



# *THE HORSE WHISPERER*

WITH A GENTLE, YET FIRM  
APPROACH, DANISH MIA  
LYKKE NIELSEN IS AMONG  
THE MOST POPULAR ON THE  
INTERNATIONAL SCENE OF  
NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP.

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In a green paddock, surrounded by trees in full bloom and overlooked by three very inquisitive llamas in a neighbouring field, Mia Lykke Nielsen is walking through the tall grass with a white Andalusian stallion by her side. Even though the pink-muzzled gentleman is all springtime testosterone and raw muscle power, he's following the equine behaviour therapist around freely without a halter or bridle, like a big, attentive puppy. Then she jumps on his back with no tack and rides him around in circles and serpentines. It's like watching the ultimate pony girl dream brought to life: To be able to control a massive, unharnessed stallion (silver wavy Barbie horse mane included, of course) with just a few subtle movements and absolutely no force.

"If I use tack, I don't feel like I really believe in it," Mia explains. "I've got no problem with riders who use bits – you can't compete at Grand Prix level on a bitless dressage horse – but for me, I need to know the horse is with me and that I'm the leader no matter what. I want the horse to choose to do something freely. Once it does that, then we get the delicate, invisible riding which we all aspire to." This idea of the horse being a willing partner infuses every part of her unique training method. Called *When Horses Choose*, it was inspired by the behavioural patterns Mia witnessed working with herds of wild horses in California in her late teens, and is currently attracting a lot of attention in equestrian circles.

"All horses are horses, and we need to meet them with that in mind," Mia explains. "In a herd, horses live in a hierarchy where a leader controls and protects the herd. All horses want to know where their place is within that hierarchy in order to survive and feel safe. If there's potential danger, everyone will look to the leader, and if he keeps grazing, no one will act on it. As soon as the horse realises you're not a predator, it will want to know where it stands in relation to you. By taking leadership, we make the horse feel relaxed because it doesn't have to worry about any dangers." And if we don't take leadership? "Then it's the horse calling the shots, and the horse won't know that that snake-looking horse isn't dangerous. And then it escalates."

As a self-professed "ambassador of the horse" who never says no to taking on a steed – no matter how difficult – Mia is a key figure in a larger international wave of natural horsemanship. From her Danish farm in southwest Zealand, she trains, rehabilitates and backs horses for clients and also travels around Europe giving lectures and holding clinics. Today, on a glorious April morning, the 36-year-old trainer is at Lomond Classical Riding Centre in Surrey, England, where she has just held a weekend clinic. Strapping Lusitano stallions are being groomed in the warm sunshine, and in the outdoor arena, Mia, in black breeches and a tailored shirt, is demonstrating her technique on a chestnut gelding that had recently developed a delightful habit of turning round to bite the rider's leg and refusing to move.

Mia always begins her sessions by releasing the horse with no halter, and those first few minutes will tell her a lot about the horse's psyche. If it runs around and tries to dominate the space rather than seek her out willingly, she restricts its movements to a corner area. "I don't chase the horse around, because I've never seen a wild leader horse do that in order

to establish its position in the hierarchy. Instead, the leader horse will push an unruly horse into a corner or restricted space, or alternatively send it a couple of steps outside the herd, something you also see in paddocks with tame horses. The corner I establish isn't a form of punishment but a safe haven that allows the horse to withdraw from the training if it becomes mentally overwhelming. I want the horse to choose to come out of that corner and choose me." While she is speaking, the gelding puts his head down and walks over to her.

The next step is to get the horse to follow her around in walk and trot, stopping when she stops and allowing her to touch him all over, including inside the ears. "Ears are a feel-ometer," she says with a giggle. "If you can touch a horse there, you can touch him anywhere and you know he's not defensive. The ears are their most vulnerable place. They need them in order to listen for predators and communicate." Finally, she tests if he'll let her jump on his back without showing resistance. With some horses it might take 50 tries, but this chestnut has reacted remarkably quickly and positively to being given a choice.

