

HorseFirst Biomechanics™

Welcome to the Conversation

Every HorseFirst journey begins here.



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Founder of EquiMotion

Welcome to the Conversation

Horse First Begins With the Rider

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Disclaimer

This publication is intended for educational and informational purposes only. It is designed to encourage thoughtful observation and understanding of rider movement, horse behaviour and the relationship between horse and rider.

The ideas presented in this book are not a substitute for professional medical, veterinary, physiotherapy or coaching advice. Every horse and every rider is unique, and readers should seek appropriately qualified guidance where necessary.

Horse welfare and rider safety should always remain the highest priority. Readers are encouraged to work within their own experience, ride appropriately equipped, and seek professional instruction when introducing new ideas into practice.

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Before We Begin

Before you turn the page, I'd like to ask just one thing of you.

For the next little while, try to leave behind everything you think you already know about riding, not because it isn't valuable, but because curiosity has a remarkable habit of revealing things certainty sometimes cannot.

You don't need to agree with everything you read, you don't need to change the way you ride, and you don't even need to finish this book in one sitting. I'd simply invite you to remain open to the possibility that your horse may have been quietly contributing to the conversation all along.

As riders, we're often taught to look for answers. HorseFirst begins by encouraging us to look for better questions.

If nothing else, I hope these pages encourage you to pause a little longer, to observe a little more closely and to become curious about the conversations that are already happening every time you spend time with your horse.

Because perhaps...

The conversation has been there all along.

Sarah.





Chapter One

The Conversation Changes Everything

If you've found your way here, I'd like to begin by making one simple assumption – and that is, that you care deeply about your horse.

Perhaps you're reading this because something doesn't feel quite right. Your horse may feel different on one rein, struggle with a particular movement, or seem to be asking questions you don't quite know how to answer. Perhaps you've lost confidence after a fall, are riding with discomfort, or simply have the quiet feeling that there must be another way. Not another gadget, another exercise or another training method, but a better way of understanding what is happening every time you and your horse come together.

Whatever it is that has brought you here, a very warm welcome to a better way of riding.

Over the years, I've worked with riders from many different backgrounds. Some have been complete beginners, others experienced competitors. Some wanted to improve performance, while others simply wanted to enjoy riding again. Their stories were all different, but beneath those differences I noticed something that never really changed.

Every rider wanted to understand.

Not just what their horse was doing, but why.

Why did one transition always feel harder than another? Why did balance seem to disappear at the exact moment confidence did? Why could one rider make something look effortless while another, trying just as hard, felt as though they were constantly fighting their own body?

Those questions fascinated me, and over time they led me down a path I never expected to follow.

Like many riders, I spent years searching for answers. I studied biomechanics, rehabilitation, movement, rider performance, neuroscience and equine therapy. Every course, every qualification and every horse added another piece to the puzzle. Each taught me something valuable, but none of them, on their own, ever felt like the complete picture.

Then something started to change, I stopped looking at the horse and the rider as two separate subjects to be understood, and started looking at the relationship between them instead, how they interact as one partnership, and that simple shift changed everything, as I found most were not interacting at all, instead the rider was mostly leading for their own purpose.

I began to realise that horses aren't simply responding to the aids we think we're giving them. They're responding to us – to our movement, our balance, our breathing, our confidence, our timing and, often, to patterns within our own bodies that we're no longer even aware of, the horse experiences all of it.

Equally, I began to understand that riders rarely choose to move the way they do deliberately. The human body is remarkably intelligent – It protects, adapts and compensates in ways that often make perfect sense, even if those patterns become frustrating in the saddle. What looked like poor posture or bad habits often turned out to be the body's best solution to a much bigger problem.

Neither horse nor rider was getting it wrong, they were simply responding to the information available to them, they really were just doing the best they could with the bodies they had available to them on that day.

That realisation became the foundation of everything that would eventually become HorseFirst. Not because I'd discovered a revolutionary new technique, but because I'd started asking different questions. Instead of asking, "How do I fix this?", I began asking, "What is this trying to tell us, or, why is that even happening in the first place?"

It's a surprisingly simple question, but it changes the way you look at almost everything.

This book isn't about teaching you to ride in a particular way, nor is it about replacing good coaching, veterinary care or the many excellent approaches that already exist within the horse world. Instead, it's an invitation to pause for a moment and look at the partnership between horse and rider through a slightly different lens.

As you read the pages that follow, I don't want you to worry about remembering every detail or searching for quick fixes. I'd simply encourage you to stay curious, curious about your horse and curious about your own body. Curious about the conversation that is already taking place between you and your horse, every single time you come together.

Because before we can change the conversation, we first have to notice that one already exists. and once you begin to notice it, it's very difficult to see your horse in quite the same way again.

So...

Welcome to the conversation It's time to start asking better questions.

HorseFirst Principle

The conversation changes everything.



Chapter Two

Every Ride Is Already a Conversation

On every occasion you spend time with your horse, a conversation is taking place.

It doesn't begin when you pick up the reins or ask for the first transition. It begins long before that. It begins as you walk into the yard, depending on how your day at work went, your horse knows how it left you feeling. As you open the stable door, or you approach your horse in the field.

As you tighten the girth, groom your horse, or as you stand quietly beside them before putting your foot in the stirrup. Long before either of you takes a step, information is already being exchanged.

Most of us think about communication in terms of the aids we consciously give. We think about our legs, our hands, our seat and our voice. We spend years learning how to ask our horse to move forwards, turn, stop, bend or transition more effectively. Whilst those things are important, they are only a very small part of the conversation.

