

Review and commentary on:

Nature, Nurture and Horses: A Journal of Four Dressage Horses – From Birth through the First Year of Training.

Paul Belasik, 2012. Trafalga Square: North Pomfret, Vermont.

By Daune Bronte-Stewart

Given my love of Paul Belasik's writing, I settled down in front of the fire hoping to open the pages and be transported into his world. I wasn't disappointed. He demonstrates a most amazing ability to weave a story about his training of four young horses together with the most sensual descriptions of his home farm and statements that allow the reader insights into his personal philosophy as well as his understanding and interpretation of the classical approach to equitation.

The story starts with the birth of the four horses that star in the book. We are told about the farm on which they are born, the author's general way of working with young horses, including the way they are handled and managed through the process of weaning and the first three years. He explains that "These early years are about playing, eating, socializing: for the most part they are idyllic and carefree" (p5). He takes care to tell us little stories that serve to paint a picture of each horse's character: confident, trusting, calm, if willful, Kara, who is used to being 'in charge'; "Big, powerful and sensitive" Escarpa who will need to learn to channel his power in a positive way; Elsa – smart and compliant but still to grow into her body and to be shaped into her potential; and finally, gentle Corsana who wants to please but is a little uncertain and wary, serious and honest, sensitive and quiet. Belasik's knowledge of the four horses is deep since, as he explains:

"I know each of their brothers and sisters, as well as their mothers and their father, whom I've trained for almost twenty years.... I have lived with the real-life experience of the theoretical lessons of genetics and heredity." (p2)

Belasik takes us through these young horses' early 'education' process starting with them coming in from the fields as (almost) 3 year olds, describing how they are handled, introduced to tack and, then, longing. We join in with the author's excitement, and a little nervousness, at the beginning of the young horses' training. He confides in us:

"When I am leading these young horses to the round pen during the first few weeks, my adrenaline is always up. I seem to take shorter steps to protect my heels from getting chopped by horse feet – they are going everywhere. My arm is cocked and elbow locked straight toward the horse to keep some space. These young horses are preoccupied with equipment and their surroundings, twisting their neck, shaking their head. I try to work quickly, keep an eye out for the cats who invariably decide to come watch the fun from the top rail of the round pen, or the dogs who take off after a squirrel right in front of us. Tarps seem to come to life on top of the sawdust pile." (p23)

At the outset he gives us mostly a day-by-day account of the ordered, systematic work undertaken with each horse and their resulting learning process. The developing characters of the four horses are illustrated by tales of their reactions to their work and other activities that they are exposed to as part of their 'dressing', such as 'baths'! The reader gets the impression that they, too, are participating in the work with these youngsters (I found myself smiling at the tales of their antics and worrying about how one of them was going to cope with the next step). As their learning progresses the journal entries are usually organized on a weekly basis. The style and structure of the writing give a clear picture of the mechanics and timing of the overall training process, but far more besides.

The classical training 'system' and the author's philosophy

The picture painted of the approach to training at the farm is clear: there is a natural annual cycle that dictates the timing and place of the training process - outside in the round pen where most of the early work is undertaken before it gets too cold, in the indoor school where the riding starts during the bad weather, and back outside to the outdoor riding arena in late Spring and Summer. The farm's environment, including the seasons and their nature are interwoven with the day-to-day 'journey' of each of the horses there, and their trainers. The temporal pattern is firm and gives a sense of calm acceptance which is structured and directed by the underlying classical training 'system' Belasik adopts. Despite this systematic process, which provides such an important underlying structure to his work, Belasik explains his awareness of the need to adapt his practice to particular circumstances:

"I should make the point now that there has to be some flexibility in *any* system. All horses are different, but all horses are horses." (p4)

Belasik makes it clear that the training he undertakes seeks to develop the horse both physically and psychologically. In this sense the work on the longe in the round pen is essential (he makes it clear that he uses the round pen in a very different way to "any other system, including others that also use a round pen" (p33)). In this longe work the focus is on addressing "the natural asymmetries of the horse in the longitudinal and lateral fields of balanced motion." (p33) The reason for this is, of course, to teach the horse the correct posture so that future training can be progressive, successful and place less stress on the horse and thereby, hopefully, allowing the horse to enjoy a longer active life. However, there is another dimension - an ethical requirement that the classical trainer accepts:

"The classical trainer knows riding is *not natural* for the horse, and because of this, he or she has an ethical responsibility to prepare the muscles of the horse to carry the weight of the rider." (p33)

As the year progresses, the reader is party to Mr Belasik's reflections as he ponders and questions the strategies of training he feels are suitable for each of the four horses: such conversations make it clear that although he follows a classical 'system' of training, he considers each horse as an individual and tries to ensure that he fits the classical training process to each horse in the best possible and most appropriate way for *that* horse.

The main contribution of this book is not, to my mind, as a manual of how to start the education of young horses (even though a great deal of advice and information is given about this). What I think is so special about this book is the privilege we are granted in being able to listen to the trainer's reflections, self-doubts, triumphs, feelings of frustration, exultation, delight, relief and surprise – all these emotions are there and the reader is invited to share them. For example, sometimes we see him question and reflect on his chosen strategies, change his direction, and even return to earlier methods and decisions. We watch how his prejudices and hopes are challenged and fulfilled:

"Elsa is smart and (so far) compliant. I must confess I have to fight against a bias when I work with her. I worked with Elsa's full sister and found her to be a fantastic horse – intelligent, beautiful, a good mover. Opinionated but reasonable, she was one of my favorite horses to ride.

I have to make sure I don't compare the two sisters too much; I don't like the idea of having favorites. So I keep watching Elsa intently for signs that she will come into *her own* talents, and I am careful that my body language doesn't subconsciously emit displeasure for her being only who she is." (p28-9)

Belasik makes it clear that his approach is not a 'soft', easy one. The horses are treated as horses - animals that can be dangerous if not educated in good manners. He explains that the aim of early

training is “probably training the mind of the horse *how to learn* and *how to work* even more than you are training the body of muscles.” (p82) He summarises the classical training system in warning us:

“Always keep in mind that in this system of breaking horses, there is a layering process that is aimed toward the highest level a particular horse can achieve. You need to set boundaries, expect certain results, limit the dialogue, and be ready to back it all up.” (p82)

Throughout the book I get a strong feeling of the author’s love for these four horses and a deep sense of pride in their achievements – they are not considered merely as a future source of income and potential advertisements for their home farm and trainer. The reader begins to feel that they, too, know these four horses, Elsa, Corsana, Kara and Escarpa, and think about how they would tackle their training. It is fascinating to read how these four youngsters turn into beautiful adults, complete with their own ‘personalities’. Despite the systematic approach there is no feeling that Mr Belasik produces ‘carbon copy’ perfect horses as a result of his training process. On the contrary, we see how these horses are allowed to fulfill their potential as individuals and this depends very much on the trainer’s ability to see and understand them:

“They are all these individual puzzles, and if you want to get the best out of them, you have to find what they respond to and what ‘shuts them down.’ What parts of their personality can potentially turn into roadblocks, and how do we fix these *now* when they are still malleable?” (p81)

There are many comments throughout the book that give the reader an idea of the author’s philosophy towards the training of horses: my interpretation of this is ‘firm but fair’. Throughout, the emphasis in any process is on ‘safety’ (for horse and handler/rider). Words such as ‘force’ and ‘submission’ are not used but it is clear that each horse needs to learn to behave and to be respectful towards their handler/rider. He draws on his understanding of the way of horses when he explains:

“I think it would be irresponsible of me as an experienced trainer to say that in the handling of young horses one should never be harsh, never put a chain shank over the nose, and never give sharp half-halts with the bit. The reality is it will depend on the reactions of the individual horse as to how much energy you need to put into corrections. When you handle young horses on a daily basis for veterinary work, for shoeing, and training with nothing but a cotton lead line, there is a good chance you or somebody else will get hurt, including the horse, and you will be responsible for creating some very bad habits in a very large, powerful animal.

