

It began with a HORSE

RÓISÍN MAGEE catches up with international horseman Warwick Schiller about his new direction in training



Warwick Schiller had been a successful international horse trainer and clinician for 20-odd years when he and his wife, Robyn, bought a new reining horse; the previous owners were having some trouble with him.

This little horse, Sherlock, was the trigger for a radical change, not only in how Warwick trained horses, but in how he thought about himself and his place in the world, and prompted him to go on a fascinating journey through horsemanship, connection, nature, shamanism, ice baths, martial arts and much more.

Good morning, Warwick! Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to NZ Horse & Pony. I have to ask – why such a fundamental change after so long?

Before we bought Sherlock, I had millions of views on Youtube, I was teaching clinics around the world and what I was doing was working. Every single horse that came to a clinic, left better... some remarkably better!

What causes a person to change is

when you get a horse where what you know doesn't work, and this is exactly what happened to me with Sherlock. Sherlock wasn't bad; in fact, he was a very good, functional reining horse, but his level of shut-down was preventing him from becoming a great reining horse. When I realised nothing I tried was helping, I stopped trying to do anything with him and started thinking about what to do next. The big number of horses coming through my clinics gave me a lot of opportunities to practise ideas.

I am a great believer in getting the horse you need when you need him.

What is a 'shut-down' horse?

If you think about levels of anxiety, 'shut down' is more than anxious; you get there because there was something about a situation that concerned you, but that concern got too much. When I went to Africa I saw a wildebeest being eaten alive by lions and she lay almost completely still; this state is a survival mechanism.

Horses are very good at physical shut-down because they don't want to show any weakness to predators, but they are also very good at shutting down

mentally. The key to getting a horse out of shut-down is connection; not asking for anything but simply letting them know you are aware of them.

How did Sherlock change your approach?

Before Sherlock, I was the end of the line for many dressage horses, eventing horses, bolting horses, rearing horses... some people sent me their horses because I wear a cowboy hat, and they thought I was going to 'ride the buck' out of them, which was the complete opposite of what I did. I didn't use terribly aversive tactics to fix them, actually. In fact, what I used to do isn't bad or ineffective, but there is a deeper path which you can go down. It's a little more work for you, but it's a little less work for your horses. It's a bit more truthful, whereas to do what I used to do I had got quite good at covering stuff up – though not in an aversive way! But you take away a little bit of the horse in order to make them fit into today's world.

Martin Black, a well known horseman, said: "Sometimes you can bring the person up to the level of the horse, but sometimes you have to bring



the horse down to the level of the person.”

I guess my old way was to bring the horse down to the level of the average horseperson, but what I’m working on these days is bringing people up to the level of the horse. A lot of it has to do with your outlook on life, your self talk, your judgements. I’m a big quantum physics fan! It’s the observer effect – what you perceive as going on in front of you will affect what actually is going on in front of you, because your energy will change. People often respond a certain way to horses because of past trauma, not necessarily what is happening directly in front of them.

Like Sherlock, I had spent most of my life very shut down, and since Sherlock made me realise this, I’ve done a bit of unravelling of various issues. The reason I share my story is because in unravelling, the horses got so much better for me, without me actually being better at horses. I would like people to understand that how their horse responds to them has a lot to do with the stories in their head; the energy and trauma they carry, and the unsolved stuff. Many people want help with behavioural issues, but often it’s less about the problem they report and more to do with how they themselves view the problem.

One aspect of your work that really stands out is how positive you are. A lot of horse people complain about what they see as bad or incorrect

ways of riding or training, perhaps out of frustration because they feel there is a better way. This can create a negative and unfriendly atmosphere where people are afraid to ride in public, and accusations of bullying, especially on social media. Why are you so positive?

I was in a Western store in America recently, and there was a sign on the wall with the silhouette of a man kneeling in front of his horse, next to a cross. It said “the best sermons are lived, and not preached”.

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I don’t tell anybody they’re doing it wrong. I tell them what I used to do, what’s currently working for me and what changes I’ve made, because I really think that that if you want to change things, you don’t tell people they’re doing it wrong. You lead by example.

