

# Equine Alchemy: How Equine Coaching Enhances Performance

By Lisa Murrell and Johanna Husta

*Life and Business Coaching is a method of directing, instructing and training a person or group of people, to achieve some goal or develop specific skills. There are many ways to coach, types of coaching and methods to coaching. Coaching may include seminars, workshops, supervised practice and even horses coaching humans.*

**I**n the fast growing field of personal and professional development our equine friends have found themselves with a new job. MetaSystem Consulting Group (MCG), a corporate coaching and consulting firm in New York and Paris, expanded its coaching methodologies three years ago to include Equine Assisted Coaching. Coaching with horses is similar to 'traditional' coaching as defined above; however, horses become a kind of co-coach in the process.

Horses are consummate facilitators in the work of human development in their natural state, demonstrated by their powerful roles in equine assisted therapy. However, as a result of their past relationships with humans they aren't always ready to help humans in any way, therapeutically or in a coaching role when they come to us.

Doing the intense work of Equine Assisted Coaching requires a fully aware horse; one that hasn't 'checked out' or one that is extremely defensive. Therefore, when we began Equine Alchemy, the expansion of MCG to include personal and professional development coaching through work with horses, we knew we had to have the right herd. So we, being Johanna Husta, a professional dressage trainer, and Lisa Murrell, an International Coach Federation coach and amateur adult jumper, began the process of transforming our own high performance horses into equine coaches. While our Equine Alchemy herd has proved to be excellent coaches, we didn't expect the added benefit of enhanced performance.

How does becoming an Equine Assisted Coach enhance performance? The foundation of the process is working holistically with the horses. We have broken it down into four phases. We will tell you the story of how we applied this process to Fergie, a ten year old Dutch Warmblood third level dressage

mare and Tibor, a nine year old Dutch Warmblood gelding jumper. Since Johanna is our resident equine expert, she'll be telling most of the story.



## JOHANNA'S FOUR-STEP APPROACH

### to Developing Equine Coaches

When a horse finds his way to us they are usually in one of two states, completely dissociated or extremely dominant/defensive. Where they fall on this continuum will determine the path of intervention. My holistic approach to working with any horse or rider is to understand and develop them physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. I treat each horse and rider as an individual and weave my way in and out of each these four elements as I work with them. This process peels back the layers embedded by history that brought them to their current state and offers a new way to develop them into a trusting horse human relationship; exactly what is needed in coaching.

#### PHASE I

##### Behavioral exploration on the ground

Before I do any work on a new horse we want to be sure that the horse is not experiencing any pain. What I have found is that a horse will develop major behavioral issues because they are experiencing severe discomfort. Most horses will start with subtle indicators to let the rider know that there is a pain issue. If these indicators are ignored, the horse continues to experience physical discomfort. As this escalates, their mental and emotional state becomes more and more fragile until it eventually breaks down.

With any horse that comes into my program I always start with two different examinations. The first is a traditional pre-purchase, and if there are no major issues I will bring in another veterinarian who specializes in chiropractic and acupuncture. Their perspective provides a more holistic picture of the horse and creates a base line to work from. Based on the findings of these examinations I will next work with a like-minded farrier to make any required adjustments. We have found time and again that a horse that isn't balanced and supported properly from the ground up often creates a myriad of other problems. The other foundation piece is the horse's nutrition. Horses can be greatly affected by their diet. Therefore, with the help of the reps at Thera-cell I put all my horses on a whole food diet customized to the individual needs of each horse.