Your horse doesn't just experience your aids, they experience you – They feel how you breathe, they feel where you carry tension after that last stressful meeting at work, they feel when your balance changes due to the aching pain in your lower back. They feel the moments when your confidence disappears, even if your smile says everything is fine, there's no hiding from your horse.

They notice everything, they notice when your body prepares for something before your mind has even caught up – you saw that pigeon on the fence and braced in anticipation of the spook you know is coming, the horse had seen it long before you, but only saw it as a threat when he felt the panic in your body ... so he spooked.

For many years I believed that becoming a better rider meant becoming more accurate with my aids. And, of course yes, accuracy matters. But eventually I realised that my horse was responding to much more than the questions I thought I was asking. Sometimes I was asking two completely different questions at the same time without even realising it, I might have been asking for softness while holding my breath, I might have been asking for balance while sitting unevenly without even knowing it.

The horse wasn't confused because they were difficult, they were confused because my conversation wasn't always as clear as I thought it was, and that sat with me as quite a humbling realisation.

It's easy to assume that because we know what we intend to ask, our horse experiences that same message. But intention and communication are not always the same thing. Imagine having a conversation with somebody who is smiling while their body tells you they are anxious. Or someone who says they're relaxed while their shoulders, breathing and posture tell a completely different story. Most of us would instinctively believe the body, and horses do exactly the same, but they don't judge us for it – they simply respond to the information they receive.

This isn't about blaming the rider, nor is it about suggesting that every challenge the horse is facing begins with us, as that certainly isn't true. Horses have their own histories, personalities, physical limitations and emotions, tack matters, training matters, veterinary care matters, good coaching matters.

HorseFirst simply asks us to remember that every interaction we have with our horse becomes part of their learning, every conversation leaves an impression on the horse, but the question is whether that impression is the one we intended to leave.

HorseFirst Biomechanics TM asks us to widen the picture - Instead of asking only,

“What is my horse doing?”

We begin asking,

“What might my horse be responding to?”

It's a subtle difference, but it changes everything.

Because the moment we become curious about the conversation, we stop looking for someone or something to blame. Instead, we start looking for understanding, and true understanding has a remarkable way of creating better questions, with those better questions often leading to better answers.

By now, you may already be thinking about your own horse.

Perhaps you're remembering a transition that always feels rushed, a left bend that never feels quite right, a movement you've practised over and over again without really understanding why it remains difficult. Please don't worry about solving those things just yet, but instead I ask that you simply notice them – notice what your horse might be telling you, notice what your own body might be contributing.

We spend years learning how to speak to horses, perhaps the better question is... Have we ever stopped to learn the language they're already speaking? Horses don't speak words, they speak movement, balance, tension, trust, and they speak with remarkable honesty.

The wonderful thing is... once you begin to understand that language, you start to see the way the horse has been speaking all along. HorseFirst simply teaches us to notice the whispers before they become shouts.

HorseFirst Principle

Horses don't speak words, they speak movement.



Chapter Three

A Day Through Your Horse's Eyes

I'd like to ask you to do something that may feel a little unusual so bear with me on this! For just a few moments, I'd like you to forget everything you know about riding, forget about your lessons, forget techniques, forget transitions, dressage tests, jumping courses and training methods, forget whether you're a novice rider or an experienced competitor.

Instead...

I'd simply like you to imagine that, for one ordinary day, you are your horse – Imagine standing quietly in the field as the morning sun begins to warm your back, you can hear the gentle tearing of grass beneath your feet, the quiet movement of the herd around you and the familiar sounds of birds in the hedgerows. Life is calm, predictable and uncomplicated.

Then, in the distance, you notice someone approaching, you don't recognise them because of the colour of their jacket, or the make of their car, or the sound of their voice. You recognise them because of the way they move, but today they're walking quickly towards you, you notice that their shoulders seem a little tighter than yesterday and their breathing is different. Perhaps they've had a stressful morning, perhaps they're worried about something, perhaps they're excited. You don't know why but you simply notice that today feels different.

Long before they reach the gate...The conversation has already begun.

They clip on your headcollar – perhaps they pause for a moment and rub the place behind your ears that always makes you soften, or, perhaps they don't, as they throw the headcollar over your ears in haste, it catches you on your eye, you flinch away and then immediately receive a reprimand for resisting the headcollar, because they missed that part of the conversation.

Perhaps they're already thinking about today's lesson, today's competition or the list of jobs waiting for them when they get home.

Again...you don't know why, you simply experience them.

As you walk together towards the yard, you quietly match their rhythm. If they rush whilst dragging you behind while replying to a message on their phone...you feel it. If they breathe deeply and relax...you feel that too.

Every tiny change in the person beside you becomes information, not because you're analysing them, but because that's how horses survive. For thousands of years, your safety has depended upon noticing the smallest changes in the animals around you. You notice tension long before words, you notice breathing long before explanation, you notice movement long before intention – It is simply the language you speak.

Now imagine standing quietly while you're groomed. The brush moves across your back, some strokes are slow and thoughtful, but others feel hurried. The person beside you may think they're simply removing mud from your coat but you experience something very different. You're experiencing touch, pressure, rhythm...presence, or sometimes...the absence of it.

Then comes the saddle, the girth, the familiar routine – some days everything feels comfortable but other days something feels different, not painful enough to shout but sometimes care hasn't been taken to make sure your saddle cloth is lying flat on your back, and its rubbing a little, or maybe your noseband is one hole tighter than normal and it's holding your jaw tight.

