

Pull the right rein

Horses have the ability to read human emotions and personalities, a process Jessica Liston uses in her human therapy practice, writes **SARAH HUDSON**

AUTHOR Herman Melville may be renowned for his stories of whales, but he also had some eloquent words for man's four-legged friends.

"No philosophers so thoroughly comprehend us as dogs and horses. They see through us at a glance," he wrote.

The idea that horses can read human emotions and behaviours is one that Clarkefield's Jessica Liston agrees with. It's a concept she adapts with her business, Inner Rhythm, using horses to develop people's leadership skills.

"When you work with horses, they can pick up on your heart rate from 10m away ... they can pick up on what is happening internally for people," she says.

"By doing that, they can pick up on if you are a confident leader, or internally quite a calm person, then they'll want to follow you.

"If you are quite anxious, or feeling overwhelmed, then you will have a more anxious energy and your heart rate will go up and down and horses pick up on that."

Jessica grew up in Beulah in the Wimmera, the youngest of four kids, and says she cannot remember a time when she was not around horses.

While her Dad was a grains farmer, her Mum was a horse trainer, a hobby that Jessica says helped pay the bills in drought times.

When they sold up the farm, the family moved to a horse stud.

"I have been working track work with my Mum since I was about 10," Jessica says.

"When they bought the horse stud in South Australia, they took a contract to break in 50 horses.

"My Mum broke her arm, so I stayed home from school and helped break in 50 horses because they needed someone to educate them."

Her parents now also have Three Bridges Thoroughbreds in Eddington, near Maryborough.

Jessica went into teaching, and Inner Rhythm has its roots in an equine assisted therapy program she started running at Candlebark P-7 school.

"I thought I wanted to train racehorses, and I loved training, but I also learnt so much about adapting to each horse," she says.

"I also started using that in my everyday life and saw that was really powerful and there was a lot of lessons to be learnt about communication through animals."

Jessica decided to head to Germany to study equine-assisted therapy.

Inner Rhythm started in 2016 after inquiries from parents and locals.

"I started business to support the local community in the Macedon Ranges and it kept expanding from there," she says.

Jessica says horses' ability to read people comes from the fact

they are prey animals in the wild, so they need to be able to identify predators and other threats.

They are also herd animals, and will look to a leader within their group if a threat or situation does transpire, she says.

She uses Thoroughbreds, including an Off The Track graduate and some from Three Bridges, and Walers.

Walers are most commonly known for their deeds during World War I, but Jessica says fewer

than 400 remain in Australia.

When it comes to working with people, Jessica says horses are a great leveller. "It doesn't matter if you're the CEO or the intern", so egos have to be left at the gate, she says.

One of her favourite stories is about two chief executives trying to work with horses, which prompted two very different responses.

The horse refused to follow commands of the first man and simply nudged him, and it took off

when the second man, who Jessica described as naturally a really dominant person", entered the arena.

"To see a diverse response from the same horse was really powerful, because they could both learn from observing each other as well as seeing themselves," she says.

"Throughout the day both men were practising the new behaviour they wanted; one wanted to get more respect, the man who was quite dominant didn't quite

understand why so many staff were crying and leaving."

So it seems to be a good leader, to solve problems on the outside you need to look inward first.

That was the starting point for Jessica.

"What I keep coming back to for myself is that we have our own internal rhythm and we need to check in and stay true to ourselves," she says.

"That is where Inner Rhythm came from."



Lead role: Jessica Liston with Rigoletto, a Waler, at her property near Clarkefield, where she runs Inner Rhythm, which aims to build trust and leadership.
Picture: DANNIKA BONSER