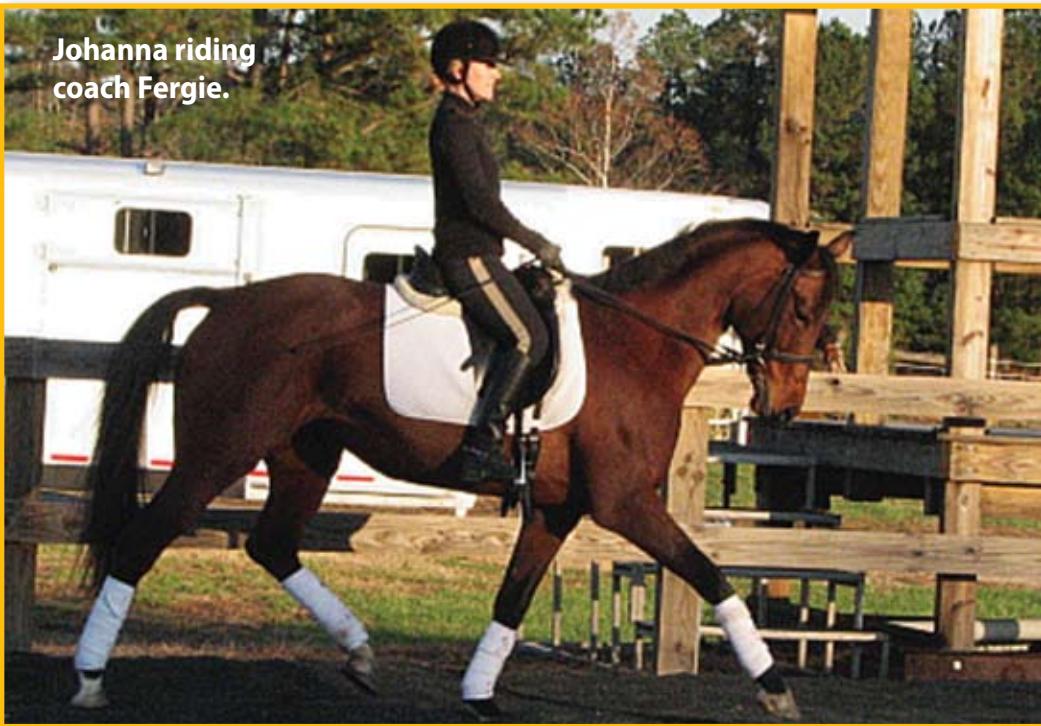
**"Interestingly, this whole issue of boundaries translates into how people relate to each other without horses."**



#### Fergie

Fergie a 10-year-old Dutch Warmblood mare was imported from Europe with the classic behavioral symptoms of a dominant, fear based and defensive horse. Some examples of her behavior included standing at the bottom of the ramp of the trailer with her front feet planted and her hind legs kicking at no one or nothing. When I led her she would try to pull away from me or run me over. Her energy was so intense that she could barely stand still to be groomed. As with any horse that comes to me I will always start with ground work. By incorporating Natural Horsemanship techniques and just good old basic handling skills I begin to define the foundational language that will take us from the ground to under saddle and then

**Johanna riding  
coach Fergie.**



on to Equine Facilitated Coaching.

To begin working with Fergie in a safe manner I had to develop clear cut boundaries while developing a relationship of trust and leadership. I put her on space restriction and was consistently clear about my personal space and boundaries as well as making it clear that she was not allowed to cross it. This allowed me to safely give her the space she needed to move her feet and provide

a language she could understand while she was in fight mode. Once the language was established I could begin to work on thresholds. I had the impression that Fergie had a past of being forced through situations where she had no choice so it was important for me to understand her thresholds and to be aware of how I would work in and out of them. For example she had a certain point in the

translated this clarity into working with her own horse outside of the coaching work. The relationship was very different. Tibor's "affectionate" behavior was something that Lisa really enjoyed and cultivated however, it lacked boundaries—the awareness of how close he could get to her while she maintained the leadership role. His behavior continued when she worked with him both on the ground and under saddle. In watching Lisa work with Tibor there wasn't much clarity at all in her boundary setting; in fact there were many mixed signals. This is something that I often see with adult amateurs. These riders really want to have a close relationship with their horse however, somewhere in their internal wiring they feel that if they set boundaries the horse won't 'like' them. In order for Lisa and Tibor to progress she had to realize what part she was playing in her partnership with Tibor that resulted in more work for her and lower performance for him.

Boundaries are not only a performance issue; they can become a safety issue. When a dominant horse's behavior

driveway where she would have a complete meltdown. I could feel in my stomach when we were getting near a new threshold which enabled me to turn her around just before she could explode. Each day we could progress just a little further beyond this threshold until it was no longer an issue.

As Fergie continued to gain confidence in me within this consistent work and environment I was able to further develop the language required under saddle. She eventually allowed me to do tactile work with her so she could be reminded that she was to yield to pressure not lean on it when applied to various parts of her body. This was preparation work for Fergie because an Equine Coach needs to understand the same language; however during coaching the most critical language is expressed through subtle cues and shifts in the energy of the human both on the rope and at liberty.

## Tibor and Lisa

A nine-year-old Dutch Warmblood, Tibor was a very friendly horse from the beginning.