You don't understand saddles, or biomechanics, or why your human has suddenly started sitting differently over the past few months, you simply experience what arrives on your back.

Then they mount.

Sometimes they arrive softly, balanced, quiet, sometimes they pull themselves into the saddle with more effort than they realise, perhaps one knee doesn't bend quite as easily as it once did, perhaps an old hip injury means they twist more on one side or perhaps their shoulder has never quite recovered from a fall years ago. They don't mean to land heavily, they're simply doing the very best they can with the body they have today, you don't know any of that, you simply feel the landing and notice how it makes you feel.

And then...the ride begins.

Or perhaps more accurately...

The conversation continues, because for you, it never really stopped.

Every breath, every shift in balance, every tightening of a rein, every moment of confidence, every moment of uncertainty, every hesitation, every smile, every protective movement, every quiet sigh, you feel all of it. Not because you're looking for faults, not because you're judging but simply because this is how you experience the world. You have no idea what happened at work that morning, you don't know about the old knee injury your rider has been protecting for years, you don't know they're worried about today's lesson, or nervous because they fell from another horse six months ago, you don't know they're trying as hard as they possibly can. You simply experience the conversation their body is having with yours today.

And perhaps...That's the most important thing to remember – your horse never experiences your intentions, but that your horse experiences your actions and the remarkable thing is that they respond to all of it with extraordinary honesty. Not because they're trying to make life difficult, but because they're answering the only conversation they know how to hear, perhaps that's why the smallest moments matter so much, perhaps the conversation has never really been about riding at all. Perhaps It's always been about understanding.

As riders, we naturally spend a great deal of time thinking about what we want our horse to do, we think about rhythm, transitions, straightness, bend, collection, confidence, performance. But horses don't experience our goals, they experience us. They experience the person sitting quietly on their back asking them questions, the person they're trying to understand. That doesn't make the rider wrong for having goals or a purpose to a ride, but it does remind us that every conversation has two participants.

Eventually the ride comes to an end. The girth is loosened, the saddle comes off. Perhaps you give your horse a quick pat before turning them back out into the field or putting them in their stable, for you, the ride is now over, and your horse simply returns to grazing.

Or do they?

Perhaps they carry away the soothing memory of a calm conversation with you. Perhaps they carry tension that neither of you noticed.

Perhaps they leave feeling more confident than when they started, perhaps less so.

Every interaction leaves an impression on your horse, not because horses keep score but because that's how they form their future behaviour – every conversation teaches something.

This chapter isn't asking you to change anything.

Not yet.

Instead, I'd simply invite you to become curious, the next time you visit your horse, notice the moments you usually overlook, notice how they greet you, notice how they stand while you groom them, notice what changes as you tighten the girth, notice the first few minutes after you mount, notice what happens when you breathe out.

Notice what happens when you stop thinking about riding and simply spend a moment together.

Because before we ask our horses to understand us...Perhaps we first need to understand what it feels like to be them.

And perhaps the most remarkable thing of all is this...Our horses rarely begin by shouting, they almost always begin with a whisper. The question is...

Are we listening?

If your horse could write one page about your last ride together...

What do you think it would say to these questions?

Field – “What did your horse notice before you noticed them?”

Grooming – “When was the last time you groomed simply to spend time together?”

Mounting – “If your horse could describe the way you mount, what would they say?”

Riding – “What question did your body ask today?”

Untacking – “When did today’s conversation actually end?”

Your horse doesn’t wake up in the morning wondering how they can make your ride difficult. They don’t stand in the field planning to drift through one shoulder or struggle with canter transitions. Like us, they’re simply responding to the body they have, the experiences they’ve had and the information available to them in that moment. Once we begin looking at horses this way, something remarkable happens.

Every behaviour they give us has a reason, that doesn’t mean every behaviour is desirable and nor does it mean every behaviour should be accepted, but before we decide how to change something in the horse It’s worth asking why it exists in the first place.

HorseFirst Principle

Trust is built through every conversation.



Chapter Four

Every Behaviour Has a Reason

By now, I hope you're beginning to see your horse a little differently.

Not as an animal that simply carries us from A to B, nor as a collection of movements to be trained and refined, but as a living, feeling individual who experiences every interaction we share with them.

If Chapter Three invited you to stand in your horse's shoes for a while, this chapter invites you to look at something many of us have been taught to see very differently.

Behaviour.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give our horses is the willingness to pause before we react and ask a simple question.

“What might this behaviour be trying to tell me?”

That one question changes everything – Instead of asking only “How do I stop this?” we begin asking “Why might this be happening?” The difference may seem small, but in reality, it changes the entire conversation.

Your horse doesn't wake up in the morning wondering how they can make your ride difficult. They don't stand in the field planning to fall through one shoulder, lean on the reins, rush into canter or refuse to stand still while you mount. Like us, they're simply responding to the body they have, the experiences they've lived through and the information available to them in that moment.

Once we begin looking at horses this way, something remarkable happens, frustration begins to soften and curiosity quietly takes its place.

For many years we've become very good at describing negative behaviour. We can identify napping, spooking, rushing, bucking, drifting, leaning, resistance, tension and countless other labels. Those labels can certainly be useful, but labels only describe what happened – they rarely explain why.

HorseFirst is not interested in stopping at the label – HorseFirst begins where curiosity begins.

