

The Home Forum.

The secrets of training a circus horse



WHEN SHE WAS 10, Katja Schumann entered the ring for her first performance in the circus her family owned in Denmark. She was a “ballerina on horseback.” Now she is doing what her great-great-grandfather, her father, and all her Danish ancestors in between did: training circus horses. Maybe that’s why she is so good at it.

I’ve come to New York City to watch Ms. Schumann and her horses perform in the Big Apple Circus. As I wait for the show to begin, I’m excited. I can’t wait to see what Schumann will do this year. Last time I saw her, she rode an American buffalo into the ring at the end of the show and asked it to bow!

Schumann enters the ring on a graceful, long-legged chestnut horse. She is wearing a flaming red costume with glittering gold trim. In place of a saddle is a scarlet cloth – she’s riding bareback. More difficult than riding bareback, though, is the fact that her horse has no bridle. Like many native American riders of the past, Katja has only a thin rope around the neck of her spirited mount. There’s no bit in his mouth to help Schumann control him.

Two other horses and riders are also in the ring. Each rider holds the corners of long, wide strips of red silk hung from the top of the circus tent. The horses move in, out, under, and over the huge, billowing folds of fabric. It looks like a graceful dance, but to me it is also a show of the horse trainer’s skill.

Like other animals that are prey rather than predators, horses are naturally skittish. Their eyes are on the sides of their heads, which lets them detect movement over a broad area around them, but otherwise they don’t see very well. They are suspicious of any unfamiliar movement, and their instinct is to run away from anything that frightens them.

So some parts of the act push the limits of a horse’s trust. In one part, a rider grabs a length of silk in each hand and lifts himself off his horse. Using the fabric as gymnastic rings, he does flips over the horse’s back. In another part, a rider uses the silk strips to catapult himself onto the horse’s back from behind.

Another time, a rider canters around the ring, holding the billowing silks, then lifts himself off the horse’s back. (A canter is like a slow gallop.) I can tell that the chestnut horse doesn’t like this part. He tosses his head and shows a little of the whites of his eyes. But he keeps cantering rhythmically as the rider flies around the ring just over the horse’s head. Schumann stands at the center of the ring directing the horse with nothing but a short whip, which she uses the way a teacher uses a pointer.

You have to know each horse as an individual

A typical horse – especially a young, spirited one – would take one look at the flapping fabric and bolt from the ring. How does Schumann get her horses to perform such acts in a noisy, whirling circus environment?

“She has a lot of patience,” says Schumann’s 17-year-old daughter, Katherine. “She finds out how each horse thinks, and she makes it easy for him to do what’s being asked. When he does it, she gives him lots of praise.”

Schumann’s hands are busy during the whole program. She pats, scratches, or rubs her horses to reward them as they complete each task. She knows each horse’s favorite place to be scratched: behind his ears, on his back, or at the base of his neck. She also keeps a few feed cubes handy. Once I saw Schumann spread her arms the

GET TO KNOW THEM, SAYS THIS BIG APPLE CIRCUS TRAINER, AND KNOW HOW TO REWARD THEM.



BERTRAND GUAY/BIG APPLE CIRCUS

AFTER AND BEFORE: Big Apple Circus horse trainer Katja Schumann rides into the ring (top). Note the fluttery, potentially horse-spooking strips of silk and the absence of saddle or bridle. Below, Schumann at a training session in New York.



MAIKE SCHULZ/BIG APPLE CIRCUS

way performers do when they’re welcoming applause. But I noticed that one of her hands ended up near a horse’s mouth – and that he took something from her hand. Soft, soothing words are another reward.

In the morning, I watch Schumann and her famous-trainer father, Max Schumann, work the horses in a practice session. Their voices are very quiet, their hands light and gentle.

“She moves so subtly,” Katherine says of her mother. “And the horses understand her movements. It doesn’t take strength,” she adds. “Strength isn’t going to get you anywhere if the horse isn’t doing what you want him to do.”

In the 1500s, an Italian trainer named Grisone invented harsh metal bits (a bit is a metal bar placed in a horse’s mouth in the gap between its front and back teeth). They were very unlike bits in use today. The idea was to control the horse by force. That is not Katja’s way. She sides with an ancient Greek horse trainer, Xenophon, who wrote, “Anything forced and misunderstood can never be beautiful.” Katja observes each horse closely and tries to understand him as an individual. She makes sure he understands what she’s asking.

