

Monty Roberts Speaks the Language of Equus

by Vicki Hanson



For anyone who has ever witnessed it, the brutal scene in the classic 1961 film *The Misfits* in which Clark Gable fights a wild stallion at the end of a rope indelibly defines a thousand similar struggles between man and horse. But this Western also gives us a surprising break with tradition — Gable's character suddenly frees the animal, acknowledging finally that destroying its spirit murders something in ourselves.

This has been the message of **Monty Roberts (ASCI '59, Boots and Spurs '86 honoree)** for most of his 62 years.

Exposed to the world of horse training and rodeo competition throughout his youth, he sought a different direction from his father's methods of tying up horses to "break" them. He developed instead the gentle craft of "starting" young horses, using a body language he calls "Equus" that he learned as a 13-year-old studying mustangs in the Nevada desert.

Roberts has catalogued his methods in his bestseller, *The Man Who Listens to Horses* (Random House, 1997), magazine articles, and shows like *Dateline NBC*. These methods are deceptively simple: Wearing his trademark tweed cap, he stands in the middle of a round pen,

Roberts works with a racehorse fearful of the starting gate. (Photo by Doug Allen)



Roberts and his wife, Pat, a well-known horsewoman and Western artist. (Photo by Karen Foster-Wells)

facing a nervous young horse backed against a wall. He flicks a light cotton lunge line at the horse's heels, reinforcing its instincts to "go away a lot." As the horse's fear subsides, it signals that it's ready to negotiate: cocking an ear, chewing its lips, lowering its head, and finally following Roberts around the pen until "join-up," when both man and horse stop and Roberts strokes the horse's forehead soothingly, talking reassuringly.

Often within half an hour, Roberts goes on to run his hands over the horse's vulnerable areas (back, belly, flanks), pick up each of its feet, then slowly add a pad and saddle and eventually a rider. Without the use of force, horse


and man are cooperating.

Roberts has successfully started thousands of young horses, including royal mounts for Queen Elizabeth II, and helps rehabilitate mistreated and "remedial" horses. He gives horse clinics worldwide and offers demonstrations at his own Flag Is Up Farms, a world-class Thoroughbred racehorse operation near Solvang.

Students from the Cal Poly horse program — one of the best nationwide — frequently visit Flag Is Up. "The main thing Monty Roberts has *generously* given students is the opportunity to work with horses — not just a one-time gift, but over and over," says Animal Science Professor Roger Hunt, who established Cal Poly's

horse enterprise project and served as horse unit manager for 10 years.

Senior Equine Specialist Mike Lund, who teaches equine classes with Hunt and Animal Science Professor Gene Armstrong, agrees. "Monty has always been open to having students watch his join-up method, which he's been doing for years," says Lund. "And he's a successful role model — he shows kids that all you have to do is use some initiative and thought."

"The fundamental goal of my work is to create a greater understanding in the area of communication," says Roberts, "human to animal, and human to human. My primary desire is to leave the world a better place for both horses and people." 

Please see interview with Monty Roberts on the following page.

The following interview with Monty Roberts was held on a bright day in mid-December 1997 at his Flag Is Up Farms in Solvang, California.

CAL POLY MAGAZINE: How far back does your connection with Cal Poly go?

MONTY ROBERTS: I first came down from Salinas in 1949 on a high school FFA field day and stayed in the ag farm shop on a Navy bunkbed. The horse courses at Cal Poly were just getting started [under Bob Gibford]. I kept coming three or four times a year. I lived on campus, keeping horses there, riding horses, helping out.

