

Changing training: how polo needs to learn a new language

Renowned for his empathetic interpretation of the silent language of horses, tireless trainer Monty Roberts is now using his experiences right across the equine world with many of the game's top polo pros – including, most significantly, Adolfo Cambiaso

Photograph by xxxx



Alice Gipps
at Royal Polehampton Lodge Stud

A living legend, American Monty Roberts – now 76 – has become one of the world's most famous horse trainers. He was first introduced to polo in his 20s, when 10-goaler Billy Linfoot and he became friends and Monty began working on Billy's western horses using his effective non-violent method of breaking and training them.

In the intervening years, Monty became best known for the impact of his methods in the racing industry, having personally produced over 600 Group 1 winners. However, these dramatic benefits unsurprisingly didn't go unnoticed across the equine world and Monty is now finding himself in high demand amongst the world's top polo professionals, all of whom have breeding



operations that are key to their success.

Memo Gracida first asked for his assistance six years ago. His brother Carlos soon followed. Others have gradually shown

interest since but, when world number one Adolfo Cambiaso asked Monty to work on his thoroughbreds two years ago, it marked a real breakthrough for the game.

Cambiaso is a winner of the Argentine Open nine times, producing such champion ponies as Dolfina Cuartaterra and Aiken Cura down the years. That he wants to change his traditional training methods to incorporate Monty's less dangerous, less domineering and less confrontational approach shows how seriously polo now realises it has to take the fair treatment of its horses.

"I tell you why polo needs me," says Monty. "It is because the public perception of how the average polo player treats his horses has been very bad. It may not be true in many cases but perception builds on reality."

That perception relates to the traditional breaking methods that are still currently the most commonly used in polo, in which the horse is "told" what to do, not "asked" as a willing partner.

His theory is that, to understand horses, people need to think very simply, think like a flight animal. Their number one priority in life is to reproduce, their second is survival. Horses

Above: Monty demonstrates his "join-up" methods
Below: A bird's-eye view across Flag Is Up Farm, Monty's International Learning Centre in California



also have conscious thought, not just instinctual thought. Horses follow a leader, looking up to the matriarch of the herd, or a person they trusts and whom they want to please.

Monty argues it is particularly true in polo, since the best playing ponies are those that are sensitive, and thus would never make it through brutal or violent techniques that were common in Argentina not so many years ago. Tying up, terrifying or hitting a horse until it does the right thing does not convince it you are his leader; those are the actions of a predator meaning him harm.

Monty still works every day, travelling the world to get his message across, and his

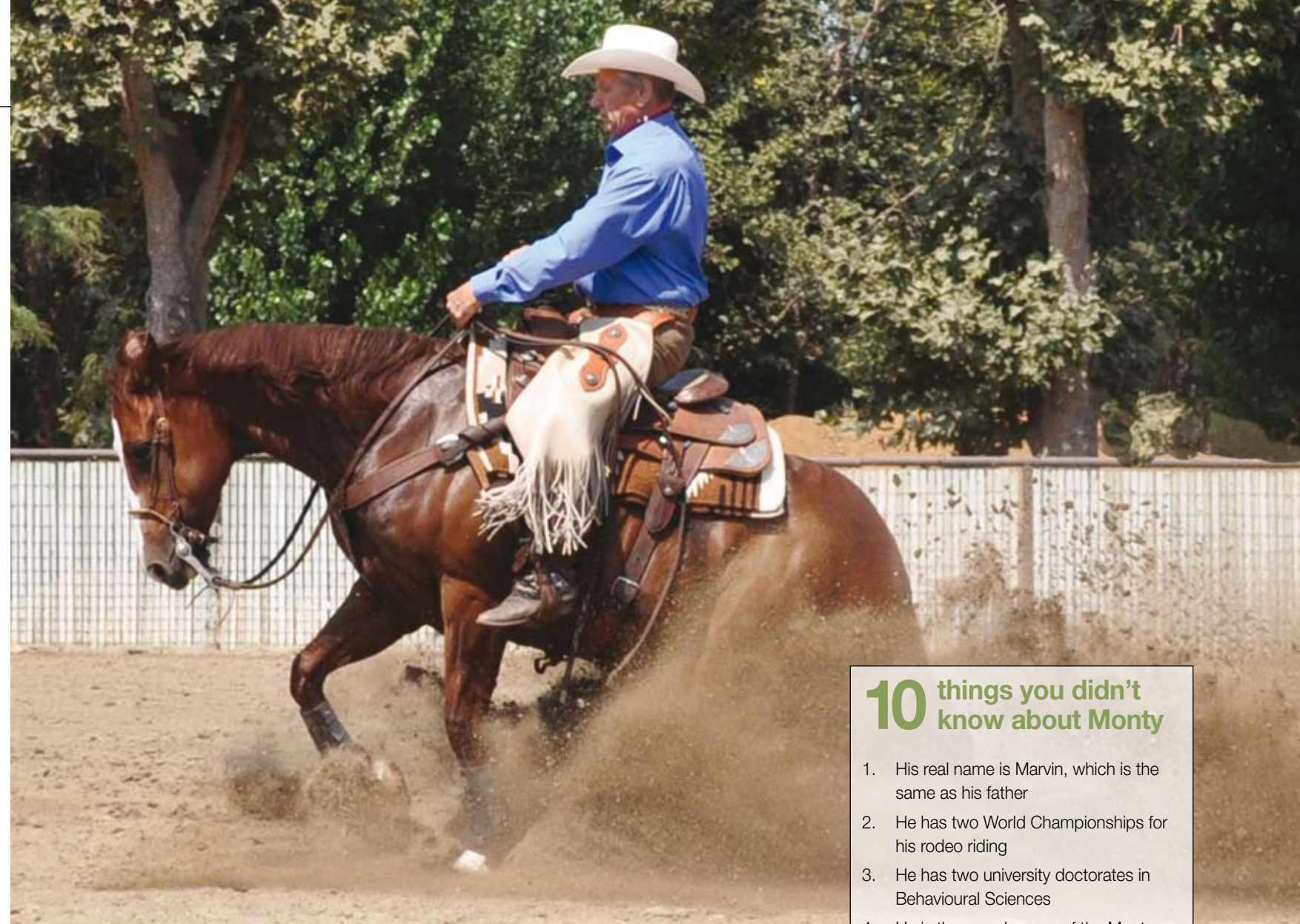
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Monty with the Queen at Windsor Castle in xxxx