One of the biggest changes in my life personally was becoming aware of judgemental thoughts and changing those thoughts. The horse world, especially in Australia and New Zealand, is very judgey. When you get rid of judgement, everything changes.

Tristan Tucker, a horse trainer who works primarily with dressage horses, told me that when someone says something mean to him on Facebook, he goes to that person’s profile and thinks something positive about them: “don’t they look happy” and this is really powerful. It’s the same with horses. If you think your horse is a jerk, he will be.

Can we talk about personal space, to illustrate how your change of thinking has changed your approach?
I used to be the ‘personal space guy’ with

horses. The rules were: I can go into your space, but you can’t come in to mine. This approach is based on dominance theory, which came from observing horses in captivity with limited resources. In the wild, this isn’t necessarily the case – herds of horses are alliances rather than hierarchies.

The way I used to think about personal space definitely keeps people safe, which is the priority, but there are different ways of doing that. If you tend to look at things as adversarial, you will respond in kind, but these days I am all about connection

first. It’s not about whether a horse can or can’t come in to your personal space. Really, it’s about having an equal amount of draw and drive. If you had 100% drive, as soon as you appeared on the horizon your horse would run away. If you had 100% draw, your horse would run into you and through you.

You are trying to have a balance where you can draw them to you if you want, but it’s very easy to push them away, much in the same way that a herd of horses would move.

If a horse wants to come up and engage, as long as he is connected and I can get him to yield away from me, there is no such thing as too close. If a horse pushes into me, however, that isn’t connection. People allow this a lot and it causes problems, because it’s juvenile behaviour. Once a foal is weaned, the herd does not allow this sort of behaviour. If the weanling gets too close, the horse might nip or kick, not to say “You can’t be this close” but rather, “If you’re close, you need to be aware of me.”

At the heart of the matter, horses are mammals and mammals want to connect. If you have firm personal space boundaries, you are basically telling the horse: “I don’t want to connect with you.” Horses are great. They’ll do whatever you want and accept the lack of connection. You can even train them to be very, very obedient with very little connection, but it is so much better to have the connection, because then a lot of your safety comes from that connection and their awareness of you.

Warwick says that if you want to make change, you lead by example, rather than judging people, or telling them that they are wrong

How important is your wealth of experience to how you work with horses now?

I like to quote Sir Richard Branson: “In order to break the rules, first you have to learn the rules.”

What I call my former, skills-based approach, the process I developed to work with horses before Sherlock, was a way to learn the rules of horses.

My new approach breaks the rules but it’s not a purely relationship-based approach; the relationship comes first, but I still want skills.

A lot of people who are really intuitive but not very skilled get along well with their horses, but maybe their flying lead changes suck. You have to have a process as well as intuition and connection.

I used to have a process, but no connection; since I discovered connection I still have a process but I can do less and I do things differently. It might not look different, but my internal energy has changed.

Previously, the way I worked with horses created a low-level tension that affected how supple they were.

I got very good at teaching horses how to release that tension, without realising that I had created it in the first place. Now I don’t cause that tension, and it’s amazing how easy the work is as a result.



Let me be clear: the correct technique with the wrong intention does not work.

Do all ‘good’ riders have this connection?

Sometimes good riders are very good oppressive riders. They’re very good at making the horse do what they want it to do, but the horse isn’t really ‘into it’.

I heard a story about a very well-known rider, who got on a green off-the-track thoroughbred who was hollow-backed. Half an hour later, the horse was moving beautifully, “just like a warmblood”.

The horse hadn’t changed. The rider was strong enough to make the horse move that way, but if you put someone else on, the horse would go back to exactly how it was before.



Warwick says his greatest skill is patience, and the ability to set up a situation and let it happen

long way by being a very nice person! What would be a good first step for anyone reading who would like to start down the path that you are on? With any horse it's all about communicating, as many times as you can, how aware you are of the little things. That is what will make horses relax. Horses don't want to go back to the herd because of the physical protection of the herd, it's the awareness of the herd.