Imagine your horse struggles to maintain a balanced canter on one rein, one approach is to ask how we can correct it, but another is to wonder what your horse might be finding difficult.

Is something uncomfortable?

Have they become weaker on one side?

Have they learned to protect themselves after a previous injury?

Could today's footing feel less secure than yesterday's?

Or perhaps...

Is the person sitting on their back unknowingly making the task more difficult?

Notice something important here, none of these questions place blame, they're simply better questions, than how do I correct the problem.

The same is true for us as riders – perhaps your horse drifts left, your instinct might be to use more right rein and more left leg. But what if your horse isn't choosing to drift?

What if they're quietly responding to a rider who has spent years protecting an old knee injury? What if a stiff ankle changes how weight is distributed through the saddle? What if reduced movement through one side of the ribcage alters balance without the rider ever noticing?

The horse doesn't know about old injuries, they don't know about surgery, arthritis or yesterday's long day at work, they simply experience the movement arriving on their back on that day, they answer the question your body asks, whether you realise you're asking it or not.

This way of thinking can feel a little uncomfortable at first, not because it makes us feel guilty, but because it gently reminds us that behaviour is rarely random, instead it is information. Sometimes that information points towards the horse, sometimes it points towards the rider. Often... It points towards the relationship between the two.

HorseFirst isn't about searching for someone to blame, It certainly isn't about deciding whether the horse is right or the rider is wrong, instead It's about recognising that every partnership is made up of two bodies having one continuous conversation.

When something changes, the conversation changes too. Sometimes the horse speaks first, sometimes the rider does, sometimes neither realises they've started talking.

Perhaps this is why truly great horsemen and horsewomen often appear to have extraordinary intuition, they aren't simply better at giving instructions to the horse, but they're better at noticing, they notice tiny changes before they become obvious, they recognise whispers long before they become shouts, they remain curious when others become frustrated and its that curiosity allows them to ask different questions.

Different questions lead to different answers, and different answers create different outcomes.

The purpose of HorseFirst is not to convince you that every behaviour has one single explanation, in fact quite the opposite – It's to encourage you to resist accepting the very first explanation that comes to mind, because behaviour is rarely caused by one thing alone instead it is often the result of many small influences coming together...The horse, the rider, the environment, previous experiences, physical comfort, confidence, available movement options – and the conversation between them all.

So before we reach for another training aid, or change the bit, tighten the noseband, label our horse is being stubborn...Perhaps we pause, we watch and we breathe and we become curious enough to ask...

“What reason might my horse have for answering me this way today?”

Because once we begin asking better questions...We almost always begin finding kinder answers.

Before You Turn the Page...

The next time something doesn't go as planned, resist the urge to correct it immediately.

Instead, simply notice.

- What happened?
- What happened just before it?
- Could your horse have been answering something you hadn't yet noticed?
- Could your own body have asked a different question than your mind intended?
- If you approached the same moment with curiosity instead of correction, what might you discover?

Perhaps every behaviour really is part of the conversation, but perhaps we've simply been listening to the wrong part.

HorseFirst Principle

Trust is built through every conversation.



Chapter Five

The Body You Bring

Every rider brings two things to every ride: the body they have, and the body they wish they had. Most of us spend years trying to ride with the second one, we picture the rider we'd like to become; balanced, supple, confident, independent and symmetrical. Then, often without realising it, we become frustrated when our own body quietly reminds us that today it isn't quite there yet.

HorseFirst begins somewhere much kinder. It begins by accepting the body that arrived today, not the one that existed ten years ago and not the one we hope will exist next year. Today's body. Because that's the only body your horse will ever meet right now.

Every one of us carries a movement history – Old injuries, operations, hours spent driving, children carried on one hip, long days at a desk, sport, falls, broken bones, confidence gained and confidence lost. Some stories are dramatic, while others are almost invisible, but every one of them leaves its mark. Not as weakness, but simply as history.

The remarkable thing is that our bodies rarely announce these changes. Instead, they adapt, quietly, very, very quietly – a little less movement here, a little more effort there, a slightly different way of standing up, turning, reaching or balancing and little by little, over time these adaptations become normal and we stop noticing them.

But our horses don't.

Perhaps you've been told to sit straighter, relax your shoulders, keep your hands still, use more inside leg or soften your contact. So you try, of course you do, and for a few moments everything changes, until, almost without thinking, your body returns to the movement pattern it already knows.

Not because you failed, and not because you weren't listening. Your body simply wasn't choosing between right and wrong, instead it was choosing what felt possible and safe. This is where HorseFirst Biomechanics parts company with simple correction, because we cannot expect the body to choose a movement that it does not yet have available. Before we ask for better riding, we first need to create better movement.

That doesn't always mean becoming stronger in the traditional gym sense – sometimes it means becoming freer, sometimes it means becoming more aware, and sometimes it means discovering that a movement you believed was impossible has simply been unavailable. There is an important difference to these.

Think about a locked door, pushing harder rarely opens it but finding the key often does. The human body is much the same, and whilst effort certainly has its place, effort without movement options often creates compensation rather than lasting change.

This is why two riders can receive exactly the same instruction and produce completely different results. The difference isn't determination, talent or commitment – It's availability. One body has access to the movement being asked for, but the other does not.

Yet.

Perhaps this is where we need to rethink what improvement really means. Improvement isn't forcing yourself into a position that your coach suddenly says is correct. Improvement is gradually increasing the number of movement choices your body has available to be able to instinctively find the best position. The more options you have, the clearer your conversation becomes. Not because you've memorised better technique, but because your body has more ways to respond, in any situation.