Adolfo Cambiaso, Monty Roberts and Carlos Gracida pose for photographs at a demonstration in the USA



Monty believes that pulling at the mouth desensitises it. Instead, players should cause their horses to stop, not force them. Note the loose reins, low head carriage, closed mouth, no rolling eyes and the horse's ears, listening to the rider

motivation for wishing to prove there is a more humane means of getting what you want from horses is horrifyingly personal.

"My father was the most forceful man you could imagine," he says. "He would tie horses to the ground, sometimes beat them to death. That's what caused me to go the other way. I had 72 broken bones before I was 12 years of age. Each broken bone was from my father, not from horses."

Knowing what it is to fear for your life, empathy with the horses and the realisation they were receptive to a kind approach triggered a desire in Monty to explore a different route to traditional methods widely used in America and the rest of the world at the time.

In 1948 Monty tracked the wild mustangs,



spending hours watching their behaviour, applying their signals to his methods and communication. Monty translated the horses' silent language and has called it "Equus".

Equus uses body language to communicate with the horse, the most critical element of

which is something known as "join-up". The method simulates the punishment by the Matriarch towards a young horse of driving it away out of the herd. Instincts tell the horse that if they are separated their lives are in grave danger. Driving the horse away in a round pen simulates this behaviour and exhausts the horse's flight response. Then, by using passive body language of a predator, such as a mountain lion not interested in attacking, the horse reads these signals and quickly accepts the human, viewing them as a safe leader, not a predator. Join-up is the moment when the horse chooses to come towards the trainer, trusts him and follows him.

Monty insists it can work on any horse from a wild mustang to a child's fluffy pony in roughly 15 minutes using a round pen. This

foundation of trust is vital, making it easier to overcome any obstacles encountered during the training process of young horses for any discipline.

It's incredible to watch. He can introduce a rider to an unbacked youngster within about

30 minutes. No tying up, no battle. Using the horses own language to communicate, they trust and want to please their trainer. However, showing his father there was an alternative way – even from as young an age as seven – gained him nothing more than a beating with a chain.

Monty's father was not the only one resistant to the idea. He's needed incredible drive and courage to break away from critics,



With daughter Debbie whilst working in Rio de Janeiro

having even encountered death threats from traditionalists trying to keep his methods from reaching the public.

One source from which he has always had support is Her Majesty The Queen. Paying tribute to her in the year in which she celebrates the Diamond Jubilee of her coronation, Monty and I met at the Queen's stables, Royal Polehampton Lodge Stud, Hampshire.

"If it wasn't for the Queen of England I'd still be telling people not to beat up horses and I'd just be talking to a few hundred people," he says. "Instead, I'm talking to a few million."

That number is no over-estimate. Monty's first book – *The Man Who Listens to Horses* – was published in 1996, after encouragement by the Queen following a demonstration of his methods in Windsor in 1989, and became a New York Times bestseller, shifting more than five million copies.

