

BELLE
By Pete Dillingham

The snow in Alpena Michigan was a foot deep, dusk approached, harsh winter winds died and temperatures dropped. Tom and his draft horse "Belle" had been skidding logs most of the day and were ready to call it "quits". The sturdy draft leaned forward and gracefully slid the last two large logs down an ice glazed path. The teenager trudged behind the mare, deftly dodging the logs while using his lines to guide Belle home. Suddenly Tom slipped and when he tried to regain his balance, his left foot landed in a space between the two traveling logs. In what seem like slow motion, he watched the two lumbering giants close their gap and grip his leg. "Whoa Belle" burst from the youth's lips and the timbers halted. The old mare stood quietly, Tom took a deep breath, thanked his horse and worked to release a sore ankle free from the entrapment. The young man unhooked the load, climbed on the old draft's back and rode home to safety.

One of the most valuable tools of communication we have with our horses is our voice. Intonation and words travel faster to our animal's comprehension than reins, legs, or even our balance. It's unfortunate that we frequently misuse or abuse our vocal aids.... For instance, half the horses you know think that their middle name is "Whoa". That single terminology could mean "I'M SCARED", "SLOW DOWN", or "STOP".

Here are some guide lines to developing good voice communication with your horse:

1. Your verbal requests should be consistent. Always use the same signal for the same request.
2. Use intonation to introduce your animal to words. Horses will comprehend sounds faster than words, but frequent use of intonation with words will help your steed identify vocabulary.
3. Generally speak in soft tones. Continuous harsh tones will either frighten or turn your horse's hearing aid off. Save your louder tones for emergencies.
4. Once you know your horse can identify a word, expand the definition. For instance "Eazzzi" vs. "Easy", or "git" (Talking to one horse in a heard) vs. "GIT" (starting a stampede).

Vocal communications with your horse can be fun, give you and your animal more interaction, and possibly save your life! Tom now lives in Wyoming, has a cattle ranch, rides horses and doesn't walk with a limp. He and Belle understood each other.