After the circus is over, I meet Schumann behind the tent. She leads me through the maze of 60 trailers housing this traveling show. We pop into one for an interview.

Schumann has a four-step training method, she tells me. Step 1: Ask the horse to do something. Step 2: Allow him to do it. Step 3: If he doesn’t do it, tell him to do it. Step 4: If he still doesn’t do it, make sure he does. “And you can’t cheat,” she adds. “You can’t ask him to do something that you won’t be able to make him do.” Schumann is careful not to ask a horse to do something she doesn’t think he’s mentally or physically ready to do. That would destroy the horse’s trust in her.

Make each task easy and pleasant to do

Schumann says the trainer’s relationship to a horse has to be that of a good leader – a leader the horse can trust. Sometimes that’s hard. “Horses aren’t like dogs,” she explains. “You can yell at your dog, and he’ll come back wagging his tail as soon as you let him. But the horse’s instinct is to flee.” By making it easy and pleasant for a horse to do what he’s asked, Schumann tries to “show him that it’s better to stay in the ring with me than to leave.”

What if he does leave? Is he punished? “If he leaves, I ask myself why. Was I too aggressive?” Schumann says. “What did I do wrong?” With some horses you must be delicate, while others take more pushing around, she adds.

Schumann doesn’t blame her horses for constantly testing her authority. “They’re not like machines,” she says, flashing a wide smile. They are individuals, and that’s exactly why she likes working with them.

After the interview, Schumann leads me to a group of portable stalls, cheerily lit against the black night. The horses are munching sweet-smelling hay, and their stalls are filled with deep beds of clean wood shavings. A very small pony stretches his head over his stall door to see us. I stoop to scratch his warm, furry forehead and think how fortunate these horses are to belong to Katja.

Nancy Humphrey Case

■ This is the Big Apple Circus’s 25th season. For information, see: www.bigapplecircus.org



BOWTIE PRESS

A TWO-MEMBER 'HERD': GaWaNi Pony Boy with Kola. Pony spoke with tribal elders about the 'old ways' of training horses. Trust and patience are key.

The native American way with horses

IF GAWANI PONY BOY ever needed the horse-training wisdom of his native American ancestors, he needed it now. In front of him was a wide set of concrete steps to the school gym where he was to give a presentation on native American culture. Behind him was his most entertaining prop – his horse, Kola.

Horses have never had to climb stairs in the wild, and for most of them stairs present as much of a barrier as a fence does.

Holding Kola's lead rope, Pony Boy headed toward the steps. He didn't stop. He didn't look back at Kola. He didn't coax him. He just walked calmly up the steps, and

'YOU CAN'T LIE,' SAYS PONY BOY. 'HORSES ARE BRILLIANT AT READING BODY LANGUAGE.'

Kola calmly followed him.

Whoa! How did Pony Boy do that? It all goes back to what he learned by listening to native American elders of several tribes and by "listening" to horses himself. This is what he came to understand:

Horses are not furry people. They think and act differently than we do because they are herd animals. Every herd has a leader. The Lakota Indians called the lead horse itancan (ee-TAHN-chun). The other horses in the herd follow him without hesitating because they know he'll do what is best for them.

In his book, "Out of the Saddle: Native American Horsemanship" (Bowtie Press, 1998, for ages 9-

12), Pony Boy explains that a rider can become the itancan of his two-member "herd" (horse and rider). That's how he led Kola up those steps.

Pony Boy travels the world teaching people how to establish good relationships with their horses. He shares with them another native American concept: iyuptala (ee-yoo-PTAH-lah). It means "being one with your horse." It grows out of trust, patience, respect, and understanding. Like circus horse trainer Katja Schumann (see story on facing page), Pony Boy knows that this relationship demands honesty.

"You can't cheat," Ms. Schumann says.

"You can't lie," says Pony Boy. "Horses are brilliant at reading body language."

Iyuptala also comes from spending so much time with your horse that you begin to know what your horse is thinking, and your horse begins to know what you're thinking. Pony Boy says he believes this is what native Americans did. And some of them – the Lakota, Comanche, and Nez Percé Indians of the Plains, for example – were amazing horsemen.

Native American boys played games on horseback that would prepare them for war. They would place a rock on the ground and try to pick it up (without falling off!) as they galloped past. When a boy had mastered that exercise, he'd practice picking his brother up off the ground. Finally, as a young man, he'd be able to pick up a fellow warrior fallen in battle – at top speed, without a saddle, and sometimes without even a bridle.

What a circus act that would make!

N.H.C.