"From a dressage point of view, the improvement I saw in one day was remarkable," comments Iñigo Ansorena, the Lomond Centre's head rider and advanced instructor. "This morning I rode him and he was fantastic. At first, it all seemed a bit hippie-ish, but you have to try new things, especially when nothing else works. Mia lets the horse think and choose, and she doesn't use strength. Now I see that the horse listens to me. It has opened up a completely new world for me."

Mia is used to her approach being greeted with scepticism, initially at least. "I think some people find it a bit mumbo jumbo. Iñigo told me he was worried I'd make him ride bareback from now on, but that's not what I want at all. On the contrary, I want him to compete more and ride bigger tests. I don't care whether people use their horse for barrel racing or jumping, as long as the horse is happy and harmonious. This is a way to make your horse deliver more. It may seem like you have to spend a lot of time running around with your horse, but you also save a lot of time later on by eliminating bad behavioural patterns."

Above all, we should pay attention to what the horse is telling us rather than just ploughing on with what we want, Mia explains as we pull up a couple of chairs in the shade of the stable buildings. "Most of the time, resistance will be a behavioural issue, but a lot of problems also stem from pain, and people don't notice." Mia speaks from bitter experience. Years ago, she worked with a large Danish Warmblood who would act up when ridden. His withers looked raised and he trembled to the touch, but two vets gave him the all clear, so she continued his training and he eventually stopped resisting. Two years later, the owner called. An x-ray in relation to a hind-leg problem showed a broken neck vertebra that had been there all along.

"That was when I realised it was possible for us to silence horses. The horse had cried out but I'd basically said shut up, because the vets told me there was nothing wrong. To this day, I take the horse's word over that of any vet. He was such an amazing horse and it hurt me so much that I was part of what happened to him. It still hurts," she says, tearing up a little. "Today, I have an amazing vet who goes the extra mile." It's clear that Mia's innate love of horses has always been there. From the age of five, she was in the saddle, taking lessons

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## It's about producing safe HORSES AND STRONG FOUNDATIONS. The kind of foundations that will make your horse JUMP TEN PER CENT HIGHER and win because they're happy AND HAVE CHOSEN TO DO IT.

at local riding clubs near her home in the Copenhagen suburb of Ishøj. "I really wanted to connect with these animals, but I kept outgrowing the ponies and I didn't really like the harsh way the ponies were often treated – you know, smacking them if they acted up. As a child, that's tough to witness."

At the age of 13, she was offered a part share in a large and boisterous Fjord horse. He'd bolt towards other horses on hacks or buck her off, and she'd spend hours trying to catch him. "We tried to put a harder bit on him so I'd be able to hold him, but once he ran there was nothing I could do. He taught me that our muscles and a bit mean nothing. He was the leader and did whatever he wanted, but I loved him," she laughs. After a short-lived stint at an agricultural college, Mia got a job as a horsemanship trainee with Elisabeth and Fritz Haug, a Danish couple who bred and sold Icelandic horses on a large ranch in California's Santa Ynez Valley, where natural horseman legend Monty Roberts also has a farm.

Here, 360 horses roamed free on a thousand acres of mountainous land. "I arrived thinking I was going to be a horse trainer, but Elisabeth took one look at me and told me that wasn't going to happen right now with my erratic riding-school body language. Elisabeth was tough as nails and so cool." Instead, 17-year-old Mia was put in charge of trekking across the thousand acres of land every day to check off all 300-plus horses from a list to make sure there were no injuries – or deaths by mountain lions or rattlesnakes. Faced with ten pages of names with colours and birth dates next them, this seemed like mission impossible, until Mia realised that all the horses tended to stick together into smaller, set herds.

Within each one, there would be a horse with a characteristic marking or colour, which quickly enabled her to set up a system and match names with horses, and she'd sing quietly as she walked around the land so they'd hear her coming and not get spooked. For two years, she watched closely and made mental notes of their behaviour. "If I close my eyes and have to meditate, I always conjure up an image of walking around out there. It gave me a sense of peace and so much knowledge." One day, her boss finally agreed to let her back and school her first horse, a mare that had been bought by a client. "Normally, there'd be eight of us to round up a small herd and get them on the trailer in order to get one particular horse, but I was on my own."