As I approach my horse, if he looks up at me, or away from me, I'll stop – just to let him know I noticed that he noticed. Most horses, once they realise you're aware of them, will come straight over to you.

I call this "relationship before horsemanship"; acknowledging any little change before you ask the horse to do anything. It's easy to do, if you are present!

We've had another lockdown here in New Zealand, so a lot of people haven't been riding much. I see you put up a series of videos on YouTube about reconnecting with your horse during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Have they been popular? I've had a huge amount of feedback in response to these videos. For sure it makes the horses better, but something changes in the people just by doing it, because you have to be present. As Jane



A rider I recently interviewed for *NZ Horse & Pony* had trained a horse which sold overseas for what would now be \$750,000. When asked what the horse was like to ride, he said, "The less I did, the better he went." I found it striking that his response to this very talented horse was to do less, not more. I was interviewed recently, alongside Dr Gerd Heuschmann and Dr Andrew McLean, and asked for my thoughts on skilled riders. I laughed, because I don't consider myself a skilled rider. I can't do it for the horse. I can get the horse to offer it to me, but I can't make the horse do anything.

My greatest skill is patience. I have the ability to go with the flow, set the situation up and let it happen, rather than make it happen. I think skilled riders can

make horses do things the horses haven't really offered.

If you want to get a horse under control, the first thing you have to do is give up control yourself and that's what most people find hard. For me, one of my under saddle basics is the horse has to be able to walk, trot and canter on a loose rein with no contact. They have to be able to control themselves before I ask them to do anything.

A lot of people see that as very advanced, you know – saying, 'Oh my fourth level dressage horse could never do that!' But for me this is very basic.

What great messages: horses are a lot more capable than most people think they are! And you don't have to be an amazingly skilled rider – you can get a

Pike of the Confident Rider likes to say: "If you're doing the work focused on the outcome, you're not doing the work."

The first video suggested people sit down in the paddock with their horse with no expectations. The next exercise was to go out and match steps with their horse; to match steps you stand a certain distance from them and move your feet as they move theirs. Again, with no expectations, so not with any plan to catch the horse or ride it, or whatever.

You have to do the work without thinking about what the work is going to do for you. It's not easy, but it's simple...

Another unusual feature of your approach is that you are very open and collaborative. Your podcast (*Journey On with Warwick Schiller*) is in large part a series of interviews with interesting thinkers from all corners of the horse world, and as a result there is an incredible range of different ideas and views being presented. How did the podcast come about?

I was at home because of Covid and I'd thought about doing a podcast, and the first few guests I had were so amazing I wanted to continue having those sorts of guests. There isn't much training information on there, but everyone I have interviewed has a spiritual side that they may not usually talk about. People might think they got good because they got good, but you really can't get good unless you have that connection to something.

The guests have taken it in a completely new direction and as a result it has become more than just a horse podcast. I've heard of mental health professionals recommending it to their colleagues, or even their patients.

For me, I feel it is important to be open about what I'm doing because I'm an educator and I feel that the best way to teach is to share personal stories. When I talk about the changes I've seen in the horses as a result of the changes I've made in myself, I'm just planting a seed.

Maybe the best message from your podcast is that you can train your horse yourself?

One of the slogans my son came up with for the business was: "You are the best person to train your horse."

I have found that a middle-aged lady who doesn't have a lot of horse experience can be a better horse trainer than a lot of professionals. Peer pressure can encourage people to do more than they should be doing. I am unbelievably slow with my horses these days.

That's a great note to end on. Thank you very much for talking to us! ■

If you would like to find out more about Warwick's approach, you can find his library of videos at www.WarwickSchiller.com. Check out his *Journey On* with Warwick Schiller podcast wherever you get your podcasts.

Mens Gibson Print Logo Long Sleeve Shirt
Classic western styling with medium geometric print and western chest pockets, one with pen holder. Western front and back yoke, contrast fabric trim on inside collar stand and sleeve cuffs. Logo back neck embroidery and Wrangler Logo sleeve embroidery. 100% Cotton Print. Navy. Sizes S - 4XL

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