After graduating from Hartnell [Junior College] in 1955, I enrolled

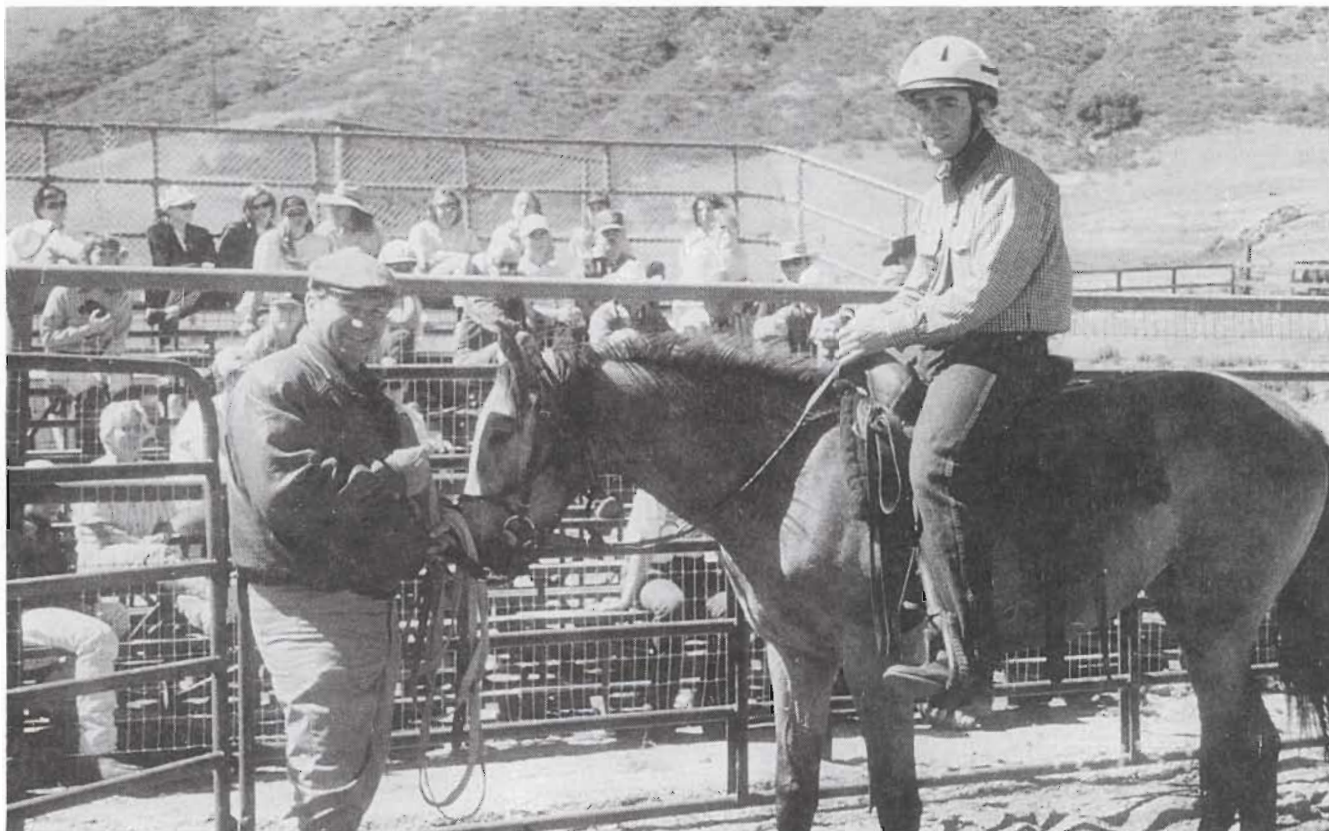
with a triple major at Cal Poly: biological sciences, to get as much of the psychology and biological aspects of my work as I could; farm management, because I had a lot of related units from Hartnell; and an animal science major. I joined the rodeo club and won two national championships as well as many regional [ones].

I was married after my first year at Cal Poly. We had a little Western store at the corner of Broad and Foothill and a few horses in training. Pat was a 100 percent partner, sitting in the

store, doing the books for the training operation, helping me with school. And later, raising our three children [daughters Debbie and Laurel and son Marty], and showing horses. The degree to which I've succeeded is directly proportionate to the help she gave me.

CPM: There were many Cal Poly graduates from the 1950s who made their mark in the horse world.

