, enthusiasm, order, awareness, and truth.

The workbook, which we co-wrote for this clinic, is our guide and journal. Each day, Jack leads discussion time with daily questions to reflect upon as the process of handling and relating to the horses begins. We believe asking ourselves the right questions will lead us to growth and self-discovery, so each day Jack has questions specific to that day's work.

Day One:

Who do you want to be for your horse? Who are you showing up as? What are your first impressions of the horses? What are the horses' initial reactions to you?

Day Two:

Are you aware of how your body language, energy, and emotions influence your horse?

Day Three:

What is your leadership style?

Day Four:

Are you developing consistency and good habits with your horse?

Day Five:

What will you take away from the Nokota[®] Experience?

Life Outside the Arena

Insightful questions like these, along with the work involved in the horse-gentling process, apply to life outside the arena. Once you have been part of the super-charged atmosphere that the clinic experience provides, the lessons begin to take hold in the real world. There is a newfound awareness as you begin to realize that the person you show up as with the horses is the person you show up as in your daily life.

The Nokotas[®] are masters at teaching us who we are. Some people believe that horses mirror the person that is working with them, but what I find is that horses are much like people, possessing their own distinct personalities and quirks.

When a person relates with a horse, the challenges that occur will often point out their strengths and weakness just like any relationship will. Horses cannot speak to us with words, so they require us to pay attention to the subtleties that might go unnoticed when interacting with humans. Trying to convince an unhandled stallion that he can trust you to put a rope around his neck and touch him demands intense awareness and quick decisions in order to make a connection and develop trust. Empowering, interesting and thrilling are words that come to mind when describing communication with these instinctual and perceptive creatures.

Two Different Approaches to Horses and to Life

In parting, I will share with you the story of two students and their very different approach to the horses, along with a word from Jack. I also encourage you to read the amazing history of the Nokota® horse (Nokotahorse.org) and the family and team of people dedicated to saving this rare breed.

Last year a young Lakota man who had no horse experience went into the clinic with a very open and accepting heart. In return, the horses were very accepting of him. He was able to connect and develop a relationship with his horse because he was unassuming. Oftentimes, if you go in with a strong agenda, the horses become resistant. There was an innocent curiosity in him that horses really responded to. He now has a job working with rescue horses, which was a dream for him before the clinic.

Another student came to the clinic with a preconceived idea about how the outcome with her horse should be. She was rigid in her thinking and had a fixed mindset, along with a very formulaic method about the way to work with a horse. The horse immediately felt pressured because the relationship was not being developed. She was so focused on the end goal and outcome that she overlooked what the horse needed. Her previous experience with horses led her to believe that she had nothing new to learn which led to a great deal of frustration for her. One of the key factors of working with a horse is to stay open and flexible. These are the same attributes that are required for people to serve in other areas of their lives.

Who you are in life is who you will be with the horses.

Coming to Your Horse with Awareness: A Word from Jack

“The main thing I have found important when working with horses and people is awareness: Being aware of what they need, what they want, and how I can help them by staying flexible and using my energy in a dynamic way.

“There are times I have to be big, strong and very direct, or times when I need to be softer, lighter, and almost invisible. My ability to slide up or down that scale at a moment’s notice is what has helped me as a horseman and coach.

“As humans we tend to get stuck somewhere on that scale, depending on our personality.

“My work is to help people become aware of their energy and to learn from the horses how to use this skill in their daily life, as they live and work with others in their families, organizations, and communities. It is my hope that they will discover their potential as a result.”

About the Author: Sarah L. Lieser is co-owner and partner at Jack Lieser Horsemanship LLC (979-203-9000, sarah@jacklieser.com).