





THE HEALING POWER OF HORSES

Horse whisperer Sue Spence is helping to boost the confidence of troubled youngsters by inspiring them to forge bonds with her equine friends, writes **Christine Jackman**.

IN A SMALL arena surrounded by rainforest, a quiet boy steps forward to meet the gaze of a chestnut stallion. The horse has the confident demeanour of an animal that has never done anything against its will. The boy, painfully shy and willow-slight, has a history of being bullied and victimised.

He has no rope, no whip. At 14 years old, this boy, who we will call Jerome, has never even ridden a horse. And yet here he stands, alone in the dirt, eye-to-eye with a creature at least 12 times his weight.

Jerome takes a deep breath. For a moment, the only sounds are the rhythmic bellows of the stallion's breath and the distant, plaintive cry of a peacock in search of a mate. And then, suddenly, the boy pulls his shoulders back and puffs ►

Horse whisperer Sue Spence with her stallion, Sunny, with whom she shares a close bond.



out his chest. He unfurls an arm in the direction he wants the horse to move and a smile breaks like dawn across his face. *Let's play!*, the smile seems to say, *We can do this together!*

Sunny, the stallion, tosses his head and sets off at an obliging, neat trot around the edge of the arena. He continues until Jerome drops his arms slightly, gesturing for the horse to slow to a walk. "That's soft energy, calm energy," a woman's voice rings out. "That's such a powerful tool. We don't realise how powerful our energy is and how we can use it to communicate, without saying a word."

Jerome breathes out and it seems he has grown several centimetres in the last minute. He signals again and Sunny halts, before ambling quietly, calmly, to the centre of the arena. When he is close enough to dwarf the diminutive teenager, the horse lowers his head and nestles his velvety muzzle into the crook of the boy's neck.

Sue Spence steps into the ring. Officially, she is the owner of Horses Helping Humans, a program that uses the skills of natural horsemanship to teach effective communication and life skills. Yet to the teenagers here today, all of whom are at risk of either being expelled from school or dropping out of their own volition, she is simply a horse whisperer.

And to the therapists and social workers who witness the magic she weaves with

these troubled young people – the ones plagued by mental illness or broken families, or other problems that mean they are violently at odds with the world and their peers – there is no doubt at all: Sue Spence is a human whisperer as well.

Say "horse whisperer" and it's likely most Australians still think of Robert Redford in the 1998 film of the same name. An adaptation of a best-selling novel by Nicholas Evans, *The Horse Whisperer* launched two things on to the international radar: an exquisite teen prodigy named Scarlett Johansson

"WE DON'T REALISE HOW POWERFUL OUR ENERGY IS ... HOW WE CAN USE IT TO COMMUNICATE, WITHOUT SAYING A WORD."

and the centuries-old art of natural horsemanship. Some, perhaps, will also think of local variations of the same archetype: laconic, weather-beaten jackaroos in battered Akubras, casting spells over brumbies and wayward stockhorses with their soft-spoken ways and thousand-mile stares.

Then there's Sue Spence. Bubbly and energetic, Sue seems more the type you'd find leading a step class at your local gym than riding the open plains. So

it's no real surprise to discover fitness training and management were the centre of her life on Queensland's Gold Coast for more than 25 years.

Yet even in that often self-obsessed world, there was always an element of caring for others in her approach. Ultimately, she was even awarded a formal Nike sponsorship for her efforts in establishing the innovative HELP program, designed to raise awareness of and support for fitness professionals who were suffering eating disorders.

To the outside observer, Sue was the pin-up girl for good health and vitality. Then came her wake-up call: a brush with breast cancer. It was time to re-evaluate the hectic pace at which she was living her crowded life.

As a teenager, she had enjoyed show jumping and eventing with her own horses. So when she and her husband relocated to the tranquil Tallebudgera Valley, inland from the Gold Coast, after her radical cancer surgery, it wasn't long before a small herd was sharing the small property with the couple. Yet, this time, natural horsemanship seemed a calmer alternative to competitive show jumping. Meanwhile, Sue continued giving presentations about health and lifestyle, as she had at the gym.

"One day, I was conducting a women's workshop on boundaries and self-esteem



On her Horses Helping Humans program, Sue teaches her students how to build relationships of mutual trust with her horses and ponies. From far left: Students lead their charges around the arena; Sue signals Sunny to jump; and later shares a quiet moment with the stallion.



at a beautiful local cafe," she recalls. "At the last minute, I decided to take Sunny to demonstrate how I could back him away, ask him forward and then stop him, simply by using my body language.

"When I did that, some of the ladies started crying! They said no one had ever shown them what 'No!' looks like and that they weren't confident to say it. They didn't have any boundaries ... but they could see the power of that body language, how much self-respect that conveys."

Sue explained that horses have just as distinctive personalities as human beings, so the key to horse whispering is to recognise what makes them tick, how they view the world and their role within it. She calls this "horseonality".

"Sunny is a natural leader," she says now. "He sees the world in black and white, yes and no terms. He is energetic, but some people can find that energy intimidating and he can be aggressive if you put him under pressure. He probably reminds you of plenty of people at work – the ones with the big office, bossing everyone else around!"

