

## Interview for NY Times by Gigi Meyer 05-21-2005

Gigi Meyer (GM) watched Katja Elk (KE) work with Decimus, a beautiful upper level dressage horse with international show records, which came to Katja for rehab work as a remedial (bucking) rehab horse. At the time of the interview, Decimus was under Van Snow's, DVM, medical supervision and located at his clinic and training facility Santa Lucia Farm in Santa Ynez, California.

GM: I'm hoping to find out a bit more about your own history with horses and where you see your work taking you in the future. Also, how is Decimus doing?

KE: Deci has made some great steps in the last few days. We have been able to work out some of the bucking issues to a minimum now. Yesterday he only 'went up' twice and I was able to keep him going pretty smoothly for most of the time. Lots of reassurances, low adrenaline, no 'big deals' about anything, we just keep flowing... He is learning that -- no matter how long it may take -- I am there for him. I have to prove myself worthy of his respect and trust every day. That means that the schooling aids on the ground and under saddle need to be very discernible and consistent.

When I ask the horse for a move his reaction needs to be prompt and willing, and the positive feedback needs to be immediate (release of pressure) followed by praise. If the horse did not respond appropriately it will go back to work and I will try to be more clear (not harsher) with my request.

I have learned that you have to believe that your horse will do well (and he will!) and that you need to work with a smile on your face. It translates directly into the horse's mind and body. It is amazing how Deci's worried eyes turn softer and how a gradual relaxation of muscles can be observed while he is starting to trust that things are going to be alright. The level of willingness to work together is growing. I have time for him and he feels it.

GM: I was most impressed when watching you with Decimus – your patience, kindness and your rhythmic feel as you walked and steered him. I know rhythm and timing are important to horses and critical in dressage. Is this something you think about consciously when you work?

Timing and rhythm are always of great importance when working with horses. The way you are walking when you work with a horse on the ground and the way you determine the horse's rhythm when you ride him shows him your state of mind, your intentions and your level of self confidence. These qualities are crucial for a horse's sense of survival because they need to feel that you are a (trust-) worthy leader whom they can follow safely .

The dominant (alpha) horse in a herd controls all other horses' speed and direction. For example, if a predator attacks a herd, the alpha mare will lead the herd in terms of speed and direction towards safety. All horses know this and the immediate, synchronized movement of a herd in a dangerous situation is a crucial part of their behavior patterns to ensure survival.

When I work a horse on the ground and under saddle, he will follow my movements in the most basic terms of relaxation and tension, speed and direction. I use this knowledge as a tool to focus his attention, to have him follow my direction and to fine-tune his responses while gradually 'raising the bar'

of training levels. I take the time to develop a horse's response system on the ground and under saddle. Rythm, suppleness (relaxation) and contact need to be in place before moving on to impulsion, straightness and collection. These are the elements of the training scale for classical dressage. It is of great importance to follow these training elements while considering each horse's individual mental and physical development capacity. Each horse has different time requirements. Commercial pressure often leads to short cuts and pushing horses forward faster than is natural and beneficial to the horse's developmental well-being. Patience. Kindness. Time. These elements need to be part of the horse's training at all times. Horses are gifts to us, and we need to honor their presence by creating joyful partnerships with them.

You can calm a nervous horse by riding him from your seat in a rhythmic slow trot rather than letting him race around so he 'can let some steam off.' By letting your horse run forward in a hectic rhythm while you are on him you confirm his belief that there must be something scary that you both need to run away from. The rider does not exude any reassuring trust or leadership qualities which can, in the worst case, lead the horse to believe that he will be safer without the rider on his back.

Do I think about rhythm and timing consciously? Yes, because I have a plan (which of course can be changed if the situation requires it) for each session when I ride or work a horse on the ground. Precise timing can only be achieved when there is a conscious thought about what it is that you want to do during each moment of your working session. On the other hand a lot of the timing issues become second nature as you become more experienced. I have always had a pretty good sense of rhythm which helps but it's almost like learning how to play an instrument. In the beginning you have to think of every note you are playing and with lots of practice you become more fluent.

GM: I hope you don't mind my next question and if you'd rather not discuss it – no need to respond. When you mentioned you had fibromyalgia, I started thinking about pain and "sensitivity." I'm wondering if your ability to help remedial horses has been influenced by your own experiences with pain.

KE: I don't mind your question. I believe that it is very important to use all our experiences (good and bad) to tap into a higher level of empathy and understanding when we are dealing with other living beings, and especially with horses.

Living with a chronic pain illness, fibromyalgia, continuously reminds me of what it means to deal with physical pain. I don't feel sorry for myself, I have learned to manage the pain and even value it at times because I am constantly aware of the mental and emotional state of mind that it can cause when it comes to evaluating horses behavior. Does a horse buck because the saddle doesn't fit right, is he in need of chiropractic adjustments, are spurs and whip being misused, or might he have emotional scars that lead him to have flashbacks of pain due to his associative thinking? It is amazing how many people witness a painful action being carried out against a horse without being able to truly empathize. Consequently they don't feel that it is necessary to change the action. So the horse has a sore from an ill-fitting saddle, no big deal, right? Wrong.

I have experienced some very intense times, physically as well as mentally, in my life. Some of them have to do with emotional scars left by an abusive relationship. I know what it is like to be dominated by a stronger being, to be hit, to be afraid for my life, to feel hopeless or angry, to try to break out, even to resort to aggressive behavior because the level of desperation seems to become unbearable. I think that

having lived through certain ordeals has sharpened my senses and my timing when it comes to handling and riding horses.

Horses are by nature highly sensitive, generous creatures whose behaviors are often misinterpreted. It takes a well-rounded knowledge about both the horse's and the rider's psychology and physiology to be able to treat and ride a horse fairly. Holes in the rider's understanding of certain physical and psychological aspects often lead to feelings of helplessness, being stuck, anger, frustration which quickly lead to more forceful means to get „thought to the horse.“ The horse cannot make the connection between the rider's actions and what he is supposed to do. Depending on the level of the rider's forcefulness and incorrect riding the horse will eventually shut down (learned helplessness) or respond with resistance of varying types.

When working with a horse that, due to abusive handling, has become literally 'untouchable' it seems that I can enter his 'zone', my body and mind almost become one with him. I know when to advance and when to leave him alone, on the ground and under saddle. The intensity of the feeling when the horse will finally let me touch him is mind-blowing. Working with horses and having them come back to their original selves where they can be ridden in a relaxed, joyful manner and thrive while being able to unfold their own unique personality is an incredible gift. And what a great treat when young horses can be fostered along these lines from the beginning.

I am glad that life has thrown me a few curve balls. And I have been extremely blessed by a number of master teachers with whom I have been privileged to study. I wouldn't be able to do what I love to do, work with horses on all the mental, physical and emotional levels to this degree if I weren't continuously being 'schooled' by each horse that comes into my life.

GM: Thank you so much. I'd love to speak with you further as you continue on your quest to make these tools available to many more horses and people.