When riders discover new movement options, something wonderful often happens. The horse changes before a single aid has been consciously improved, transitions become quieter, turns become more balanced and the contact starts to soften.

Not through force, not through repetition.

But because the conversation has become easier for both participants.

Perhaps this is why riding should never begin with correction, but should begin with curiosity, curiosity about your horse, curiosity about yourself, curiosity about the body you brought with you today.

Because that body is not a limitation – It's simply where today's conversation begins.

Before You Turn the Page...

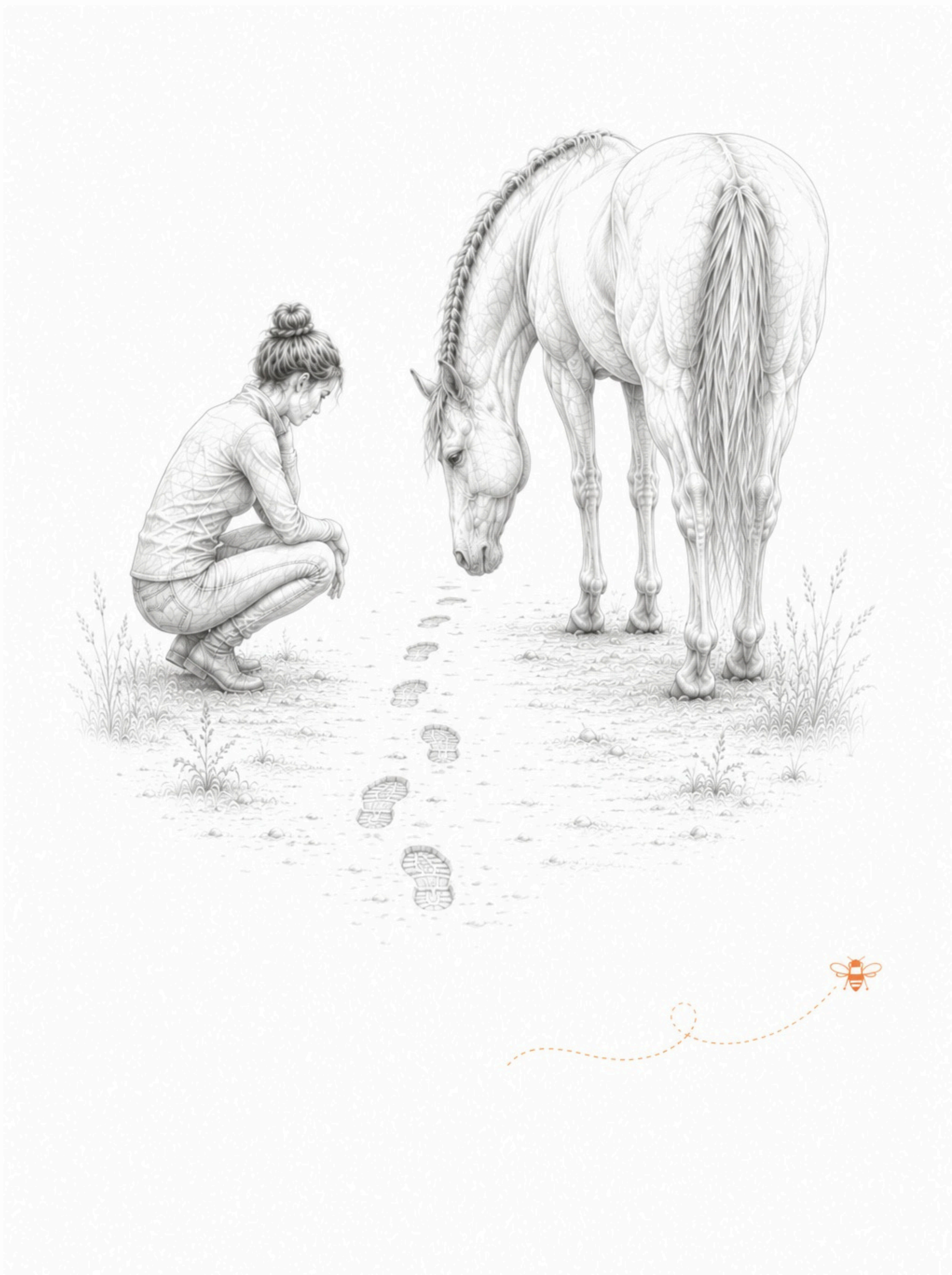
The next time you ride, forget about looking correct.

Instead, ask yourself:

- Where did my body feel free today?
- Where did it ask for help?
- What movement felt easy?
- What movement felt unavailable?
- If I stopped trying to look like a rider, and simply became myself, what would my horse notice?

HorseFirst Principle

Trust is built through every conversation.



Chapter Six

Learning to See Movement

By now, we've explored the idea that every ride is a conversation. We've looked through our horse's eyes, questioned the behaviours we see and begun to understand that our own body is just as much a part of the conversation as our horse's.

The next question is a natural one.

How do we actually begin to see that conversation?

For many years, I believed I was observing movement, but In reality, I was observing rider positions.

Like many riders, I noticed whether someone's shoulders were level, whether their heels were down, whether their hands were quiet or whether they appeared balanced in the saddle. I thought I was watching movement, but I was really looking at shapes. There is an enormous difference.

Movement isn't a collection of positions linked together. It is a continuous story unfolding from one moment to the next. Every joint, every muscle and every breath influences what happens somewhere else. The body is constantly adapting, constantly solving problems and constantly searching for the safest and most efficient way to move on the horse.