While Lisa is very clear and 'in her power' with the Equine Coaches, it was interesting to see how she

isn't met with appropriate leadership it can escalate into more aggressive acts such as biting or kicking. Therefore, we began working on this issue by simply cleaning up her interactions with Tibor on the ground. Although Lisa was going through the physical steps to create the boundary, inside she really wanted him to come to her. Horses, which have much more sophisticated sensory systems than humans, can feel the mismatch of intention and will



**A client in the round pen during a coaching session.**

**“... we have gotten to a point in our riding where they will respond to the mere thought of a movement.”**

respond accordingly. For Tibor, that meant consistently testing Lisa's intentions. This is where coaching came in handy. By using Lisa's coaching skills of revealing the 'real issues' behind the things in her life that created lack of clarity, as a team we were able to uncover her feelings about boundaries and were able to work through her concerns. We practiced this on the ground until she could act with confidence and clarity and communicate this feeling and intention. With each session she became more clear and concise while Tibor became more respectful of her space and her aids. Their relationship became much stronger as a result of this new and powerful energetic connection between them.

Interestingly, this whole issue of boundaries translates into how people relate to each other without horses. This is where the horses become Equine Coaches. While I worked with Lisa and Tibor on their boundaries while riding and jumping, I was also preparing Tibor for his Equine Coaching. How the clients perceived their 'space' in the relationships in their lives creates a parallel in how they perceive their 'space' and boundaries in working with the Equine Coaches. It is much easier to see this behavior in a round pen than in a complex relationship!

## PHASE II

### Alternative Therapies

Once Fergie, our dressage horse, felt safe and was willing to stand quietly for her grooming I was able to begin the energetic work with her. As part of my holistic approach to preparing a horse for Equine Assisted Coaching and performance, I introduce alternative therapies to go deeper into addressing both the physical and non-physical aspects of the horses. Through techniques such as Reiki, Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) and energy balancing, I can begin to connect and impact the horse on different levels.

Remembering Fergie's limited ability to stand still I began with short 15–20 minute sessions and over time expanded them to an hour. She couldn't handle the intensity of my hands on her so initially I worked on her from a distance without actually touching her. With each session she became more and more trusting in the process and began to really enjoy this new way of interacting with a human. Eventually Fergie would actually point to the locations on her body where she wanted me to put my hands for the energy work!

Tibor loves attention, so the energy work was a big hit

with him. The challenge here, again, was to create a connection that was strong enough to maintain Lisa's boundaries. Although a seemingly gregarious horse, he is very sensitive—so Lisa incorporated the energy work at a distance as well. Through this intimate work with no expectations, she and Tibor were able to develop an 'agreed upon space' for their interactions. This became an excellent way to prepare for our jumping lessons.

**Lisa and her retired eventer, their resident equine coach.**



## PHASE III

### Under Saddle and Performance Enhancements

After a couple of weeks of ground and energy work it was time to apply everything we had done to riding. Contrary to popular belief, this doesn't mean abandoning the ground and energy work! These are a continual and consistent part of the Equine Alchemy herd training program—for coaching or riding.

I began with Fergie by revisiting the ground work prior to mounting. When I do this work on a longe line or with a rope halter and line, I look for softness through the transitions or yielding to pressure from my body energetically, making sure that emotionally and mentally she is there—that her head is connected to her feet and she isn't in flight or fight mode. I went through a check list watching for reactions or responses to our conversation through aides in all three gaits and on either side. Once she responded to them in an acceptable manner then I knew it was time to mount up.

From here her work under saddle was very traditional. She actually came to me with great training. We simply needed to re-clarify those aids while working through her insecurities. Fergie's issue with trust manifested itself with contact. She would become claustrophobic with what would be considered a soft contact. This behavior was consistent to her reaction in the trailer and other situations of "confinement." Once I had a good understanding of her contact threshold I was able to work in and out of it, similar to the ground work, until I was able to gain her trust while still maintaining contact. This

appropriate responses to her cues as well as the internal picture and feeling of that expectation. We dissected the aids to the simplest level so that it became extremely clear to Tibor what the language would be between the two of them. This gave Lisa the muscle memory she needed before we started to interlace the pieces together. We also continued to look at the internal dialogue she had as she was going through the learning process.

