



# NAHSHON COOK

## And the Advantages of Attending a Clinic

By Katrina Hays Photos By Steven McBurnett



*We jump into the deep end of the clinic pool with the first horse of the morning. Eight a.m. and most of us are still clutching our first cup of caffeinated goodness, but the man in the arena—bundled in winter Carhartt bibs and jacket, a gold hoody and gold wool beanie—is focused, energetic, and very, very present.*

“What do you feel in your body when she gets stiff?” he asks the woman who has led in a Quarab mare with kissing spines. The horse has a pinched expression. She is braced, and her head is turned away from the human. Her hind legs stab the dirt as she walks, and her back has a strong downward curve behind her withers.

When the woman puts her hand on own low back, the man says, “What can you do in your body to change that? Just breathe. The simplicity of breath is a miracle.”

The woman places her hand on her heart, and he says, “Spread your feet, breathe into your whole body. Warm the base of your neck and your back, make them hot. Allow your body to feel completely safe.”

As the woman closes her eyes, the trainer turns to us and says, “I’m convinced every biomechanical problem in a horse is connected to the human’s emotional state.”

He has the woman lead her horse in a circle that becomes a slow walk-halt meditation across the whole covered arena. The mare stretches her head to the ground repeatedly. She pauses often, licking her lips, then begins yawning. Under the trainer’s guidance, for the next hour the woman heats up parts of her own body, creating a mental picture of comfort and safety, and the auditors in the clinic watch the mare’s body changes in response.

“Let your throat and chest be filled with sunshine,” says the trainer.

The mare buckles at the knees, has a long roll, stands up, and shakes off dirt. The woman is crying quietly and when the horse leads her back to where 30-plus auditors sit huddled under blankets on a chilly, wet Oregon morning, it is absolutely clear the mare’s back has lifted and straightened noticeably. Her hind legs swing and no longer drag. Her demeanor is calm and she turns to her person, noses her chest, bumping aside the hand that has been resting on her heart.

The auditors gasp.

“You see how willing she is to go where you go?” the trainer says. “We begin to see how the physical body of the horse is affected by the human mind. It’s wild. You created this space of healing by being present, and the holiness of this work with horses lies in not being afraid to wait in presence. We heat up the hurt and tension in our bodies and they release it in their bodies. You can play with that power; it’s a toy. It’s a gift we all have.”

He pauses, and then says, “Horses are miracles. And so are we.”

The trainer looks down, serious and considering, then lifts his face to meet the silent wonder of the observers, his huge grin lighting up the morning. “Well! We really jumped into it, didn’t we? Next horse!”

In a snap, we are released into laughter and head-shaking. Welcome to a clinic with Nahshon Cook, where we would spend two days learning about horsemanship as a practice of listening and light, peace and joy.



## CLINIC, CLINIC, CLINIC

In a nutshell, a clinic is a group meeting devoted to solving problems or acquiring specific skills. In horse circles, clinics give many people the ability to work with a person whose skill levels are very high, and who can offer a different perspective or technique to help the attendee move forward along the ever-expanding path of horse-human understanding and ability.

The benefits of attending clinics are myriad: You get to work with, or closely observe the work of, a person you admire who does not live in your geographical location. You can get a different take from a talented professional on a stubborn problem you've been struggling with. You can get new ideas to play with to improve your relationship with your equine. You can get an objective evaluation as to where you currently are in your work with your partner.

Horse folk are—or should be—lifelong learners. At bottom,



by attending a clinic you learn. Clinics are wonderful places to take on new information. If you don't feel up to being the one standing with the pony in the middle of the arena, enduring the full scrutiny of the trainer and the pressure of watching eyes, you can almost always choose to audit a clinic, thereby gobbling up a ton of information and saving a lot of money. Truly, there is no downside to attending a clinic this year. Even if you ultimately do not agree with what you see or hear, there is value in getting just a bit clearer about where your personal North Star of training and relating to your horse is located. Not agreeing can actually be informative about your work, your process, and your heart for your partner.

## WHO IS NAHSHON COOK

"Poet" perhaps isn't the first word that typically springs to mind in association with "horseman," but Nahshon is perhaps foremost a poet in regard to his teaching and relationships with equines. Poets are, by nature, people who enter into and reflect the numinous realm of humanity, that mysterious area of spirituality, higher emotions, or aesthetic sense all humans are aware of at some level. Not only is he a writer—his poetic musings are often found in *Eclectic Horseman Magazine*, and he is the author of three books: *Being with Horses*, *Horses See Us As We Are*, and *Meditations From the Muck*—but Nahshon brings a poet's observational clarity and sensitivity to his work as a horseman.