Most of the time, it does all of this without us ever realising.

One of the greatest lessons I have learned throughout my own journey is that the body is incredibly intelligent. When movement becomes difficult somewhere, the body rarely gives up. Instead, it simply finds another way. If one area becomes less available, another often works a little harder. If one joint loses movement, another may borrow some of the work. If one side feels less secure, the body reorganises itself to keep us moving.

At first, this is remarkably clever. After all, these adaptations allow us to keep walking, working, riding and living our lives. The challenge is that over time, adaptations have a habit of becoming habits, and over time, what began as a temporary solution quietly becomes our normal way of moving.

Eventually, we stop noticing, but our horses don't.

This is one of the reasons horses can sometimes feel as though they know us better than we know ourselves.

Long before we notice that one hip has become a little stiffer, that one foot pushes less effectively into the ground as we walk or that one shoulder has become more protective than the other, our horse has already begun responding. Not because they're analysing our movement, but simply because they're experiencing it – they don't know whether you've had surgery, they don't know that you fractured your ankle fifteen years ago, they don't know your neck still stiffens when you're tired or that an old fall quietly changed the way you organise your body. They simply experience the conversation that arrives on their back today.

Perhaps one of the greatest misconceptions about movement is that our body always does what we ask it to do, in reality, it does something far more interesting – It does what it trusts. Our brain is extraordinary, and every second of every day it processes enormous amounts of information without us ever becoming aware of it. It constantly asks one simple question:

“Does this feel safe?”

If the answer is yes, movement flows. If the answer is uncertain, the brain often limits movement long before we consciously notice anything is wrong, and not because it wants to hold us back, but because its first responsibility has never been elegant movement, instead Its first responsibility has always been protection. That protection may have begun after pain, after injury, after fear or simply after years of repeating the same movement in the same way. Whatever the reason, the body quietly learns what it believes is safe, then it repeats it, day after day and ride after ride.

This changed the way I looked at riders forever – instead of asking ...

“Why can’t this rider sit evenly?”

I found myself asking,

“What movement might their body no longer trust?”

Instead of asking,

“Why won’t they soften their contact?”

I wondered,

“What is their body protecting?”

Instead of trying to correct what I could see...I became fascinated by what I couldn’t, because hidden beneath every visible movement is another story waiting to be discovered.

As I continued studying human movement, something else became impossible to ignore, and that is (just like our horses) the body doesn’t move as isolated parts, it moves as a whole. A restriction in one place rarely stays there, it ripples, a foot that no longer moves freely influences the ankle, the ankle influences the knee, the knee changes the pelvis, the pelvis changes the spine, the spine influences the shoulders, the shoulders affect the hands. And before you know it, that old ankle injury is the cause of your uneven hands, but by the time those hands reach the reins, the conversation may have begun much further away than anyone expected. Perhaps this is why changing our hands so rarely changes the conversation for long, the hands were never the beginning of the story.

This is also why trying harder is so often disappointing, most riders are wonderfully committed to improving their riding – they listen carefully, they practise, and they genuinely want to improve. Yet so many find themselves hearing the same instruction year after year...

“Relax your shoulders.”

“Sit taller.”

“Keep your hands quieter.”

“Use more inside leg.”

They try, and keep trying, of course they do – sometimes it even works for a few minutes. Then, quietly and almost without noticing, their body returns to what it already knows, its old habits and patterns, certainly not because they weren’t trying, but because the body cannot consistently choose a movement that it doesn’t yet fully trust.

The answer is rarely more effort. The answer is often more understanding.

Over the years I realised that before we can improve movement, we first have to learn how to observe it, not to judge it, not to score it and not to compare it with somebody else's, but simply to understand it. Every rider carries a unique movement story and no two stories are the same. Some are shaped by sport, some by work, some by injury, some by motherhood, some by confidence or fear. But absolutely every story leaves its fingerprints on the way we move, and the more clearly we understand that story, the more intelligently we can help the body write the next chapter.

This understanding eventually became the foundation of the HorseFirst Explore process.

Not because I wanted another assessment, as there are already many excellent assessments, instead I wanted a way of helping riders see themselves differently – To understand the movement choices they currently have available in their body, to recognise the compensations that have quietly become normal, to discover possibilities they may not even realise have been waiting beneath the surface all along.

Explore doesn't begin by asking, "What's wrong?"

It begins by asking, "What story is this body telling us today?"

Because once we understand the story...Everything else becomes clearer.

Every Explore assessment is built upon three simple principles.

The first is that every body tells a story – movement is never random. Every adaptation, every compensation and every habit has developed for a reason. Our job is not to judge that story but to understand it.

The second is that movement comes before strength. We cannot strengthen a movement that the body cannot first organise, before we build capacity, we must first create possibility.

The third is that awareness comes before intervention. We cannot change what we cannot yet see – understanding is not the end of the journey, but it is always where meaningful change begins.

Perhaps that is what HorseFirst Biomechanics has really been about all along – not learning to move differently, but learning to see differently. Because when we begin to see movement more clearly, we stop chasing perfection, we stop fighting our bodies, we stop blaming our horses, and instead, we become curious. And curiosity has a remarkable habit of revealing possibilities that correction never could.

Before You Turn the Page...

The next time you watch someone walk, resist the temptation to decide whether they look right or wrong.

Simply notice.

Notice where movement appears effortless.

Notice where it looks protected.