Any improvements in performance came from the strength of the relationship that Lisa and Tibor developed. Starting from scratch when he arrived from Holland and working from the ground enabled Lisa to step into being a horse person as opposed to someone who rides. Through working with Johanna and her methodology, she became more independent as a rider and began to feel what was happening with Tibor and respond accordingly. She could create the energy underneath her that took her over jumps and courses with confidence and power. This different level of awareness and connectedness with Tibor created a different relationship between horse and rider. Because of that relationship Tibor wants to take care of Lisa over jumps and in situations where they need to

'dance' together; sometimes her giving direction and sometimes letting Tibor do his job. Instilling clear direction and boundaries, being open to feeling what was happening and then refining those directives made Tibor easier off the aids, more present and trusting and able to follow Lisa's leadership. This in turn created an ease and flow of the ride through an entire course with fluidity and balance.

The training we do isn't about changing the horses into something we want them to be. It is about looking at and understanding the inappropriate behaviors, mitigating them, exploring causes behind the behaviors, and correcting them all in the service of supporting

the horses to be who they inherently are, which in turn leads to higher performance. Engaging in this process naturally develops trust and relationship. It is from this place of partnership that incredible accomplishments can be made!



**Lisa riding Tibor preparing for a jump ahead.**

again developed a consensual relationship that embodied respect and trust for one another.

With Tibor, once Lisa was able to establish the clarity and congruency of intention on the ground we took it under saddle. We worked on firmly establishing the

On their way to becoming coaches, our horses advance to a level of refinement where aids and cues move from physical to energetic. Imagine what it would be like to move a horse by simply bringing up your energy in your own body! By working with Fergie and Tibor in this way we have gotten to a point in our riding where they will respond to the mere thought of a movement. I believe that many top riders have this with their horses, however it can be difficult to teach to an amateur rider that does not have the luxury of time in the saddle. If they can start to feel that connection on the ground then they can start to incorporate it under saddle.

## PHASE IV

### Equine Assisted Coaching

Equine Assisted Coaching is about personal development. It is about creating the place for people to explore their patterns with themselves and in relationships and how these patterns are impacting their lives.

Why horses? Horses are the ultimate coaches in human development. Because they are preyed upon in nature, these sensitive, mindful creatures have maintained a highly developed ability to respond to their environment. Subtle changes and nuances that we may not be aware of can provoke behaviors in them that give us information about ourselves. Their immediate feedback to our interactions with them helps us identify behaviors of our own that impact our lives, relationships and careers in a negative way or keep us from moving forward.

How does this work? The heart's electromagnetic field is 5,000 times greater than the brain's. This means that we are interacting with our environment emotionally before our brain can rationalize this. Horses, with their sophisticated sensory systems, connect with us within this electromagnetic field and, through their feedback to what they sense, make conscious what is unconscious, or below the surface for us.

Because horses reveal to us things we human coaches can't see, the benefits to the client in working with an equine coach are several. Here are a few:

- Become aware of patterns of behavior that are working for and against us so we can take more powerful action in our lives
- Helps develop what Equine Alchemy calls energetic agility, or being fully present, enabling you to see more than just the physical. This means having the ability to move with the emotions and energy of any situation—responding to life's interactions vs. reacting to them.
- Learn how to engage in your life from the head, the heart and the gut
- Be more fully present in your relationships and interactions in your life

**"Their immediate feedback to our interactions with them helps us identify behaviors of our own that impact our lives, relationships and careers ..."**

As demonstrated with Tibor and Fergie, not all horses are in the right state to do this work when they first came to us. Using Johanna's four step holistic approach of developing them for equine coaching, we worked to get them to a point where they could become coaching partners in Equine Facilitated Coaching. This included:

- A horse that is fully present, not dissociated, and safe to work with
- Having a clear understanding of their innate characteristics along with their man made ones and how to relate to them from that place
- A relationship built upon trust and respect
- Being able to work with humans on an energetic level—no tools, at liberty. 

■ **LISA MURRELL** is an ICF certified coach, Advanced Epona Instructor and author of *Inspiring Real Change; Using Systemic Experiential Learning to Develop Systems, Organizations, Teams and Individuals*. Co-founder of MetaSystem Consulting Group, ([metacg.com](http://metacg.com)) and founder of Equine Alchemy, ([equinealchemy.com](http://equinealchemy.com)). Lisa is the creator of the cutting edge Coaching and Equine Assisted Coaching Coach Training Programs.



■ **JOHANNA HUSTA** is a professional dressage trainer who started her riding career at the age of five in the hunters and jumpers. She has 15 years experience as a technical lead position in a large corporation before chronic Lyme disease ended her career and put her on a path to follow her passion and develop her gifts for working with horses. She is the creator of 'Elemental Dressage,' a holistic approach to training and riding for optimal performance.

