



ED DABNEY

- Six keys to Harmony

From ranch cowboy and Hollywood rider to traveller in Natural Horsemanship, Ed Dabney from Georgia, USA, has had an outstanding career. Lucky Rider, a western lifestyle magazine, met him and his daughter Elizabeth at Stenbro Ranch outside of Eskilstuna/ Sweden, in the beginning of May.

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Too often, people are in a hurry and are too focused on the goal, says Ed Dabney. When you want to teach your horse something you should do it step by step. On a scale from one to ten, the step from zero to one is the most important. This is where you lay the foundations and where you build up the trust and the confidence that will make the rest of the work run smoothly. Don't rush through things

and never lose your temper. What you do is not a fight and to a horse there is no winning or losing. Remember an insect can make a thousand pound horse move!

Ed is lean and tall like a long distance runner. He has a bright and open face and gives a calm and friendly impression. A dark red scarf is elegantly tied around his neck matching his bluish-green shirt which is well ironed. The words Ed Dabney Horsemanship





Stenbro Ranch own little Connemara, Flanagan, doing duty when Ed Dabney presented the exercises that are part of his program, "Six keys to harmony". Ed advises all riders to do these exercises before mounting their horse. When these exercises have become part of the rider's daily routine, it doesn't take more than ten minutes to go through them. Above: a side pass.

International are embroidered on his chest pocket. He is a fifth-generation horseman and has more than forty years of experience working with horses. Ed grew up on a ranch in Tennessee. As a boy he was taught how to ride on old retired horses. These had "three legs in the grave" but were safe teachers. His father raised and trained horses to the highest level.

—My dad had an admirable and very natural way of dealing with horses. As a young boy I didn't really understand how good he was. It wasn't until I started working on other ranches that I realized that all horses were not treated with as much wisdom and respect that my father used. Very often it was the trainers, not the working cowboys, who used methods that were hard and destructive. I had a hard time watching

this and decided to develop my dad's genuine knowledge into a system, a system creating harmony and mutual respect between the horse and the rider.

Cowboy and Hollywood rider

In his life as a horseman Ed has had the privilege of experiencing things that very few people experience. For many years he lived in Wyoming and worked hard as a ranch cowboy. Here his workdays consisted of long days in the saddle, driving cattle over endless deserted plains. In this wide open landscape where the American soul sings the most, he has also studied wild mustangs and learned from their herd behaviour. Many riders have had their fill of adventure, following Ed on week long trips among

wild animals and magical sceneries in the grand Rocky Mountains. He both trains riders and horses, conducts horsemanship clinics and produces instructional videos in Natural Horsemanship (NH). Ed has also been a teacher at the University of Georgia in how to start young horses. In truth, Ed has many strings on his bow.

Maybe the most spectacular part of Ed's career, apart from a short period in his early years when he was working in rodeos, is his collaboration with Hollywood and the movie industry. There, horses and riders have been apprenticed to him, in order to safely perform scenes that are trustworthy on the big screen. Ed himself has performed as a stunt rider on several occasions, classics like "Crazy Horse" and





Elizabeth Dabney is sure to follow in her father's footsteps. Her life is all about horses. Already at the age of nineteen she is an accomplished trainer.

"I am extremely careful not only showing my pupils how to do things but more importantly why you do them"



Deesse, the thoroughbred of the ranch, is a former race horse. She can be a little choosy about her rider. For Ed, riding her worked like a charm, he made her do all sorts of things, for instance jump over ditches. A piece of cake for a man who used to be a stunt rider!

Mel Gibson's "The Patriot" are part of his repertoire.

– I am very interested in American history and luckily most of the films where I have contributed have had a historical concept. The most daring scene that I have been asked to perform was in the movie The Patriot. I was asked whether I had a horse that could jump over an exploding bomb! Boone, my experienced movie horse, a crossbreeding between a Quarter and a thoroughbred, was just cut out for the part. That horse would, literally speaking, do anything for me.

The bomb which was supposed to look like a canon ball, was almost a meter in diameter and was chock-full of peat and cork. Well prepared and having made sure that nothing could hurt Boone, we went through with the scene. At a gallop we headed for the

attacking British cavalry. The bomb which was operated by remote control exploded when Boone was right over it. We went on, galloping, in a cloud of peat and cork. Boone was completely unaffected, trusted me one hundred percent, and could have repeated the manoeuvre right away. It was a fantastic experience but I had to remove dirt from my ears for several days afterwards, Ed says, laughing.