MR: Yes — It was a vintage crop



Trevor Harper, Cal Poly senior mechanical engineering student, worked with Roberts to start a filly for the Thoroughbred enterprise project. "The most valuable thing I learned was subtle eye contact," Harper says. (Photo courtesy Roger Hunt)

that included **Bill Stroud [ASCI '58]**, now a vocational ag adviser in Paso Robles, and **Jack Varian [ASCI '58]**, who has gone on to have big ranching operations throughout California. At one time virtually all of us rented places on O'Connor Way, the back road to the Army camp, where we had room for horses. At least five people living in that little canyon went on to become world [rodeo] champions.

In '59 I began to operate Laurellinda, a professional horse training operation in Edna Valley financed by Homer Mitchell, a San Joaquin Valley cotton farmer. But I [kept my involvement with] Cal Poly, because Mr. Gibford and Mr. Bob Miller, my adviser, kept sending me students.

Many have gone on to wonderful things. [Among them are] **Lee Smith [AGB '66]**, now one of the major heads of agricultural banking in Nevada; **Johnny Miller [ASCI '54]**, who went on to be World's Champion Cowboy and now has his own operation in Scottsdale; and [former Cal Poly student] **Crawford Hall**, who has run Flag Is Up for 25 years — I couldn't have hired a better manager.

In 1966 I moved down here [to Solvang]. Roger Hunt worked with me for a year and then there followed a stream of interns, both formal and informal, including one exchange student from India,

Satish Seemar, who is now running the world's largest Thoroughbred operation.

CPM: What would you say are the most important lessons you've learned from your horse training methods?

MR: First, to allow any creature the right to fail, but to hold them accountable for their actions. Without that, they cannot succeed. Second, no one has the right to say "you must" to any other creature, animal or human. Not governments or parents or teachers.

The contracts I make [with horses] give the positive consequences of certain actions as well as the negative ones. I tell them, "Do whatever you want, but if you want to walk over there while I'm asking you to come over here, then walk over there a lot," and I send them cantering in circles for a while. When they're ready to move toward me, I offer them fellowship.

CPM: Your techniques appear to be rooted in the notion of surrender rather than domination, which is the usual way humans do business.

MR: You put your finger square on it. The human species, if it can rule by domination, generally does. If we have an opportunity



Crawford Hall, former Cal Poly student and long-time manager of Monty Roberts' Flag Is Up Farms, believes all creatures have a right to their own perceptions: "We need to ask ourselves, 'If I were living in this horse's body, how would I perceive what is going on?'" (Photo by Doug Allen)

[to use negotiation or force], we generally use force. But ultimately violence has a greater price than the problem it tries to solve. Right now [the Earth] has the greatest chance it has ever had to eliminate violence. [All the world's powerful nations] are professing not to want violence now — we could sign a peace pact under the United Nations and agree never to use violence again.

CPM: Your book has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 18 weeks and as of this week is number two. What has captured all those readers?

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MR: The book strikes a chord about how people conduct their relationships with other human beings. The letters that have come in here — stacks of them — are changing from those mainly from horse people to letters from teenagers, bosses and employees, and husbands and wives.

CPM: You believe that people and animals and countries all share a common identity?

MR: Yes — I believe firmly that nature created a mosaic of [all creatures], and that everything dovetails so incredibly well that it couldn't have happened accidentally. There must have been an architect. But we as human beings have had the upper

hand, and we have created chasms between the species.

CPM: If you look back through history, the horse is everywhere: Bucephalus dying and Alexander weeping, all our great men shown on horseback. What is the particular significance of the horse?

MR: Opposites attract. We are fight animals and the horse is a flight animal — he resorts to violence only as a defense. And the horse plows our fields, clothes us, carries us, pulls our wagons. And he does all these things for us in spite of us telling him for 6,000 years, "You do what I tell you to, or I'll hurt you."

CPM: So you think the horse is

man's best friend?

MR: Oh, I do. Without the horse the United States would've been another 50 to 75 years happening.

CPM: What do you feel when you're talking to horses?

MR: What I feel mostly is apologetic that no one else may be listening. I wonder how I can take their message to people who claim that horses don't even have a message.

CPM: What is the horse's message?

MR: "You don't have to hurt me. I will do for you, and you don't have to hurt me." ☐



Photo by Doug Allen