Notice how one part of the body quietly influences another.

Then ask yourself one simple question:

If movement tells a story... what story might my body be telling my horse every single day?

HorseFirst Principle

Trust is built through every conversation.



Chapter Seven

Restoring Possibility

By now, you've probably recognised something of yourself within these pages. Perhaps you've found yourself thinking about an old injury you'd almost forgotten, or maybe you've started noticing that one side of your body simply feels different to the other. Perhaps you've realised that some movements have gradually become more difficult over the years without you ever really noticing when they changed.

If that's happened, I'd like to share something that I believe is one of the most hopeful truths about the human body.

The body is always learning.

That means it can also keep learning.

For a long time, I believed that once movement had been lost it was simply something we had to accept. If a joint became stiff, if balance changed or if one side quietly became stronger than the other, I assumed those changes had become permanent. It wasn't until I began studying movement more deeply that I realised how wonderfully adaptable the body really is. After all, it has spent your entire life adapting. It has adapted to injuries, to work, to sport, to stress, to confidence and to fear. It has adapted to operations, long days sitting at a desk, years spent driving and countless little experiences that you may not even remember. Every one of those experiences has shaped the way your body moves today.

If the body has been capable of adapting in one direction.....It can also adapt in another.

I find that incredibly reassuring because it reminds us that our movement story is never finished. One of the greatest misconceptions about movement is that improvement simply comes from trying harder. We're often told to stretch further, strengthen more, sit taller or work harder, and while effort certainly has its place, effort on its own doesn't always create change. Sometimes it simply teaches the body to become better at the old movement pattern it already knows.

Imagine asking somebody to speak a language they've never learned. No matter how determined they are, trying harder won't suddenly give them new vocabulary, and movement is much the same. Before the body can choose a different movement, it first has to discover that the movement is available.

This is why HorseFirst uses the word Restore for the second phase of our pathway.

Not because we're trying to return you to the person you were twenty years ago, and not because we're chasing perfect posture or textbook rider biomechanics. Restore simply means helping the body rediscover more efficient movement choices that have quietly disappeared over time.

Sometimes those choices have been hidden by pain, sometimes by injury, sometimes by habit and sometimes by years of protecting an area that once needed protecting but perhaps no longer does – a limp for example following a knee injury. Whatever the reason, the body has become very good at using the safest solution it knows.

Our job isn't to force it into another one.

Our job is to gently introduce the possibility that another option exists.

Think back to when you first learned to ride a bicycle. At the beginning, every tiny movement demanded your attention. Balance felt uncertain, steering felt awkward and every correction required conscious thought. Then, gradually, something changed and your body stopped thinking about balancing because balance had become something it trusted.

Movement changes in much the same way – The nervous system doesn't learn through force, but It does learn through experience. Every time a movement feels safe, comfortable and successful, the body quietly stores that information. Given enough positive experiences, it begins to trust that movement a little more and eventually, what once felt unfamiliar starts to feel like the new normal.

This is why the smallest changes often have the biggest consequences – A foot that moves a little more freely, a ribcage that rotates with less effort, a neck that no longer feels the need to protect itself quite so much.

Individually, they may seem insignificant, but together they can completely change the conversation your horse experiences. Not because you've consciously changed your aids, but because your body has found more ways to organise itself.

People often ask me which exercise they should be doing, It's an understandable question because exercises feel like solutions, but over the years, however, I've found myself asking a different question altogether.

“What movement is this body ready to rediscover?”

The exercise itself is rarely the answer, It's simply one of the tools we use to help the body find it, which is why no two HorseFirst journeys ever look exactly the same.

Two riders may both struggle with sitting trot, yet the movement each of them needs to rediscover may be completely different. One rider may need more freedom through their ribcage, another may need to trust loading one leg again after an old ankle injury, while somebody else may simply need to breathe differently. The destination may appear the same, but the journey rarely is, because every body has lived a different story.

Something else begins to change during this stage too – the relationship we have with ourselves.

I've met countless riders who have spent years feeling frustrated with their bodies. They apologise for them, criticise them and sometimes even blame them for holding their riding back. Restore invites us to see things differently.

What if your body hasn't been working against you all this time?

What if it has been working incredibly hard to protect you?

What if the movement patterns you dislike today were once the very thing that helped you cope with pain, injury or uncertainty?

Suddenly the conversation changes again. Instead of asking,

“Why can't I do this?”

We begin asking,

“What does my body need before it feels safe enough to do this?”

Those are very different questions – one creates frustration, and the other creates possibility. And as our bodies begin to discover new possibilities, something remarkable often happens, the horse changes too.

Not because we've corrected every aid, not because we've achieved the perfect position, but because the conversation arriving on their back has become quieter, clearer and easier to understand. Perhaps that has been the purpose of Restore all along – not fixing the rider, not changing the horse, but simply helping both discover that they have more possibilities than they realised. Because every new movement your body begins to trust becomes another conversation your horse is finally able to hear.

Before You Turn the Page...

The next time you notice something that feels difficult, resist the temptation to force it.

Instead, ask yourself:

- What movement might my body no longer trust?
- What movement might simply need another opportunity?
- Am I trying to create effort, or am I creating possibility?
- If my body believed this movement was safe, how might it feel different?

Sometimes the greatest breakthroughs don't begin with trying harder.

They begin with discovering that another possibility has been there all along.

HorseFirst Principle

Trust is built through every conversation.