Monty has been performing public demos since 1986 and is currently working extensively in central Brazil, where 3,000 horses will be started next year using his methods.

Having witnessed first hand how teams of men were let loose on 150 untouched youngsters in a Brazilian competition each year, cheered on by the audience to inflict brutality on the animal until it was rideable, Monty was painfully reminded that the most affective philosophy is that "slow is fast, fast is slow".

Of course, traditional methods can produce quick results initially. Some horses seem to know automatically what the rider wants of them, but they are the exception, not the only ones with potential. Most horses react out of fear to forceful training, easily developing undesirable traits such as becoming one sided, developing a hard mouth, leaping, and head-shaking. As any player or buyer knows, these are faults that are very hard to correct and the horse did not start out with.

To make a comparison, imagine learning to swim for the first time. If your instructor pushes you in at the deep end, you would fear for your life – listening to instructions comes second to doing all you can to survive. And, assuming you do, the trust with that instructor would

10 things you didn't know about Monty

1. His real name is Marvin, which is the same as his father
2. He has two World Championships for his rodeo riding
3. He has two university doctorates in Behavioural Sciences
4. He is the proud owner of the Monty Roberts International Learning Centre in California, near Santa Barbara
5. His only hobby away from horses is dry fly fishing, though he is so busy that the last time he managed it was more than five years ago in Iceland
6. He does a lot of work with prisons, domestic abuse centres, schools and corporations, applying similar principles of psychology to those he uses on horses
7. He has three children, and has fostered some 47 others
8. He is a type-two diabetic, and so eats the same white chicken, brown rice and green vegetables three times a day, seven days a week
9. He was honoured by the Queen in June last year for his service to the royal family and to the racing establishment
10. He was made an honorary member of the Royal Victorian Order, given to people who have served the monarch in a personal way



Monty Roberts, flanked by Carlos and Memo Gracida

be entirely broken. However, if your instructor patiently shows you step by step in the shallow end, you have confidence in them and learn the correct techniques necessary, which will help make you a confident swimmer. And, in some cases, such a technique is helping furnish those with the talent with the tools to make it to the top, should they continue with that sport.

"Incremental education is by far the most effective education," explains Monty. "Trainers cannot skip steps and expect good results. However, by giving a horse a little time and to think about what you mean by a particular instruction, and leading them incrementally through the process, you'll get there faster, much faster than you will with the forceful way.

"It's no problem re-educating these guys," says Monty, reflecting on working with horse trainers in Brazil. "One guy I came across, called Matias, was brutal. Unbelievably, he would kick his youngsters in the nose, beat them. I watched him beat a horse up until its bladder gave way. I took this kid on, and within three or four hours of direction he could do the join up method as well as I could because of his knowledge of how to get around a horse. These guys are definitely good enough, they just need convincing to put aside the

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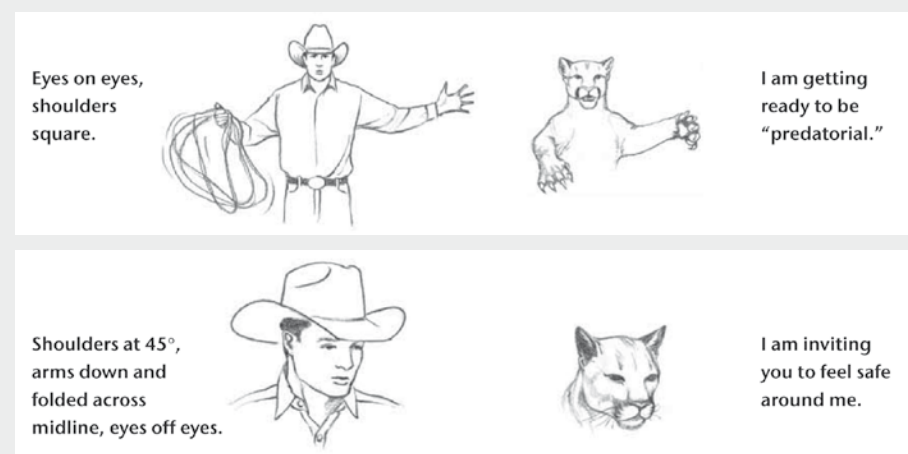
A short lesson, Monty's way

"For example, when teaching a horse to stop, the trot is the most valuable gait to use in early training," says Monty. "If you can achieve a desire within the horse to stop immediately on cue from a trot, your chances of accomplishing this in the canter goes up dramatically.

"When he's stopped well always allow him to relax for 30 seconds. That's his reward. The key to getting the horse to want to do something is being quick to reward. Build this up gradually over 3-4 months to get a perfect stop. You could put a fishing leader on my reins and 2lbs of pressure is all I need to stop a horse. Pulling too much on the mouth desensitises it.