Traveller in NH-training

Several years ago, Ed and his wife and his four daughters left Wyoming and moved to Monroe, Georgia.

– The winters in Wyoming can get almost unbearably cold. In Georgia the climate is milder and the area around Atlanta is a popular district for horses with many riders and various disciplines. Here there are good opportuni-

ties for me when it comes to training and education. To date, we don't have a ranch in the sense that we used to have. Now it is a horsemanship-training-center.

As a trainer, Ed travels to most parts of the USA. On his home ground, he takes care of forty to fifty training horses every year. Mostly it's about starting young horses, but he also takes on solving problems concerning horses that have already been ridden.

– When all the medical problems are ruled out, I make a new start with these horses as if they have never been handled before. They have to go through the same program as the young horses do and when this is done, most of the time the original problems have vanished into thin air. The most common cause is lack of leadership, therefore the owner always has to come and

take lessons with the horse during the training.

For three years horses and riders in Europe have had the opportunity to share Ed's deep knowledge. In Sweden, he has his agent, Madeleine Forsgren. She plans his clinics and organizes his schedule when he comes to Europe. The program offers education and clinics as well as exclusive tour riding in wonderful surroundings, the latest one in Sicily.

When Lucky Rider meets Ed this day in the beginning of May, he has just arrived in Sweden and to Madeleine's ranch Stenbro, outside of Eskilstuna. Here he will teach and give clinics for four days starting the following day. Ed has brought his youngest daughter Elizabeth, a nice nineteen year old girl with long chestnut hair and a keen interest in horses. She is also a trainer and

will help Ed with some of the pupil's horses.

Why Ed as a trainer?

Natural Horsemanship has almost come into vogue and many people claim to be experts in the field. What is then Ed's distinguishing quality when it comes to being a trainer?

– A couple of years ago I received a phone call from the head of the Animal Science Department in Georgia. He had seen an exhibition I had had a couple of weeks earlier in which six of my pupils performed a synchronised demonstration of my educational concept, "Six keys to harmony". Now he wanted to employ me as a teacher at the university. The reason was that he had been so impressed by my pupils and drew the conclusion that I must have a great ability of conveying my

knowledge to other people. I guess that is true, I am extremely careful not only showing my pupils how to do things but more importantly why you do them. My goal is for the pupils to "feel" the technique, says Ed.

Legendary horsemen like Tom Durrance and Ray Hunt have meant a great deal to Ed's own development.

– Both these gentlemen were "horsemen" beyond comparison, but at the same time, in my opinion, they were pretty hard to understand. You had to have a certain amount of basic knowledge. I remember when I was young reading one of Tom's books, True Unity, in which he advised us to "offer the horse a feel", what does that mean I thought at the time? Today I know exactly what it means and I preach to my students that communicating with the horse is much more on the



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mental than on the physical level. The first things the horse notices from you, are the small signals you give using your energy, your thoughts and your emotions. To us humans this might seem strange but for horses this way of reacting is normal, it is part of their instincts of survival to react this way.

This is why it is so important to be “here and now” when training horses. Your outer person must match your inner one. You can’t stand there, waving the rope and at the same time wonder what’s for dinner, says Ed with a smile.

Classical inheritance and patience

Ed has studied under masters like Craig Stevens, Philippe Karl and Karl Mikolka. Ed has kept the classical inheritance and made it an integral part of his unique educational system.

– Many NH-techniques are excellent as far as ground training is concerned but when it comes to riding they

are less valuable. NH and the methods from the classical art of riding from the seventeenth and eighteenth century are closely related and complement each other in the best possible way. If you combine these two methods you get a system that works everywhere and in any discipline. What matters is developing a safe trustful horse which is balanced, self bearing and flexible. Under the correct seat of the rider, using small cues, the horse should willingly and easily be able to perform all movements as if it were set free.

Ed recommends an early handling of the horse, preferably from the birth of the foal. This way of doing things pays off in the long run. But he is against starting the horse too early. Futurity for three year olds is, for example, not his cup of tea.