Horses are very social and have evolved in a hierarchy. In many cases they don’t care where they are in the social order, they just need to know they are in it. In-hand work, especially, develops the horse’s awareness of the trainer being in control of the space, and horses are keenly aware of spatial signals. The horse must move from mere signals of the trainer’s body, as he would from signals from the boss mare or lead stallion in a herd, and accept that even when seemingly pinned against the wall, the horse cannot step into the space, or worse, onto the trainer. He must respect that space and accept the handler’s control or leadership.” (p78)

The above quotation is lengthy but I feel it is important to provide it in full to ensure that the author is not misunderstood by those who may balk at the view that sometimes it may be necessary to act in (what some might consider to be) a ‘harsh’, or heavy-handed, way to correct a young horse. This immediate correction is important to ensure a well behaved and respectful partner. It is important that the above extract should not be taken out of context; indeed, it should be considered within the light of Mr Belasik’s concern for the continuous development of the trainer’s ‘judgment’. This judgment, I believe, directs and dictates the training process and is fundamental for a rich and successful application of the classical training system. The classical training system without judgment is merely a set of principles and methods; judgment is required to apply these principles and methods in an ethical and

systemic way, so that great and beautiful results may be attained. We see Belasik use and question his judgment throughout the book and when he is comfortable with it, he passes it on as advice. Such advice relates to what the trainer considers to be right/wrong, acceptable/unacceptable – both in terms of the horse's behaviour and actions and, of course, in terms of the behavior and actions of the trainer.

“When horses like Kara get so resolute, it can push some trainers to violence – but you have to find other ways of dealing with it. With horses that are fearless and smart, you have to be really careful...if, in an effort to avoid confrontation, you are always ‘getting creative’ and trying to outsmart them, your training methods have the real danger of becoming too complicated or sophisticated – you end up putting way too much time and energy and thought in resolving simple requests and demands. When you turn training into a series of games, you have to understand that in any game, one possible outcome is you can lose. Another is the horse can learn to like playing the game with no real interest in obeying the command that incited the game in the first place. The result is you spend more time playing games instead of getting progressive results.” (p82)

A strength of the classical training system is that there are fundamental principles, together with practical exercises based upon these principles to allow the trainer to work through any training problem that may be met along the journey:

“The beauty of the classical riding system is that there are enough alternatives in the exercises and equipment to address most problems without so many that the work becomes confusing to you or the horse. Still the most important part of the training equation is the trainer's perceptions and skill, not the gadgets and tricks.” (p129)

There are boundaries that will be set at various points of the training process and the horse must learn these and respect them. In return, the handler/rider acts with sympathy, empathy and consideration for the individual horse, but they must be attended to. The important point is that a considerable part of the setting of boundaries depends upon the ethics and judgments of the trainer- it is their responsibility and sometimes it is not easy to do the right thing:

“It is really important that the trainer knows how to both set boundaries and uphold them. This is pretty basic psychology, but even very intelligent and aware people have blind spots. Sometimes these stem from a physical fear – the horse is often over a thousand pounds, and if he wants to hurt a person, he can do so easily. Sometimes the fear is more of the possibility of loss – “the horse won't like me and I'll lose the friend” – other times it is a fear of confrontation that therefore avoids it to the point of capitulation. I can't tell you how many people I work with who apologize to the horse when they tighten up a side rein, or who back down every time they feel a bit of resistance, perhaps with an explanation like “the horse is tired so I'd better stop for today”.(p42-3)

We are then offered a sobering description of what happens when these boundaries have not been set by the responsible owner/trainer/rider:

Very quickly, in such cases, the horse begins training the rider. When it goes on too long, what does fear and 'kindness' such as this produce? It produces a very large animal that has little respect for humans, that has learned that every command is negotiable, and that thinks everyone has a price. The trainer helps develop a personality that is manipulative, as the smart horses often know that outright criminal resistance will force a societal reaction. So they don't push that hard or that violently, but they are persistent in their unwillingness. Horses have evolved in hierarchies, not democracies. They are especially perceptive of weakness and when they find it, they usually exploit it for their own gain. It is an instinct framed by millions of years of evolution. Most people who think of horses as pets never get a chance to have a satisfying relationship with one of them. Instead, these trainers or riders are in a sense physically frozen and psychologically unrealistic, convincing themselves that they are experiencing some physical or behavioral problem for all kinds of reasons, but not the real ones.” (p42-3)

As the book's story unfolds we are reminded, constantly, of the importance of the classical training system. We see that it is responsible for putting in place boundaries, not in a harsh, sudden and oppressive way but by a step-by-step layering of acceptable behaviours and ways of going that are shown, directed and encouraged by the trainer using the appropriate methods and equipment:

"When you look at this system I have learned and used, it is an impressive metaphor. In the beginning it is all about safe, fair, consistent, and substantial boundaries. The young horse is tethered to me by a longe line. I don't let him run around in haphazard circles. I have leather side reins, and an almost unbreakable cavesson and surcingle. We train in a round pen with a high fence. We have backups for the backups to ensure the young horse learns the rules and has correct body posture so the work ahead can be a successful experience. Establishing boundaries has to be done early when the horse is malleable, and it has to be done correctly the first time. Everyone's life can be enriched when the horse is protected by the good habits he has been taught." (p43, 46)

Belasik appears to take on some current topics of debate in the dressage world head-on. This is refreshing. For example, one cannot help but hear the comments from such debates in the background when he says:

"To make blanket judgments that all nosebands should be loose on all horses is myopic. Although the classic principles are universal, each horse is an individual, and as we have seen, each needs constant individual adjustments of training and equipment. With the addition of the flash, which I don't need to make very tight, Corsana's transitions improve dramatically – now instead of just opening her mouth to avoid the bit, she has to think about a new way to yield, and this new way is a more correct way of flexing in the poll so the whole body can learn to coil or extend like a connected spring." (p136)

We are back to the question of 'judgment' – the trainer must develop judgment so that sensible and appropriate decisions can be made to inform action. It is not good or healthy to be in a world where action is led by bland generalized statements by those wishing to ensure that unknowledgeable and inexperienced people do not cause suffering. Those with judgment, acquired by practical experience, learning, reflection and a clear personal ethical standpoint do not need such blanket 'rules' imposed on them.

He also tackles what may be a characteristic resulting from the influence of the modern world of social media which encourages everyone to have an opinion. He takes great care to explain the difference between 'opinion' and, what I would call, 'informed opinion' (developed through education, reflection and experience). He gives an example of the way modern dressage is perceived and differences explained:

"It is easy to say that a preference for one type of movement over the other is just a different expression of taste, and as an observer, I am entitled to have my own opinion. People who drink wine break down the rules of protocol all the time, but there is a big difference when you start accepting or preferring wines that are made badly. That is not a matter of your right to an opinion, it is a matter of your lack of education." (p76)

Training of the young horses

Above I have highlighted what, for me, are the most important themes of this book and these have tended to be of the more theoretical, epistemological kind. However, the story of the development of these four horses provides the author with the opportunity to discuss certain common and interesting practical difficulties in the training process. The one issue that is discussed several times in relation to the different horses, and one which is so fundamental to the training of a dressage horse, is that of how

to encourage the horses to seek and accept the bit (whilst on the longe and/or when ridden) and to take it up, forward, and out as opposed to curling over the top of the bit. Belasik explains his actions in such circumstances:

“I start to demand more with the longe line. In Elsa’s case I’ve already been pretty active with the line because I had to use the *arrêts* to try to get her to pick her head up and to prevent her from curling her neck and head behind the bit when I shortened the side reins ... so she is used to the idea of half-halts on the longe line. Escarpa, on the other hand, has needed very little correction, so he is not used to me taking tugs on the longe line.” (p52)

Later on we see the problem reappear when the horse is ridden and the discussion focuses on how difficult but important the correction of this problem can be:

“I think one of the most difficult things for riders to learn is how to get the horse to flex in the poll without the neck ‘curling’ or over-flexing. When you allow the neck to be carried to[o] low, you are training the horse to keep his weight on his forehead. Subsequently, the hindquarters are too light and will not, along with the back, learn to carry weight – which is the very reason for being a dressage horse.” (p60)

Further advice on how to correct a horse’s unsteady reaction to the bit places firm responsibility on the rider and their skill and judgment and gives an example of how a rider without appropriate skill can make an effort to correct one ‘problem’ and, unwittingly, create another:

“The rider must have a good seat to correct it [an unsteady contact] because it cannot be fixed by pulling back on the reins. Your back must always be ready to block these ‘challenges’ with a passive hand, while your hips and seat continue to encourage the horse to keep moving forward. Many riders can brace the back to stop the horse from pulling them forward, but because they are unable to separate the upper back from the seat, they stop their seat as well. So although they let the horse discipline himself for grabbing the reins, they are ruining the rhythm. Good riders discipline the horse by blocking aggression toward the bit while keeping their seat dictating the rhythm so the horse keeps going. The ineffective rider makes the ‘big lesson’ stopping; the better rider makes the big lesson continuing on with forward rhythmic motion.” (p108)

When problems arise, the horses are either taken back to the longe in the round pen or worked in-hand. Kara seems to have been the most complex horse of the four to school. At the end of the book we hear she has started to understand the nature of her relationship with the human beings around her:

“It has taken a long time for her to realize that we aren’t interested in making her totally subservient, but we will issue directions, and they aren’t all that bad.” (p136)

The writing

Without doubt, Belasik is a story-teller and a poet. This is evident in most of his work and this book is no exception. He pulls you in, using all your senses, until you are there. Here the writing is confidential and we get the feeling that we are standing by the round pen watching from the sidelines as he works the horses. We can feel the calm and hear the muffled sounds of the horses working in the indoor arena. Sometimes we could be sitting comfortably in the farm house in the evening, wood fire crackling, surrounded by books of the old masters, discussing the day’s training sessions and planning tomorrow’s. These sensations of reader involvement are impressions but some passages allow you to see, smell and feel the time and place:

“It snows at the farm all day Saturday, through until Sunday morning, at times accumulating as much as an inch every hour. When it stops, we have almost 2 feet of powdery beautiful snow. The skiers will be

ecstatic. And today, in the bright sunshine and with plowing done, the farm looks like a folk painting.”
(p63-4)

And after the hard winter, Spring:

“Maybe because of all the snow cover and the wetness of this last winter, it has been a banner spring. When the locusts finish, the wild vines of honeysuckle along fence lines and guide wires bloom faint white yellow trumpets, sending out a gardenia-like fragrance. Then the drier almost anise-like scent begins from the wild roses – impenetrable bushes with razor sharp thorns.” (p116-17)

I love such descriptions that allow me to see and smell the picture painted. In fact, I am not sure what attracts me to his work the most - his words or his horses? Having written this, maybe the answer is obvious – they are inextricably entwined, symbiotic.

End words:

I was thoroughly engrossed in this book over several evenings. We have a young horse just starting and I found lots to make me smile in recognition of an issue or habit that my own horse, or I, was demonstrating. I learnt, or was reminded, about ways of tackling certain issues. I also loved the story. If I was to wish for something more in the book then it would be further information on how in-hand work was used. I guess the topic is too large to cover adequately within the scope of the book but a couple of times we are told that, on certain occasions, in-hand work was used to refocus the horse or correct a particular way of going. I would very much like to know more about the use of this way of training but within the context of the overall training approach (in the same way as we are told about the longing process).

The only disappointment I felt came at the end when the author’s narrative finishes. Three of the horses have been bred and dressed to be sold so it is clear to see how this story must finish at the end of their first year of training but I am left wanting to know more: following their journey thus far I have an emotional stake and practical interest in their development. Maybe one day we may hear more of their stories. Whatever happens, I wish them all long and wonderful lives.