

California Riding Adventure

Listening is on the itinerary during the Join-Up® In the Saddle Tour in Australia.

by Sarah Borrey

Once in a while unexpected opportunities become our greatest adventures and fondest memories. This summer, I accompanied Charlotte Bredahl as she participated in Monty Roberts' Join-Up® in the Saddle Tour in Australia.

Monty Roberts is a world-renowned horse trainer who developed Join-Up®, a violence-free method of training young and problem horses. Charlotte is a respected dressage trainer and competitor and won a dressage team bronze medal at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. The third trainer on Monty's tour was Rob Horne, an Australian trainer versed in Monty's Join-Up® method and an expert horseman and trainer in his own right.

Along with Monty, Rob, Charlotte and, lest I forget, Monty's fabulous crew, this tour of Oz (Aussies love to shorten words with more than two syllables, so "Oz" is short for Australia) was just that and more. It was filled with fabulous animals, friendly folks and magical moments.

This tour took us to Melbourne and Perth, which are on the west and east coasts of Australia, respectively. (We also stopped in Sydney for a couple of days.) During each demonstration, Monty started the day with Join-Up® demonstrations, focusing on young, un-started horses and problem horses. Rob and Charlotte worked with horses under saddle, starting with Rob, who discussed the early stages of training a young horse, and then Charlotte, who outlined the development of

the horse as a riding partner up through the upper levels of dressage. Each demonstration was quite successful with attendance nearing 2,000 people in each city!

Watching trainers such as Monty, Rob and Charlotte work with horses they had never met was as close as we get to magic in the horse world. Their expert timing and finesse when handling horses were awe-inspiring. They demonstrated that great trainers think alike: Their success is founded in establishing a genuine conversation with horses. Whether the conversation occurs when a horse joins-up with Monty in the round pen, or Rob trains a problem horse out of a bad habit, or Charlotte explains to her dressage horse how to perform a complicated movement, these trainers do not just talk at their horses, they also listen to them.

Monty's work in the round pen focuses on communicating with the horse in the language of the horse. Monty's demonstrations began, appropriately, with "starters," young horses that had not yet been ground schooled or backed. Next, he usually worked with a "problem horse," a spooky or rambunctious horse. What's notable is that Monty never meets the horses he works with before a demonstration. As Monty worked with a horse in the round pen, he only used body language to communicate. Within minutes the horse responded in kind, "listening" to Monty with his inside ear turned toward Monty. In this manner, each horse accepted Monty as his or her leader

by "joining-up" with him (the moment the horse willingly chooses to approach Monty) and ended up under saddle without force or fury. Every time, the process took place as a two-way conversation between the horse, who learned to trust Monty, and Monty, who communicated that he would be a fair leader.

The Conversation Continues

Rob focused on the early phases of training a young horse. He applied the principle that a lead horse shows her status by requesting movement from the other horses and asked the horse to move her haunches, first on the ground and then under saddle. This way, he explained, the rider communicates to the horse that he is the leader of the horse-rider unit. Building on the Join-Up® method by adopting a style of communication that is innate and clear to the horse, Rob showed how to establish a good foundation of respect between a horse and rider.

Just as Join-Up® is a two-way "conversation" between Monty and the horse, Charlotte explained that a good rider should build upon basic principles and always "listen" to the horse. Both of the horses lent to Charlotte were wonderful high level horses. The first, Victor, was a Friesian-cross owned and obviously cherished by Sheree McConachy. The second, Armani, was a gorgeous and sweet Warmblood-cross owned, bred and trained to Grand Prix by Tyana Lawless. We had great times sharing horse (and other animal)

The 3 trainers on their horses in Perth - Rob Horne, Charlotte Bredahl and Monty Roberts.





Sarah Borrey and Charlotte Bredahl on the ferry in front of the Opera House in Sydney.

stories with Sheree, Tyana and their moms, who did not miss a beat to keep the horses looking their sharpest!

