

THE NEXT PARADIGM SHIFTERS

By Katrina Hays Photos by Kylie Bartel

Paradigm shift: noun

A fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions.

A paradigm shift in horsemanship began in the American West in the mid-20th century when Tom Dorrance began showing an effective, gentle way of horse training that emphasized feel and observations of horse behavior over the use of domination. Ray Hunt, Buck Brannaman, and Pat Parelli are notable figures who pushed that message out into the world, teaching humans and their relieved equines what became known as “natural horsemanship.”

Today, who are the teachers continuing this arc of what we can call “horse-humanship”? Who are the thinkers encouraging us to see, train, and relate to horses from a grounded, scientific, and more humble platform of curiosity, wisdom, and connection?

This *EH* series interviews just a few of the notable people who are putting the pieces together a little differently and teaching us how to be better for our equines.

JOSH NICHOL

Teaching the art of awareness and connection.

There's a working cowboy in Alberta, Canada, who inherited and expanded Tom Dorrance's lessons on how humans can feel horses, helping us improve our abilities to build healthy relationships with them. His name is Josh Nichol, and his training methods prioritize understanding and empowerment—for both the equine and the person.

Josh is a horseman who can reference *The Alchemist*, the mindfulness practices of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, and his love of rodeo in a single sentence. As a trainer and clinician, Josh teaches humans to reach inward and talk to a horse about how he feels inside by understanding what is going on inside of us. Emotional intelligence grounds his work.

TEACHING FEEL

“My process rests on awareness,” says Josh. “We need awareness of what is happening within us. We need awareness of what's happening outside our body. And we need awareness of just how we interact when we connect with another being.”

“Feel” is a controversial cornerstone term in horsemanship. Some people insist you either got it or you don't. This kind of thinking leaves the don'ts out in a bare pasture, forever relegated outside the herd, and unable to become a truly competent horseman.





ONGOING SERIES



In reality, feel is a basic human attribute. Feel is the intuitive/psychic (and by psychic I mean awareness of nonphysical forces) ability of all beings to receive and be aware of information that comes from a place other than what we call rational thought. We feel. We receive. We then act in response to what we feel. Everyone has feel, hard stop.

Of course, some need help in turning the rational-thought dial down in volume and turning up the intuitive channel when we're working with horses. Josh's online training platform offers a whole focus course on how to improve feel. Called "28 Days to Feel," the course demystifies the concept of feel and offers simple practices to make it a component of daily routines.

Mindfulness, breathwork, self-improvement—since ancient Greece and Socrates, to know thyself is the first step towards wisdom. Horses, those gracious and remarkable beings who teach by means of reflecting what is going on inside the humans who work with them, require our wisdom to carry them forward in this complicated world. That base requirement means we must know ourselves, know what drives us, and know what is going on within in order to create a healthy and forward-going relationship.

"You cannot separate personal growth from horsemanship," says Josh. "How you are as a person dictates the success you have with horses and people in life."

DO COOL THINGS WITH YOUR HORSE

Lest this all sound a bit heady and not applicable to, you know, actual practical horsemanship, remember that Josh comes from a place where horses are working partners of humans. Although being a clinician and teaching people currently consume a great deal of his time, his community and family life center around ranching, cattle, and rodeo. Whether it be learning the deliberate work of roping calves for branding or training for the explosive leap and light turn of a good barrel horse, developing working equine partners that are agile, stable, and sensible is the ultimate goal of Josh's training and teaching.

"You want to do cool things with your horse," Josh exclaims. "You want your horse to be able to handle life, because when he is confident in himself he can do amazing things."

Josh, 45, has a boyish face behind his beard, and when he grins he looks like a little kid. "Horses are fun! I want folks to remember that. We can get so serious about our horses, and we should be focused on their well-being, but ultimately we want to be able to do stuff, even hard stuff, with them."

MAPPING THE BODY, MAPPING THE MIND

Just like people, horses store tension in their bodies. Tension can be understood as dormant behavior that comes to the surface when pressure is applied. These behaviors can prevent horse-human teams from moving forward in training and usually labels the horse as "being naughty" or "being a jerk."

People often have a hard time understanding what it means to feel the internal elements of a horse. Josh has a technique he calls "body mapping," to teach us to locate the specific areas in the horsebody where the equine carries its tension. Body mapping uses a progressive assessment of tensions in the head and neck, shoulders, and hind end of the horse that comes through the rein/lead rope and is received via intuition and felt in the human body.

