

Don't judge a book or a horse by its cover



By Kathryn Kincannon-Irwin

A mind-blowing incident happened here at Riversong in terms of herd dynamics that I can't keep to myself. I have no doubt you will find it as fascinating as I did.

Our alpha mare, Katja, is a 16-year-old Trakehner who rises to the level of commandress-in-chief of any herd, regardless of its individual equine components. I have watched her in action here at Riversong with up to 14 horses for eight years now, and up until this past week, I would have sworn I had her pegged: a no-nonsense matriarch who doesn't take guff from any horse. She will, in short order, with a level-headed, unemotional approach, set the record straight with any challenger in such a matter-of-fact, just-another-day-at-the-office way that there is no way any horse — or human for that matter — wouldn't bow to her skills. She is like a mother who never has to say to her child "And I mean it!" because they know, without question, that she does. And that she does it for the right reasons. To keep them safe.

Katja wasn't born to be a mother, she was born to be THE boss. She was born to run a herd. And she does it extremely well. There isn't a mark on any one of our horses — not from her, not from each other. She knows out-of-check sibling rivalry only undermines the herds' awareness skills, and so she keeps it to a minimum. She plays the role model of calm and attentive to the hilt, and it rubs off beautifully. All of our horses are sleek and healthy and relaxed and well-cared for — by humans and Katja alike. Pure and simple, Katja cuts an impressive figure as the unequivocal Empress Dowager, wearing her status with dignity. That said, you just plain wouldn't want to cross her. Especially not the way our youngest filly, Ekwa, just did.

We have two Riversong fillies: Katja's three-year-old Warmblood daughter, Avalon, and Ekwa, out of Chris' Hanoverian mare, Tsunami and a lovely Friesian stallion. Neither of these young ladies has ever had a difficult day in their lives. They are poised and confident, and yes, being teenagers, quite full of themselves. They have lived together, with an ever-changing variety of herd-mates (Chris mixes it up to keep any of them



When Ekwa (black in the middle) turned her hind end to Katja (red bay on the right), Katja sent a well-placed boot to Ekwa's hind end — the source of the disrespect. Avalon (foreground on the left) sensibly high-tails it out of there.

from getting too bonded to one another). For over a year, however, their herds have NOT included their mamas. But with winter approaching, and our horses all potentially living together for a portion of it, it was time to bring the mares back together and make sure the mother-daughter hierarchies were sorted before the snow flies.

Katja, Tsunami and our other 16-year-old mare, Bahama, a Shire-Thoroughbred (all of whom have been living together most of the summer), as well as Avalon and Ekwa, were led into our big indoor arena in halters and leads. We took Katja to the middle, our second and third tier mares, Tsunami and Bahama, to one end of the arena and Ekwa and Avalon to the other end. They were all calm and relaxed as their handlers individually unhaltered and released each of the mares.

Katja immediately made a B-line to Ekwa and Avalon, exploding onto the scene with predictable purpose. The two older mares bowed out and moved to the periphery: Bahama planted herself at the far end of the arena and took a spectator seat to watch and Tsunami trotted around the fringe, keeping an eye on her daughter and the overall activity, but not getting personally involved. Avalon, even though she has been ruling the roost in her small herd without the older mares, very quickly bowed and bent away from her mother, realizing she was no match for Katja as Queen Bee.

Ekwa, on the other hand, totally surprised us by standing up for herself when Katja came to push

her. Not only did she NOT bow to Katja, she actually turned her hind end to her, planted in an inverted llama stance and prepared for Katja's "I'm not impressed!" response, which Katja obliged. The two paraded some pretty athletic martial arts moves — squeals, strikes, spins and double barrels, even ears pinned to bite — but aside from one well-placed boot to Ekwa's barrel by Katja, it was all for show. At the end of round one, however, Ekwa hadn't budged from her "You can't make me!" attitude. We were stunned and glued to our seats.

Katja then wandered around in her typical unhurried mode, considering her options. Then she walked — not trotted, not galloped — back to Ekwa, who was still locked in an adrenalin-filled frame and parried with what Katja does best — she herded that young lady around and around the arena, all at a measured walk with a level head. Katja did not get worked up or wound up — she was simply persistent and determined to show the little upstart who really was boss, and knew it was just a matter of time before Ekwa bowed to her superior awareness skills. But Ekwa would have none of it. She stayed uncharacteristically haughty, taunting Katja with resilient resistance. A ballsy young lady for sure!

So Katja changed her tune. Just like that she did a complete 180. With Ekwa in stoic, competitive "what are you going to do about it?" posture, Katja walked slowly up to her and did the most remarkable thing: she did the equivalent

of prostrating herself in front of Ekwa — lowering her head and bending around Ekwa's front end to nuzzle Ekwa's front leg in a very vulnerable, passive position. Ekwa stood stock still, not moving a muscle, I'm sure as shocked as the rest of us, waiting for the other shoe to drop. But it never did. Katja persisted her nurturing, her nuzzling until Ekwa realized she truly meant it and reciprocated by dropping her head to nuzzle and nibble on Katja's withers. They did this for a good few minutes until Ekwa fully dropped her head and bowed at Katja's side, reversing her bend to be respectful and allowing her pumped-up balloon to finally deflate. She let go all of her resistance and stood there next to Katja, head to tail, both of them level-headed and respectful, no attitude whatsoever by either one.

And then Katja quietly walked away, and Ekwa did as well. The drama was over. No one got hurt and, better yet, no one was the loser. Katja did not resort to browbeating Ekwa into submission. She did not play the "you WILL respect me!" dominance card to have Ekwa come around. She not only allowed Ekwa to save face, but honoured the young lady's chutzpah and naïve toughness with a bow of her own. Because Katja knew it was only Ekwa's bravada talking — not a true threat to the hierarchy or her position as the alpha mare. Ekwa was testing her boundaries the way all youngsters do and will and good for her, Katja said! That kind of competitive spirit makes Katja's workload easier, knowing Ekwa will grow

up able to take care of herself in the big bad world of lurking predators.

What was left was another notch of respect for Katja's uncanny ability to accurately read a situation and do what was in the best interest of all. Katja's tactics proved beyond a doubt that it is not always the biggest, baddest and toughest that wins. Carrying a big stick does not always win the day. In this case, being the first, not the last, to bow made all the difference. Such a move was not lost on Ekwa. And I dare say it wasn't lost on the other mares either.

Maybe it was her seasoned maturity. Maybe it was an accumulation of been there, done that experiences that gave her the perfect tool for the job. Maybe she just has finessing down to a science. Whatever it was, playing the gentle, caring, nurturing card with Ekwa at that moment was a master's touch. Katja proved she was strong enough to be soft, confident enough to bow. Courageous and humble in the same breath. No wonder her light shines so bright. 🐾

Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and Train The Trainer programs throughout North America and Europe. They are currently building their own Alberta-based equestrian centre at Riversong Ranch, west of Edmonton near Whitecourt, which will open for events in August of 2008. If you have a question you would like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please email her at alphamare@xplornet.com