Chapter Eight

Evolve

People often ask me how they'll know whether HorseFirst is working, It's a wonderful question, although I don't think it has the answer most people expect.

When we begin a journey with our horse, it's natural to hope for visible change. We imagine straighter transitions, softer contact, more expressive movement or higher competition scores. Those things may well come, and they should certainly be celebrated when they do, but in my experience they are rarely the first things that change.

The first changes are usually much quieter – your horse begins to wait for your aids instead of preparing for them, mounting becomes uneventful rather than something to manage, standing still no longer feels like obedience – It simply feels comfortable.

Transitions become calmer, corners stop feeling like negotiations, the contact becomes lighter, not because you've consciously tried to create lighter hands, but because your horse no longer feels the need to organise around your body.

The conversation begins to flow instead of feeling interrupted.

Perhaps that is one of the greatest signs that both horse and rider are evolving together. The horse is no longer trying to interpret conflicting information, and the rider is no longer trying to control every movement. Instead, both begin responding to one another with greater clarity.

Something else often changes too, It happens long before you climb into the saddle – you notice it when you walk into the field, or when you open the stable door. Perhaps your horse walks towards you more readily, perhaps they lower their head more easily when you put on the headcollar, perhaps leading feels more relaxed.

None of these moments are isolated from riding, they are all part of the same conversation – trust has a remarkable habit of appearing everywhere.

Many riders believe confidence comes first, but in reality, confidence is often the result. As your body begins to trust movement a little more, your horse begins to trust your body a little more. As your horse becomes easier to understand, you begin trusting yourself a little more, confidence quietly grows in the space between the two.

Nobody forces it and nobody teaches it, instead it simply emerges because the conversation has become easier for everyone involved.

One of the greatest misconceptions in riding is that evolution means becoming more technical, I don't believe it does, I think evolution means becoming more aware, and you begin noticing things that once passed you by. You recognise the smallest changes in your horse's posture before they become resistance, you feel subtle differences in your own balance before they become compensation. You begin asking different questions, and because you're asking different questions, you start finding different answers.

This is where HorseFirst Biomechanics becomes more than a way of riding, It becomes a way of learning.

Curiosity replaces judgement.

Observation replaces assumption.

Understanding replaces correction.

Not because correction no longer has a place, but because understanding now comes first, perhaps that is what evolution really is. Not arriving at a destination where everything is perfect, but becoming the kind of rider who never stops learning. Every ride becomes another opportunity to notice something new, every horse becomes another teacher, every challenge becomes another invitation to become more curious rather than more critical and the remarkable thing is that your horse notices this too.

Horses don't measure our knowledge, they don't know how many books we've read or how many qualifications hang on our wall, they simply know how it feels to be with us and perhaps that is the greatest compliment a horse can ever give.

Not winning a championship.

Not producing an extraordinary movement.

Not even achieving a perfect test.

Perhaps the greatest compliment is that your horse begins to seek your company because somewhere along the way, the conversation became a place where they felt understood. I think that's something far more valuable than any ribbon. As riders, we often spend years trying to become better for our horses, what if becoming better has never really been about doing more? What if it has been about removing the things that prevented our horses from experiencing who we truly are? The tension, the uncertainty, the misunderstandings, the assumptions.

Little by little, those begin to fall away and what remains is something much simpler – A rider who is present, a horse who feels heard and a conversation that no longer needs to be forced.

Perhaps that is what HorseFirst has always been leading us towards, not perfect biomechanics or perfect riding, but a partnership built upon understanding, and perhaps that is what evolution really means – not becoming someone different.

But becoming someone your horse finds beautifully easy to understand.

Before You Close the Book...

The next time you walk towards your horse, don't think about today's lesson.

Don't think about the movements you want to improve.

Don't think about the mistakes you made yesterday.

Instead, pause for just a moment.

Take a breath.

Then ask yourself one simple question.

“What kind of conversation am I bringing today?”

Because every conversation is another opportunity to build trust.

And sometimes...the quietest conversations are the ones that change everything.

HorseFirst Principle

Trust is built through every conversation.

The Next Conversation ...

If you've reached this page, I'd simply like to thank you.

Not for reading every word, but for being willing to see things a little differently.

I hope these pages have encouraged you to pause a little more often, to observe a little more closely and perhaps to ask questions you hadn't considered asking before. If they have, then the conversation has already begun.

The remarkable thing about HorseFirst is that it doesn't end when you close this book. In many ways, this is simply where it begins.

Tomorrow, when you walk towards your horse, you won't just be carrying another piece of knowledge with you. You'll be carrying a different perspective. You may notice the way your horse greets you, the way they stand while you groom them or the subtle changes in your own body before you've even thought about riding. Those small moments matter, because they are where HorseFirst truly lives.

For some people, that new awareness will be enough. They will continue exploring, observing and learning through every ride. For others, however, those first observations naturally lead to another question.

“What story is my own body telling?”

If that's a question you've begun asking yourself, then I'd love to help you discover the answer.

Horse**First Explore** is where the philosophy you've just read becomes personal. It isn't about finding faults, chasing perfect posture or becoming somebody different. It's about understanding the unique movement story your body has been telling for years, often without you even realising it. Together, we'll explore the movement choices your body has available today, recognise the adaptations that have quietly become your normal and begin discovering new possibilities for both you and your horse.

Because once we understand the story...

Everything else becomes possible.

Whenever the time feels right, I'd love to continue the conversation with you.

Until then, enjoy your horse, stay curious and keep listening.

The conversation has only just begun.

Sarah 



