

The big picture of hand-grazing

By Kathryn Kincannon-Irwin

Dear Alpha Mare:

I have a question for you. I am thinking about saving a 16.2 hand, 5-year-old off-the-track Thoroughbred named "Snuck To Be You" (Snucky) who has had a fractured sesamoid that will need stall rest for about five months to heal. I think this will be a great time for bonding and working with him in his stall and taking him out for walks. I really feel this horse is yearning for someone to give him the attention and time to develop a lasting relationship. He is calling me! When I came home from Iraq, I received PTSD counselling to help me through not knowing what to expect and how things in life change as a result of things you have gone through. I want to give Snucky the same type of care and love that saw me through to a new beginning. Thank you for your time and I hope someday to meet you and Chris.

I sincerely applaud your compassionate interest in doing what you can for this horse. There is no question Snucky deserves a second chance for a fulfilling life and I will do my best in this column to be grounded in what he truly needs from you to feel like this is being accomplished to both of your satisfaction, especially during his healing period the first five months, which will include work in his stall, hand-walking and grazing on a lead for him to get some fresh air every day.

First, remember that in his mind, developing a relationship with you will be all about your earning the right to be in charge. As you know with your armed forces men and women, vulnerability doesn't mean they want you to feel sorry for them or simply be nice. What they need to see is that anything they can do you can do better in order to motivate and protect them. Snucky needs the same. His injury has tuned up his powers of awareness knowing intuitively that his mobility is not up to par. So he will be scrutinizing you big time to see if you truly have what it takes to call the shots and keep him safe. Add to this the increased stress of claustrophobia in a stall or up-close-and-personal on the end of a lead line with a horse that desperately wants to move, and, much as your heart is in the right place, know you have big shoes to fill for this boy to truly accept your lead.

A few years ago, my own TB gelding, Razy, then three and only a few months off the track himself, sustained a mystery injury where his back leg blew up like a balloon for no discernible reason and he was dragging it around like a ball and chain. The vet was puzzled and recommended six weeks of stall rest.

Great. A young, high-strung TB being told he couldn't run and play for six weeks. I was told to hand-walk him twice a day for 20 minutes per session, and keep him calm to prevent a re-injury. Sure thing. Right-O.

The first few days he was fine, and I was getting a little cocky at how good a boy he was being. Then he changed tactics. Instead of walking out calmly and munching on the nice grass I brought him to, he started puffing up as soon as he came out of his stall, and unless my timing for flexing him down was right on the money, he would head twirl and pull away from me, prancing off on that bad leg in complete disregard for pain in high adrenaline mode. I was at a loss, so I asked my husband if he had any suggestions. Chris came out the next hand-walking session and watched us, and about three minutes into it told me Razy's behaviour was perfectly understandable given that I wasn't doing my job. I looked at him questioningly and here's what I learned:

Being the better horse — the one who calls the shots — means paying attention to your horse 100 per cent of the time, even when he is doing something as innocuous as grazing! If you have your horse on a lead, your horse knows he is in your circle of influence. Letting your horse bend into you even once is a chalk mark for him. Not flexing down a high-headed horse leads him to believe being with you is about feeling stressed out and anxious. Letting him drag you to the grass without adjusting his stride to what you are comfortable with means he is leading the dance. Once he puts his head down to eat and starts moving his body around to eat what he wants without you calling him on any hip being cocked or barrel pushing towards you means you are a pushover. Add all these up and, in his mind, you are the underling and he's the boss. Why wouldn't he be the one to dictate the rules of engagement?

So here's what I did. First, I didn't take Razy out of his stall until he was calm and relaxed. To do this, the first thing I did when I opened his stall door was ask him to back up a couple of steps by tapping his chest (not flagging his head), which not only gave me room to move around him but added the respectful psychology of "bowing out." I then went to his shoulder and, with a light brush, groomed him with my right hand on his left side and my left hand on his right side (having the brush in the hand farthest away from his head). As I was brushing him, if he flexed his head away from me, even looked away one millimeter, I would lightly touch his girth button to bring his head and attention back to me. I was diligent about this counter-bending and after catching him

at this every time, after only a few times he would drop his head and blow and sigh, letting me know he appreciated the fact that I was paying attention. He tested me like this a few times until he knew he could count on me to be the sentry — the lookout — and he could now chill.

Only then would I put on his halter and lead, and I would do so from the shoulder, flexing his head down and around me by again touching the girth button so that his head would drop into the halter rather than me bringing the halter to his head, which would invert him and cause a stressful frame. I would then ask him to take a step back to give me room to go through the stall door by backing away into the barn aisle and drawing him out of his stall. Avoid going through

a stall door with a horse right beside you — the chances of getting hurt by being slammed by their body through a tight opening are way too high.

I have included a series of pictures to show the progression of mutual respect during the walk out to your grazing area and while your horse grazes. The common denominator in all of it is your paying attention to his being respectful of you while he is enjoying being out. An alpha mare would require this of any of their herd. If you don't, in

his mind you're a pushover who barely deserves the time of day, much less responsibility for his welfare.

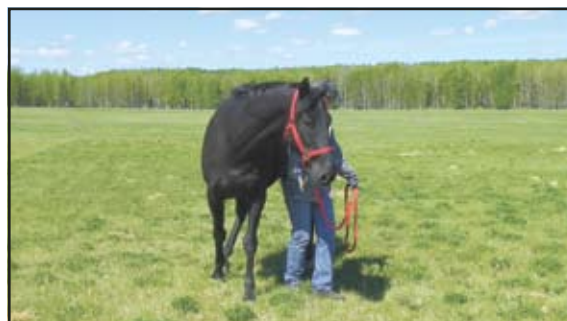
In just a couple of sessions, Razy was sighing and blowing his nose every time I called him on his frame being a little "bent out of shape" and he relaxed into a comfortable groove of being hand-walked and grazing on the end of the line. Best of all he didn't stress about me being the one to look out for him in the process. I trust you find the same with Snucky. 🐾



As Petra walks Razy out to the grazing area, as soon as she feels him get strong on the lead rope to pull her, she knows it's time to turn him on the forehand.



Petra turns her body in to place it on Razy's shoulder, looking over her left shoulder to place the dressage whip on his hind end to move him around her. Note her left hand on the lead rope does not pull his head to her. His head will follow the movement of his hind end swinging away from a tap on his inside hip.



As Razy feels the endorphin flow of bending, he relaxes his topline and his pushiness and anxiety is dissolved. Petra can now resume leading him, and will repeat this turn on the forehand any time he gets strong. It only takes a few times for Razy to come to conclusion that it takes him longer to get where he wants to go if he tries to pull Petra there, but she always corrects him in a way that has him feeling good. So why do it?



When Petra allows Razy to graze, if he bends into her like in this picture, she needs to let him know this is rude and disrespectful by pointing the whip (or her body or hand) to his girth button



Here Petra gently raises the whip to point at Razy's girth at which point he looks up, reverses the bend and swings his hip away from her. Good boy.



From then on, for the remainder of the grazing time, Petra kept an eye on Razy to make sure he knew that he could eat what he wanted, but he needed to move to keep his hind end away from her and his front end facing her. He blew and sighed after she asked him for this only a couple of times.



At the end of the grazing time, Razy came and plugged his head right into Petra's core and sighed. You could see how relieved he was to know he really could leave himself in her capable hands and enjoy his favourite pastime, eating!

Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and Train the Trainer sessions throughout North America and Europe. They are currently developing Riversong Ranch Equestrian Retreat on the shores of the McLeod River just west of Edmonton. If you have a question that you'd like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please e-mail her at alphamare@explornet.com