Three months later, after endless coaxing and some strategically placed fencing, she got her mare. Back in the round pen, she tried to emulate the Elisabeth Haug's methods, but Elisabeth told her to scrap all that and dig deep into the knowledge she'd gained from observing the dominant horses in the herds. This became the starting point of her entire philosophy for *When Horses Choose*. "Today, whenever I've come across a problem I always return to the wild horses. Of course I've looked at Monty Roberts and Pat Parelli and all the greats, but I think what I do is freer. I establish trust and a way for the horse to say yes or no." A year later, after backing 50 horses, Mia returned home and bought a farm, thinking people would be lining up to get help. They didn't.

"Back then, Danes weren't very open to horsemanship ideas, so I only got the horses that everyone else had given up on – the ones who attacked or had major girthing issues, but still had a value that saved them from being put down." Along the way, she accumulated seven horses whose owners had thrown in the towel. Slowly, the tide turned. Today, she has a full calendar and receives a large percentage of competition horses for

fine-tuning, while a growing number of professional riders send their youngsters to Mia for backing, which she does with her less-is-more approach. Starting out with no bit or saddle, she only introduces tack when she's sure the horse doesn't show any tension. "It's wonderful to be able to create a great foundation for them from the beginning."

With only one apprentice and a lot of work, it's a seven-days-a-week job for Mia, with clients calling at all hours. "I see my friends and family, but there is a lot of horse," she smiles. Why does she think we're seeing such a steadily growing interest in natural horsemanship? Aside from a general trend towards holistic thinking and animal welfare, Mia points to the emotional factor: "I suppose it hits us in our hearts, or at least I hope it does. Natural horsemanship can be a bit of a jungle and there are so many different methods, but I hope that when people see that my technique works, it'll help change things."

She continues to test the efficiency of her methods. A couple of years ago, she teamed up with a mustang rescue centre in the United States to train five wild horses in 30 days. Every year, the government rounds up some of the 30,000-strong mustang population, driving them hundreds of kilometres to be freeze-marked, castrated and offered up for auction, scared out of their minds. "And the prospective buyers aren't people with money or horse sense, but the ones who want a pony in the backyard for their kids. It's an accident waiting to happen," Mia says solemnly. "I got up on the podium at an auction and offered my training services for free to five prospective owners." Within a month, she got five wild mustangs to follow her freely everywhere and rode them with just a string around their neck or a hackamore. "The feeling of a wild horse putting its head down and accepting you was deeply moving," she says.

All her experience with the mustangs and the wild Icelandic horses is going into her first book, which she hopes will hit shelves later this year. She's also focusing a lot of her energy on educating future generations, hosting summer camps for kids. "A lot of people comment on how it's dangerous to let children handle horses with no tack, but I think the other way is more dangerous as it creates an illusion of control."

One easy tip that anyone can pick up is Mia's way of dealing with spooking. "You know how some riders coddle their horse when it spooks? They go, 'Poor horsey, let's walk over to the scary bucket and look at it together, come on, one more step.' This doesn't work. A horse is not a child." Instead, Mia will take advantage of the fact that in a herd you'll never see a horse back up unless a dominant horse forces it to do so. "If a horse spooks, I'll back him up two steps and walk on. This makes him feel safe because I'm in charge and a strong leader. People want predictable horses but we're not always very predictable ourselves. We need to have predictable reactions and instil confidence in our horses by being an authority."

So far, she hasn't come across any problems that she couldn't solve. "I just want to spread the message. Of course it takes years to do everything I do, but anyone can learn the basics and put them to effective use right away." For Mia, every frustrated horse or anxious rider she helps is a highlight in her career. "I love the horse's language and I love to bring out the ease," she muses. "It's about producing safe horses and strong foundations. The kind of foundations that will make your horse jump ten per cent higher and win because it's happy and has chosen to do it." •