To work effectively with a personality like Sunny, it is important to stay calm but assertive, while refusing to be drawn into a power struggle "because Sunny types fire up really quickly". Having taught the stallion to execute an array of complicated manoeuvres – reversing

through a series of obstacles, dropping and rolling, and skipping sideways in a form of equine ballet – all without a raised voice or the prod of a crop or whip – Sue began working with her ponies, too.

Each has their own personality type. Gorgeous grey mare Mindy is a "loving princess" who is prone to anxiety. "She finds it hard to say no, so she gets nervous around aggressive people."

In contrast, Mindy's cheeky son, Yogi, is the equine equivalent of an impulsive juvenile delinquent. He can't enter the yard without stopping to rub his fat rump on a fence post, so hard it almost topples over, and he continually confounds Sue with his ability to unpick the latches on her paddocks, then arriving unannounced on her verandah.

Finally, there is little Larry, rescued from an abattoir after what Sue suspects was a life of abuse and neglect. "Larry is the classic melancholic type. He's sensitive and dislikes confrontation. Often, he'll shut down if you pressure him – but he's also capable of becoming defensive and fighting back if you push him too far."

Meanwhile, one of the women who had attended the workshop where Sunny made his guest appearance had approached Sue, convinced that horse whispering could work with "at risk"

kids. "She was the manager of a local not-for-profit group and, within two weeks, she had all her youth workers attend a presentation. Before I knew it, the demand for youth workshops had overtaken everything else!"

As a group of teenagers gather under the trees at the edge of the arena, it is clear Sue has an equally well-honed instinct for picking human personalities and picking which "horseonality" will work best with them.

Sometimes, opposites attract. By pairing a submissive type such as Jerome with Sunny, Sue challenges the meek youth to come out of his shell – and to enjoy a rare sense of powerful achievement by standing up for himself assertively.

Similarly, she barely pauses before leading 14-year-old Becca over to meet Larry. From a troubled home, the initially surly teenager is close to being expelled because of her angry outbursts and aggression towards teachers and classmates. To this urban girl, working with a horse is no more familiar than waking up and finding zebras grazing in your backyard.

Will she be able to contain her own frustrations and remain calm enough to work with the skittish pony?

"I want you to go to Dude Land," Sue urges Becca. "Whenever you start feeling a bit stressed, think 'jelly belly'. Breathe ➤



Sue has a well-honed instinct for pairing humans with the right "horseonilities"

out and relax, loosen up your shoulders and deflate your belly.

"With horses, it's not what you say that matters. It's what you project. So the way to get their respect is to establish our own boundaries and have our own emotions under control."

For a girl like Becca, at war with the world for the longest time, perhaps communicating with another species is an unexpected relief from adolescent game-playing and social hierarchies. Or perhaps it is simply impossible to be angry at a tiny pony looking just like a clockwork toy as he trots briskly around the yard.

Whatever the reason, as she learns how to draw Larry towards her simply by dropping her shoulders, gesturing inwards and – crucially – relaxing her breathing, Becca's brittle outer shell falls away, revealing a generous, patient young girl. Later, a small smile plays at the corners of her mouth as she carefully combs Larry's mane.

A battered binder nearby overflows with thank you letters, each documenting other miracle transformations in this dusty yard. "Sue is able to engage students where typical interventions have failed," reads one. "Students – particularly those who have been abused as children – find

her animals and methods to be very non-threatening ... and she is able to convey simple differences such as the difference between being aggressive and assertive."

"Watching a young person with ADHD completely focused, calm and gentle with one of Sue's ponies was a revelation to us all. The program taught our young people to recognise how their own and other's behaviours impact on the horses ... and to be able to relate this recognition to their human interactions," reads another.

Sue has seen similar "lightbulb moments" with acclaimed actors, supermodels, sports stars and CEOs who have attended her corporate team-building and effective communication workshops.

"I have had big corporate bosses come in with their poor, submissive wives and, for the first time, they begin to realise what a bully they can be," she says. "They'll say, 'I'm a Sunny, aren't I? And she's a Mindy!' "

As Sunny nuzzles her ear, she adds, "So I say, 'How do you get a relationship like this with your wife, with your kids? You drop your aggression. You relax. You take the time.' "

Back in the ring, she has paired a human "Yogi" with the real thing. Gangly and

grinning, Jake is that kid who makes teachers sigh and roll their eyes on a good day, and drives them to yelling and ordering detention on a bad one. The one who cracks the rest of the class up with one-liners, then loses himself in a daydream about the big world beyond the classroom window, rather than the lesson at hand.

"The trick with Yogi is to stay focused," Sue says. "The minute you get distracted or drop your energy, he'll think, 'Well, this isn't important enough', and he'll take off."

It's a struggle for both. Yet, by the end of the session, Jake has directed Yogi over a jump almost as tall as his fat belly to trot and reverse – and even to drop and roll over like a dog. "So, what have you learned today?" Sue asks.

Jake grins. "How much of a pain in the arse I am," he says, matter-of-factly.

Sue throws her head back and laughs her clear, ringing warble. Even in the world of the horse whisperer, you're allowed to be human.

"With horses, it's not how perfect you are," she reminds the kids as they reluctantly farewell their four-legged teachers. "The most important thing is how you handle it when things go wrong. A bit like life, really." ■