

Iredell CITIZEN

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Maggie Shoobridge/CITIZEN

BILL STACY and Mister "jaw" during training.

"...and who can talk to a horse, of course?"

THE FAMOUS MR. BILL

Maggie Shoobridge
IREDELL CITIZEN

HE'S TWO YEARS OLD, BUT EVERYONE calls him Mister. He is a quarter horse stallion who needs to learn some manners and Bill "The Horseman" Stacy is just the man to teach him.

Bill Stacy speaks softly but doesn't need the big stick. He uses a natural horsemanship method called Round-a-bout. It's a gentling process gathered from many books, clinics and instincts. Some call him a horse whisperer.

"Once you understand the horse, how he acts and thinks in the wild, you use that information to put yourself in the position of herd leader," Stacy tells a group at an informal class held at his farm in east Iredell. "Horses are insecure without a leader or direction because, in the wild, that is when they are most vulnerable."

This is the first time Mister has been handled. With just a rope halter, Stacy pokes his hand in Mister's mouth, moves the horse's head back and forth and has him step back and then up again as he offers pointers to the group.

"If they'll give you their head, literally and figuratively, that is a good sign," Stacy says. "Giving into pressure is a good test for trainability."

Many people think the whispering goes one way but Stacy listens to his horse's nonverbal cues just as Mister listens to his.

"Horses are unbelievably perceptive," he says. "They know posture, tone of voice and even facial expressions." Stacy uses all these to gain Mister's trust.

The pair moves toward the round

pen for the first time. Mister is skeptical but makes the step. Stacy then works at getting Mister used to knowing who is in charge.

"At first it is like leading a cat," Stacy says. "But you have to let him know who is in charge. If it isn't you, guess who it is."

Stacy dominates Mister by casting him out of the herd (chasing him around the pen). The object is to get Mister to look to Stacy for leadership. After a lot of hard work, Stacy steps over and offers guidance. Mister complies and has his nose to Stacy's shoulder, following him like a puppy.

Depending on the horse, this "join-up" can happen on the first try or can take up to three weeks or more. Once this join-up is accomplished, and Stacy is considered by the horse to be the Alpha male, the rest is easy, relatively speaking.

Line driving is the next lesson. Here Stacy guides Mister as if he were remote controlled. During the lesson, Stacy stands in the middle of the pen giving cues through ropes, much like he would if he were driving Mister from a cart.

"You can do anything from here that you can do under saddle," Stacy said. "It's just a lot safer to do it from 25 feet away for the first time."

Not long after declaring Mister ready, Stacy is ready to ride him.

"I think of the first ride like a NASCAR race," Stacy says. Everyone wants to see a wreck, but doesn't want anyone to get hurt. If anything is going to happen, it will happen today."

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