"Of course, polo is a quick game, for players and ponies, but there's no reason why things need to be done hard. You watch – things are really going to change. Players such as Cambiaso increasingly want a light, responsive pony, so you're going to see the top pros pulling their horses around a lot less. The trick is to get more out of a pony but causing it to do something, rather than forcing it."

Human Gestures as seen by the horse



destructive techniques that have come down through the generations."

Monty is also living proof that the change is beneficial for the breakers as much as it is for the horses. At 76, he's still working with spirited young ponies on a daily basis, because, though he disciplines his horses, his firm-but-fair methods don't typically put him in a position to get hurt in a confrontation with them.

Like any language, Equus needs practice. But good horsemen pick up Monty's techniques quickly and it's far less dangerous.

This is what is currently inspiring many polo players. Carlos "Polito" Ulloa – father of nine-goaler Hilario – has been a driving force in developing high-goal ponies Argentina, and credits Monty Roberts for his own approach, which insists on the term "taming" rather than "breaking in".

Former 10-goaler Memo Gracida, who has also achieved great success training thoroughbreds for polo, echoes the same view:

"The language of the horse is universal," he says. "I have lived around horses all my life, and knowing how to communicate with your animals is fundamental to anyone that would like to call himself a horseman. Put simply, Monty is the best horseman I know, so I've been sure to transmit everything I've learnt from him to my breakers, horse masters and grooms."

Monty's just happy that his methods are reaching far and wide, and isn't surprised that they are of particular relevance to players with large breeding programmes: "Semi-wild horses respond better to the join-up model. It is an expression of their language. A horse that hasn't been intervened with by humans has the clearest genetic potential for that language. Its natural senses are still heightened, not dulled from having been broken in the traditional way. A horse desensitised by violent authority won't have the sensitivity necessary to give you that extra mile an hour or rapid turn, and so won't be a top polo pony.



Shy Boy, a wild mustang, is the most famous example of Monty's work. Free in 42,000 acres, Monty achieved complete communication with Shy Boy, using no force. He quickly went from being wild to accepting everything including a rider

"I'm so excited about what is happening in the world with the change in attitudes towards training horses. I'm being accepted at a level I could never have dreamed was possible. I was ready to give up in 1989, until Her Majesty endorsed me. I am conscious that a lot of credit for what has happened since belongs with her."

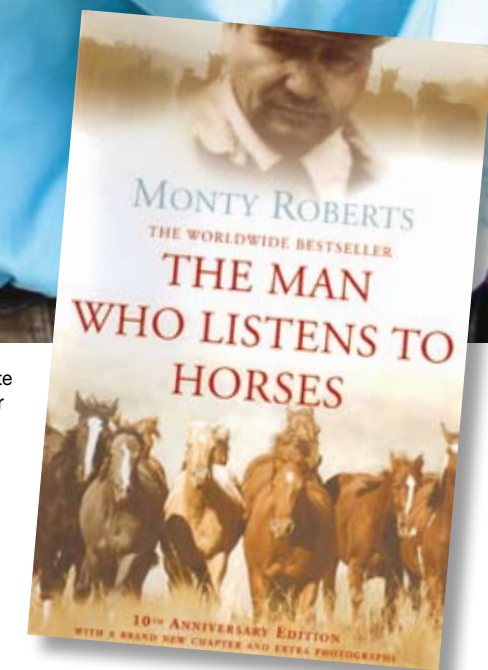
More than 20 years after that endorsement, Monty's techniques are finally becoming essential practise on many continents, with a scientific study last year in the UK even acknowledging that his training methods were PROVEN to be less stressful and more efficient for horses.

"Certainly, they're more efficient," agreed Memo Gracida. "The increase the percentage of horses reaching their full potential in polo is significant. I start between 30 and 40 horses a year, and am totally convinced, when you

use the horses' language, it simplifies and makes things easier to understand. From my first-hand experience, I would say Monty's methods allow you realise the natural ability of the equine athlete to its fullest, because you forge an immediate connection between man and horse, which is the essential foundation for its future development."

It takes a brave person to break away from years of tradition and try something new. But Monty Roberts has shown there is room for mavericks that seek to buck the trend. And, with more and more acknowledgement of this, particularly in the polo world in recent times, it does seem as though training may be changing. For those of us that love horses, there can be little doubt that these changes are for the better. ☺

▶ Monty Roberts is set to receive a further



award from the Queen, when she is expected at the final of the AI Habtoor Royal Windsor Cup on Sunday 24 June

▶ Discover more about Monty's books (in both English and Spanish), his training DVDs (some of which come with Spanish subtitles) and even his online university course (complete with video lessons) at www.montyroberts.com

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