



Student of the Horse

Trainer Karen Jones using the 'natural horsemanship' method

By Martha A. Woodham | Photos by Bob Fraley



Trainer Karen Jones of Roscoe accepts a kiss from an appreciative customer.



These days, going “green” is quite the trend. Georgians are turning to organic foods and looking for earth-friendly products. Coweta County horse trainer Karen Jones goes one step further, practicing “natural horsemanship” when teaching her horses and students.

Jones discovered natural horsemanship more than 10 years ago when she attended a clinic taught by noted horseman Pat Parelli. Natural horsemanship, as the training technique espoused by Parelli, Buck Brannaman and other trainers is known, is a non-aggressive way of working

with horses that is derived from observations of horses in the wild.

As Brannaman said one time: “I’ve started horses since I was 12 years old and have been bit, kicked, bucked off and run over. I’ve tried every physical means to contain my horse in an effort to keep from

getting myself killed. I

started to realize that things would come much easier for me

once I learned why a horse does what he does. This method works well for me because

of the kinship that develops between horse and rider.”

Always mindful that horses are prey animals that interact with each other in herds,



Jones uses these communications techniques to build partnerships with horses that resemble the relationships that exist between equines. In other words, to her horses, she is the “boss mare.”


“Understanding, working with and developing a better partnership with your horse is a peaceful, yet exhilarating emotion that is unexplainable,” says Jones, adding that she is constantly learning from her horses. “There is nothing purer than a horse ... so forgiving, so understanding. They are great teachers. When we think we are teaching them, we are in turn learning about ourselves from them.”

Like so many horse lovers, Jones began riding at an early age. “My mom swears I came out of the womb saying horse,” she says with a laugh. Her parents had grown up on farms, so they indulged their horse-crazy daughter with Western riding lessons and a horse. She eventually was a regular on the show circuit, competing in halter and showmanship classes as well as Western pleasure and trail classes. And her horse herd expanded.

“I trained a couple of them myself, but some of those horses knew more than I did,” she said. One was a sorrel Quarter horse named Skipper Jr. Moore who came into her life when she was 10. Skipper




Observation of horses in the wild led some well-known horse trainers to create the “natural horsemanship” method of training, which is now taught by Karen Jones of Newnan at her home in Roscoe.



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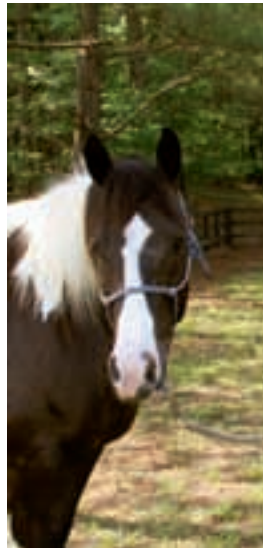


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went to college with Jones when she set off for Auburn University in 1976, intending to become a vet. But her plans changed, and she became an artist instead. Cowetans familiar with the annual Powers' Crossroads Country Fair will remember Jones and her unique wooden block puzzles.



When she married her husband, Jack, Skipper was sold. But two years later Jones bought Skipper back, and her old four-legged pal inspired the name of her horse training business, "The Student of the Horse."

"You know how you have a horse that you learn everything from? He was my teacher," she says. Skipper passed away at 31 and is buried on the Joneses' farm in the Roscoe community, where the couple moved in 1984.

A bad fall put an end to Jones' riding in 1998. She wasn't badly hurt, but "it affected me mentally," she says. "All of a sudden, I was consumed with fear. I couldn't get back on ... I became nauseated at the thought of getting on a horse."

After watching Parelli work with problem horses and riders at that 1999 clinic in Perry, Jones was in awe. "I was just blown away," she says. "People were actually playing with horses – and they were having fun! I thought, I can do this."

But after that initial burst of excitement, she became discouraged again. The techniques, which require a lot of work with the trainer on the ground instead of on the horse's back, are not difficult. But horses are smart enough to take advantage of a neophyte. After all, natural horsemanship methods are their native "language." And Jones was still afraid to ride.

She got back on track in 2001 with a clinic by another natural horsemanship trainer, David Lichman, who trained with Parelli. Jones overcame her fears and began to ride again. "Now I can't stay off of them," she says.

Jones now has three well-trained American Quarter horses, Fortune, Sage and Amy – all mares. She describes them in terms of their "horse-onality": Fortune, 24, is laid-back; Sage, 12, is serious; and Jones's main "teacher," Amy, at 6, is very green and playful.



Jones' relationship with Lichman also developed into a new business as she began booking and coordinating clinics for him and other trainers such as Karen Rohlf, who combines principles of natural horsemanship with the art of dressage. Horse enthusiasts attend the clinics to learn new ways of working with their equines, much like kids attend basketball or soccer camp.

Jones now shares her extensive knowledge of natural horsemanship with students of her own. She sees many of them on a regular basis, but she will also step in to help someone whose horse has a problem, such as refusing to load in a trailer.

"My job as a teacher is to push you a little bit out of your comfort zone, but not so much that you are fearful or can't excel," she says. But she sandwiches her teaching between lessons and clinics she takes to improve her skills.

"I'm always a student," she says. "There is always something to learn about horses, and in turn we learn about ourselves."

Want to learn more about natural horsemanship? Contact Karen Jones by e-mail at kjpuzzles@mindspring.com or phone 770-251-1799 or 678-877-4817.

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