Although Charlotte rode very experienced horses, she started her demos as if her horse was green to demonstrate the first basic principle she teaches: for the horse to move forward and then sideways off her leg. Next, building on the importance of the inside leg, Charlotte showed that transitions between gaits involve yielding to the inside leg just before any transition. Through figure eights across the arena, Charlotte showed that bend also comes from the horse yielding to the rider's inside leg as she repeatedly changed from left to right bend. Each of these exercises taught the horse the function of the inside leg, while Charlotte communicated her aids without strain, force or tedious repetition. Her emphasis was on communicating in clear building blocks to progress to more difficult movements.

Charlotte also explained that, as our horses attempt to understand what is asked of them and, as their bodies must develop to perform more difficult movements, the rider should always have empathy with her horse. Again, this empathy comes through listening to our horses. As Charlotte demonstrated more and more difficult movements, she explained that progress should occur only after listening to the horse to determine whether the horse is ready for more difficulty. For example, Charlotte began each demonstration at the rising trot. She explained that young horses should be ridden at the rising trot because it is much easier for them to carry their rider, balance themselves and swing their back as she is posting than if she was sitting the trot. She stated that a young horse will "let you know" when he is ready for his rider to sit the trot. In other words, we must listen to our horses as they develop their physical strength and capacity, not assume or force anything.

Charlotte warms up all of her horses at the rising trot and only starts sitting the trot after she feels her horse is well warmed up. She advised riders to think of their horse as an athlete in training. Through many more similar examples, Charlotte made it quite clear that successful training of a horse under saddle depends on good communication, which means clear aids, but also listening to the horse's body language.

On and off the horse, through Join-Up[®], horse psychology or basic dressage principles, Monty, Rob and Charlotte shared that their secret is none other than patience, a systematic approach and, above all, listening to the horses.



Charlotte Bredahl with a koala.

Big, Beautiful Country

The demonstrations weren't the only fantastic moments during our tour of Oz! Australia is not like any place I had ever visited. It is vast, exotic and full of surprises. Cities grew great distances from one another, separated by seemingly endless stretches of "bush" (that's Aussie for brush or wilderness). Where we expected to see deer, we saw pods of hundreds of kangaroos lounging during the warm part of the day and gaily hopping around at dusk. Because it was spring in Oz, there were countless joeys peeking out of their mom's pouches, as if they were playing hide and seek with us. And, let's not forget the koalas, Tasmanian devils, wallabies . . . and huge fruit-eating bats!

Finally, there are the Aussies. Warm, genuine and full of humor, the Aussies were the best part of our trip. Meals with the entire crew were without exception filled with friendly banter and joking, as if we had all known one another for a lifetime. Of course, understanding the Aussie accent was sometimes quite a challenge. Not only do Aussies love to truncate words so they end with either "o" or "ie"—vegetarian becomes "vejjo" and electrician, "sparkie." They also love acronyms and contractions. Finally, either our hearing was completely failing us, or Aussies really do talk with their mouths closed! They told us that historically, it was safer to talk with the mouth barely open to keep out flies, mosquitoes and spiders, but we're still wondering if they were pulling our leg.

So, you wonder, how did I end up on this fun and magical tour of Australia? A few years ago, I started managing Charlotte's website (www.bredahldressage.com), and it didn't take long for us to strike up a wonderful friendship. When Charlotte's husband could not accompany her on the tour, Charlotte remembered my interest in Monty's Join-Up[®] method, and she kindly invited me to join her on this trip. I certainly never expected that working on a website would lead to a tour of Oz, but it just goes to show that you never know where the yellow-brick road may take you.



Author Sarah Borrey lives and rides in Northern California's Morgan Hill. She has a 2-year-old by Charlotte Bredahl's stallion, Windfall, she trains with Erica Poseley and she loves dressage for many reasons, most notably because it requires both focus and calmness.

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