At a clinic in drizzly, cold Central California last November, Cynthia Wright walked in with a slender, dark bay Westphalian Warmblood mare, that shied from the jump standards in the corner and giraffed her head straight up at the sound and sight of the auditors on the rail, her eyes and nostrils round.

Josh relaxed against the temporary round pen that had been set up in the center of the large arena and watched the eight-year-old mare tiptoe across the top of the dirt like a ballerina in toe shoes, her tail clamped to her buttocks.

"This mare is holding her feelings in and doesn't yet know how to process them." His voice was calm over the loudspeaker. "When she can no longer contain them, she 'pops.' When horses carry too much tension or anxiety, even the smallest trigger can

feel like a big deal. This is why we often want to make a horse's world smaller—because they haven't yet learned how to manage pressure in a connected, calm, and empowering way."

Cynthia carried a small flag in her left hand. She began moving through the body-mapping movements, asking the mare first to lower her head, and then applying a little pressure behind with the flag until she released.

"That was easy for her," said Josh. "Now go to the shoulders."

Cynthia's face was intent. Her flag pressure was tactful. The mare's body still radiated tension, but it was clear she was trying, not dodging the conversation. As Cynthia and her mare walked in circles, she asked the horse to release laterally from her shoulders using the lead rope and flag. The mare's strides lengthened, but her body still looked inaccessible. Josh asked Cynthia to talk to her hind end and simultaneously attend to her own energy.

"You're being real precise, which I appreciate, but can you feel how your energy is leaving your body?" he asked. "Can you ask yourself to let your energy flow into her?"

Cynthia took a deep breath and visibly relaxed. She turned her attention to the mare's hindquarters. The pair began moving again, and within a half-circle the mare's topline melted, her tail unclamped, and she started to lick and chew. The jump standards were still there, the auditors were still moving and talking, but the horse had found, through the slight pressure of the flag and the energy of her person, a way to deal with what had been causing her anxiety.

When asked later how she understood her mare's release of tension in the hind end, Cynthia hesitated, then said, "It's hard to describe, but I felt her release in my body."

"Yes!" said Josh. "That's the receiving state, where you get this energetic flow of information from one being to another. It's wild, but once you understand it with your horse, you don't want anything else."

VULNERABILITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Josh's work and teaching rest on a foundational belief that a person must be conscious and present to create a space where the horse willingly gives the gift of its body. He speaks of a crossroad that horse folk need to choose: Do you demand the horse's submission without your growth, or does your growth help you develop more capacity to connect and honor their gift?

In many ways, it's a huge ask of the human to make the choice to do the work to understand what subtle information is coming not from only the horse, but from yourself. "Vulnerability" and "authenticity" can be viewed merely as trendy terms on social media, but to stand in the presence of your horse and be mindful of everything you are showing them is an awesome task.

Josh himself had to face that and learn to change himself and be aware of his thoughts around horses. "The most powerful thing I learned was when I realized I could set the energetic tone—decide how I responded—in any situation. That turned my horsemanship loose."

Most everyone reading this magazine has already made a choice not to force a horse to submit to our will. How much deeper are we willing to look within in order to create a shared space with our horses that honors both beings in the relationship? This is the deep work of excellent horse-human-ship.

According to stories shared in the book, *More Than a Horseman*, as a young man Tom Dorrance wasn't all that fond of people. But in his later years something shifted, and he began actively working to help folks help their horses emotionally, physically, and mentally. A few decades later on, Josh Nichol is continuing that paradigm shift in horse-human-ship, challenging us to do the work to be the best, most aware, and honest person we can be for our horses, instead of putting the burden of change solely on them.

THREE QUESTIONS

What is a horse?

"Some animals provide support, others comfort, and others only visual pleasure. The horse is a growth creature."

"Horse people grow and develop because of the horse. This animal is not simply a part of our lives; horses are deeply embedded into the fabric of how we exist in life."

"Horses are part of my existence, my spirit, my church, and my growth. They have inspired me to be a better person, showed me holes I wouldn't have seen without them. They give me wings, with power and speed that only comes through mutual trust, and they show me what vulnerability looks like."

"Horses are an expression of what relationships are built on, and what being a better person looks like. I have horse blood running through my veins and feel they have been what has unlocked my growth and success in life."

"They are not just an animal. There is a deeper connection between horses and humans that we are all still unpacking."

Who are you?

"I'm a student of life, learning as I go and doing my best to stay open to where life is taking me."

What do you hope people take away from this interview?

"That you can have a great relationship with horses and chase your dreams with them at the same time!"

MORE INFORMATION

• joshnichol.com

Watch Josh discuss the "universal language" of awareness and connection.