

Two PMU Mares Hear a Different Whisper



By Erin Gilmore

Toci and Koko have elephant names.

They stare at the world from under heavy eyelids and move with deliberate steps, necks swinging as they brush the ground with their big noses. Castoffs of the Premarin drug industry, the sad-eyed horses spent their lives as cogs in the machine that produces a hormone-replacement drug for women.

The circumstances of their rescue were all too common: two more neglected horses saved at auction, in March 2009 by an animal rescue group. A naïve first-time horse owner saw their photo on the Internet and had them shipped, sight unseen, to her home in Kentfield CA, where they were predictably tagged as too dangerous to be of any good use.

But that was before the huge Shires met Robin Gates of Santa Rosa, CA. With her wide smile and thinly creased eyes, Robin could make friends with anyone from a stranger on the street to, well, an angry elephant. "Horse trainer" is a thin definition for what she does; "horse whisperer" doesn't begin to do her justice.

No Quick Fixes

A former high performance dressage rider who competed and trained through Prix St. George and Grand Prix, Robin says she "really" learned how to train horses from a little old lady in San Diego who lived with a herd of wild horses during her childhood. If that sounds way off the beaten path, it is, but 68-year-old Carolyn Resnick has a growing following in the horse world.

Carolyn developed her training methods directly from the way horses interact with each other in the wild, and for anyone who knows horse gentling, her training is raw; no ropes, small pens or quick fixes are involved. Robin has worked with her on and off for more than 20 years, learning her method and adding her own twist.

But gentling a couple of terrified, 2,500-pound animals is no easy feat.

Both horses still sport ugly brands on their hindquarters and old rope burns on their legs. Toci had the dangerous habit of striking out with her front legs if someone came too close, and Koko would panic and run if she felt confined. Robin had to start slow; for weeks she simply sat near the horses while they ate.



The Freedom to Leave

Robin is fluent in horse in the way that Jane Goodall is fluent in gorilla. She knows that any animal would choose freedom over confinement, and like Goodall interacting with gorillas in the jungle, Robin prefers to work with horses in the largest possible space. All training time was spent in open pastureland that provided more than enough room for the two draft horses to run or walk away if they wanted to. But after a lifetime of being forced and contained, the freedom to leave was an incredible new concept for Koko and Toci.

In the wild, herd interactions create a cohesive community between horses. All horses communicate with each other by seeking order in their herd ranking through constant interaction. In this way they choose their herd leader, and if they view the behavior of a herd member as unfair, they can simply leave that horse behind.

But how did that theory apply to Toci and Koko? A lifetime of containment had erased the instincts of their own language. Once they were given the choice to leave, Robin found that they couldn't tolerate any pressure at all. In the beginning, a slight move from her was enough to get them bolting for the edge of the pasture, where they would stand together, shaking.

"What we're not doing with horses is giving a rip about cohesion and community," says Robin. "We're focused on telling the horse how to do it our way by using pressure until the horse gives in. Too



Toci (left) and Koko have learned to trust people

many horses have been subjected to that dominant model, where they've been pressured until they give up."

Toci and Koko were truly afraid of and (as Robin puts it) enraged at humans. They didn't want to have anything to do with people, but as Robin started out with very small movements, she taught them that if they reached out to her a little, they would be rewarded. Gradually, the mares let her lay a hand on their side. A month later she was able to pick up Koko's hoof and run a brush over Toci's face. Today, Robin and the mares' owner Carolyn Ellis can ride the mares at liberty.

Offered Leadership

"I didn't pursue leadership with Toki and Koko when they were saying 'no' to me," she explains. "When I knew I could get a 'yes', I offered leadership. I never went into their resistance."

People have controlled horses with ropes in contained spaces for so long that working completely without them is considered a novelty. Even "natural horsemen" who travel the clinic circuit begin their work with rope halters and guiding lines, and promote 30-minute methods of horse training with systems of pressure and release.

"But too much pressure erases the horse's instincts," Robin argues. "What I love about Carolyn's work is that we're not looking to erase the horse's instincts. Every horse wants to go along with what you want and establish a bond. But by giving them a choice I'm allowing them to tap into their deepest instincts."

Robin knew that working at liberty with Toci and Koko would produce better long-term results. The kind of leadership she asked of the horses made them want to come back once they'd left. Being asked—and not told—for performance equaled empowerment. In Toci and Koko's case, 'performance' simply meant looking at Robin, or walking one step towards her. Today, doing things like lowering their head when asked,

standing quietly during grooming, and even being vaccinated at liberty is as easy as swatting a fly.

On her website Robin likes to talk about "dancing in the bond" with a horse. It might be heavy in new age tones, but it's an accurate description of the connection that Robin has with Toci and Koko. Now, they crave her presence so much that Robin doesn't even peek sideways from under her hat when she walks at liberty with one of the jumbo-sized horses. She already knows they're right by her side.



In the two years since Carolyn Ellis adopted Toci and Koko sight unseen from a rescue website, she's gone from a naive first time owner to a horsewoman who works with the Shires at liberty