Based in Colorado, as a young trainer Nahshon was given troubled horses, horses with huge physical problems, horses called untrainable—and he found his calling.

"I work with horses that are inconvenient," he says. "They are my teachers."

Nahshon uses the step-by-step principles of classical dressage—rhythm, suppleness, contact, straightness, impulsion, and collection—to develop and strengthen the bodies and minds of those inconvenient horses. He also brings the heart-centered, deep listening practices of a counselor to unwind the mental stressors that often drive behavioral issues in equines.

And within the world of equine inconvenience he also discovered humans who were desperate to connect with their horse partners; people who needed help rehabilitating their equine relationships and for whom traditional methods of horse training had failed or were incomplete. Despite being extremely private about his life and work, Nahshon developed a quietly rabid fan base of people who have seen the benefits of approaching horse training from a stance of equality, healthy boundaries, and peace.

"My goal is to help horses be healthy and happy," he says. "To do that, I guide people back to their bodies. People need to trust themselves, and then they find the holy with their horses."

## PARTICIPATE? AUDIT?

A good clinician has the ability to meet people where they are, reflecting back what she or he sees and offering clear direction towards improvement—be it technical, emotional, physical, or relational. Some clinics and clinicians focus on a very small area of training—like learning a sliding stop or improving the approach to a fence—and other clinics are broader, where the trainer helps all comers, irrespective of sport, breed, or discipline.

Being a participant has the advantage of providing direct connection with the clinician, having one-on-one focus, and getting specific help. It also can be more stressful to be the one on display, and it can be difficult to manage the hauling, stabling, and preparation needed before entering the arena. Participants at a clinic usually spend six to seven times per lesson to what an auditor will pay to watch each day.

Auditors will almost always find a horse-human pair in the arena that reflects back exactly what is needed with their own horse. Beckie Haynes, a Masterson Method® practitioner of equine bodywork from Oregon, has attended many clinics as both participant and auditor, and says while she has learned a great deal as a participant riding in front of the clinician, the time auditing Nahshon's clinic gave her time to write and reflect, with detailed notes to take back to her own barn and work.

"First, what I appreciated about being an auditor in this clinic was Nahshon took the time to turn to the auditors, check in with us, and ask if we had questions about what he was instructing and sharing with the horse-human pairs.

Second, throughout my two days as an auditor I was able to somewhat capture in writing all these variations of Nahshon's work to take home and reflect on, and hopefully bring with me to my horses. I'm going to ask myself, 'Do I have the courage to feel my emotions and my body? How deep is my breath? Am I clear in my mind about what I want, and am I clearly able to communicate that to my horse? And most importantly, do I trust my horse?'

## STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

"Acceptance is trusting. Trust is relaxation. Relaxation is the practice of peace," says the clinician.

Nahshon's style as a clinician is multi-variant: he is a cheerleader; beloved therapist; and visionary self-help guru. He is a stern headmaster insisting on the pupil's best work; he is a go-go backup dancer celebrating on the stage of the horse and human in the arena. He is a revivalist preacher; and a gospel singer. And he is an orator, using repetition and rhythm to hammer in his message of peace, presence, and the sacred act that is relating to equines in equality and love.

On the second day, after the mare with kissing spines returned to the arena still holding her back straight and strong, after a challenging hour convincing her to accept a bareback pad on her body, and after she walked of her own volition to the mounting block and invited her person to climb aboard, the auditors were clearly in a state of wonder.

Nahshon thanked the mare, scratched her neck and told her she did a good job. He hugged the woman who was again wiping tears from her cheeks. He looked at the auditors and said,

"Horse is our invitation to life. Yeah, a horse is a just a horse. And..."

He paused and seemed to consider his words carefully.

"A horse is what the voice of God looks like embodied," he said. "It is powerful. It is soft and strong. It is healing when it is followed—and it will test you if you follow it. It will lead you to the place where you are hurt and frightened. And it will heal you."

## ATTEND A CLINIC THIS YEAR

Nahshon is not doing clinics in 2025. He says he needs to take the year off to learn.

"My horses are calling me to sit and study right now. My purpose in the world is to help horses. I can't do that if I'm not paying attention."

But there is a slew of clinics being offered in 2025 by talented people teaching every discipline imaginable. Consider challenging yourself to go learn at a clinic—as an auditor or as a participant.

I personally came away from auditing Nahshon Cook's clinic feeling energized. I am joyful about the possibilities to be found in the smallest honest interaction with a horse. I have more toys to play with now, and I'm curious and excited to see what the horses have to say about my new skills and awareness.

At the end of the clinic, Nahshon summed up his philosophy of horsemanship simply:

"To be a good horseperson is to be a good human being," he said. "And don't we all want both these things—for horses and ourselves?"

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