– The body of a horse is not fully developed until it is five years old, it’s only money and glory when people won’t

listen to that argument. The spine of the horse is developed last, remember that you sit on a bridge. In Wyoming we started the horses when they were three years old, first very gently and only for short periods of time. We didn’t put them through any strenuous work before they were five. Why? We wanted our valuable ranch horses to last for twenty to twenty five years. Be patient and give your horse the time needed for its development. I am not against competitions but it must never be at the expense of the horse.

Six keys to Harmony

During the interview the phrase “six keys to harmony” keeps popping up. What do these keys contain?

– Just like pilots having pre-flight-checklists, I have a program which I follow before I go for a ride. It doesn’t take more than ten minutes to go through the program and done the right



"...you must speak the language of the horse and be able to visualize what you want it to do"

way it makes sure that your horse is "with you". It understands that you are the leader. Lots of riders mount their horse wondering how he/she is going to behave today. I think it is worth spending then minutes to get rid of that feeling of uncertainty. Briefly, using small means, the six exercises consist of how to make the horse move backwards, straight and energetically, move the haunches and the shoulder to the right and to the left respectively, changing gaits and direction, go through a small passage and finally to move the body sideways. Your own body language, your position, posture, energy and focus are of course of the utmost importance when carrying out these exercises, you must speak the language of the horse and be able to visualize what you want it to do.

This is what we will do during the four days ahead of us, as well as many other things, for instance making the horse follow its rider in a safe way when passing a scary object.

When Ed works the horse from the ground, he makes a point of the fact that all of the helping cues also can be used from the back of the horse. He is also very observant, requiring accuracy in exactly where the horse puts down its hoofs when moving.

– In order to control the movements of the horse, you have to be in control of its four hoofs. This cannot be done,

until you have the full mental and spiritual attention of the horse.

God and cowboy poetry

Thirty years ago Ed became a believer. God is with him all the time and has shown his presence on more than one occasion, not least when Ed works with his horses. Maybe it was on the back of a horse during the long cattle-drives trough Wyoming that he made up his mind. On these wide expanses, far away from home, many cowboys have come into contact with themselves as well as with the whole universe.

Proof of this is the abundance of cowboy poetry that exists and is documented. Ed is fascinated by the subject and has collected lots of material through the years. Above all, it is the really old poetry from the end of the nineteenth century that interests him the most. But to Ed, poetry also has another purpose.

– When I guided riding tourists in the Rocky Mountains and we put up our tents at the end of the day, I wanted to be able to offer some kind of entertainment to them. Since I am totally unmusical, I go for cowboy poetry instead. People usually like the poetry a lot.

When Ed is asked to perform a few examples he politely agrees. First he must get his cowboy hat, the hat play-

ing an important part of the performance. As a matter of fact, so do the boots, but since we are in Madeleine's living room, Ed decides to skip them. Instead he puts himself behind the sofa so we can't see his feet.

Soon words start flowing from his lips at a steady and rhythmical pace. It is impossible not to be drawn into the sentimental flow of his recitation, his words being both thoughtful and humble. Silhouettes of lonely cowboys sharply outlined against a red sunset appear on the retina. One of the poems was the favourite of Ed's father, a tribute to the horse.

The reward is in the release

And now the time has come to take some pictures. Madeleine offers two of her horses to Ed and his daughter Elizabeth, the thoroughbred Deesse and the Connemara Flanegan. Deesse is a retired gallop horse, she can be a little choosy about her rider, Madeleine says. Ed listens to her and nods. Before he mounts the horse, he shares with us his trainer's motto: Expect a lot, accept a little, reward often. Remember that "the reward is in the release". And, last but not least, be consistent, love your horse with all your heart and have fun together.

For more info: www.eddabney.com



MADELEINE FORSGREN

Stenbro Gård

Madeleine Forsgren owns Stenbro Gård, outside of Eskilstuna. Here clinics and educations are arranged by some of the world's finest trainers. Riders and their horses are offered a concept that is different from today's conventional education in riding. Madeleine has searched high and low and found trainers that work according to her philosophy, which is a combination of good Natural Horsemanship and modern dressage based on classical methods. To be able to offer people a wider knowledge as well as a better understanding of the horse and its wellbeing is what makes Madeleine tick. Today the three professional trainers Ed Dabney, Craig Stevens and Philippe Karl are part of the team at Stenbro. Madeleine's children, Irene and Jarl Forsgren are also here, both of them well educated and highly experienced trainers.

For more info: www.stenbro.com