

The Tale of Two Laddies

by: Robert J. McLardie

Robert McLardie has worked for over thirty years with countless horses and their owners to repair relationships, calm fears, nurture and protect and above all else bring owners to a new understanding of their horses. He brings to you "The Cornerstone Approach – A Revolution in Horsemanship".

The Tale of Two Laddies is a story about the challenges and obstacles that every human being and creature face throughout life and living. The two laddies in my life brought me to a greater understanding and depth of the words "never give up".

As a horse trainer, coach and farrier, I have had the opportunity to meet many great people and horses.

I first met Laddie while I was working on a little Arab at a 450 acre ranch in Northern B.C. There was another horse on the ranch named Laddie. He was a 10 year old appaloosa gelding and he had been running wild for 8 years on the ranch. Apparently as a 2 year old Laddie had been tied to what someone had thought was a secure object but Laddie had managed to pull and drag that object. The result was a broken halter and Laddie running off. For the next 8 years Laddie had no human contact, therefore no halter on, hooves not trimmed, unlimited feeding with the cattle and unlimited pasture which led to him being severely foundered.

I learned later that Laddie had been put into a log corral and in trying to catch him that Laddie had reared up and dropped his body on the top log and it broke. Laddie was then able to scramble over the logs and was free again.

I asked the owner if I could take on the challenge of repairing Laddie's foundered feet as well as training him to be ridden with the objective of saving his life and finding him a new home. Laddie was so sore that at times he would lie down and eat by pulling himself in a circle to eat the grass where he was laying. I was surprised that he had not been attacked and killed by the large pack of wolves that were known to travel and take calves from this ranch. An agreement was made between the owner and I for me to pick up Laddie on a Sunday afternoon. I thought the owner would have him in a corral or fenced area waiting for us. When my son and I arrived he was welding some farm equipment and I asked him where Laddie was, he pointed to the large whit butt that could be seen over the rise on the distant hillside. Although disappointed, I thought that catching Laddie would not pose a great challenge I told my son it wouldn't take long! After all Laddie had sore feet.

We set off with a lead rope and halter in hand. Unknown to me was Laddie's in-depth knowledge of this 450 acres and his great desire not to be caught! Laddie knew every nook and cranny, every cow trail into the bush and pasture, and all the ways to evade capture. He would hide behind groups of cows and calves and as we got close he would scatter the cows. He would hide in small groves of trees, deadfall, brush and brambles. Laddie seemed just like a moose, he was that comfortable in the wilderness. It was hard to imagine that with his feet in such bad condition that he could continue to walk.

After 2 ½ hours we were close to the house and close to giving up so I went in to talk to the owner. We needed to get Laddie into a smaller area. The cows were used to coming for grain so we got the grain and the cows, the 2000 lb. Bull named Harcourt, 2 huge sows, and 2 goats heading for the corral. Cam and I were part of the herd as well, the corral was full. The owner controlled the gate as the last of the animals went in. We poured the grain on the ground to get the animals settled and we started the process of cutting out cows and calves. It was easier to walk up and pat the 2000 lb. Bull, Harcourt on the head than it was to get close to Laddie. Laddie was extremely anxious and agitated and had fear written all over his face. Our idea was to cut out the cows, calves, pigs and goats, keep things calm and capture Laddie. We got the majority of the cows and calves out, then Harcourt, the pigs and the goats. There were a few Herefords left and Laddie. In trying to approach Laddie he again reared up trying to clear the log corral, but with fatigue and soreness it prevented his attempt to flee. This was our opportunity! With a bucket of grain my son approached Laddie's head. This gave me a chance to move towards Laddie's shoulder so I could stroke his withers and neck and put a halter on. Cam and I breathed a sigh of relief, this was the first time in 8 years he had had a halter on!

With the lead shank and the halter on I moved him around in the corral for a few minutes. What were amazing were that after all those hours of following behind him, Laddie now just accepted the halter and the lead shank and followed me willingly.

It was now a mile and a half walk to get Laddie to my training facility. On my way home I have to go by the farm of an old local cowboy, John. He used to break horses in the style of his father. He was sitting on his front porch and could see me walking down the road towards him. He was an old friend of Laddie's owner and had been in the corral on the first occasion when Laddie had broken free. John couldn't help himself, he came down the driveway to meet me. He asked me in amazement if that was old Laddie and how on earth did I catch him. Without going into great detail I said it took hours of walking. John looked at Laddie's feet and recognizing how badly foundered he was told me that I would never be able to repair them and what was I going to do with the horse anyway? I told him that I was pretty confident that I could fix his feet and that I was going to train him and ride him. John looked at me and said, "You'll never do it. Laddie's too old, you can't teach an old dog new tricks! You're crazy!" I said, "Just give me a couple of months and you can come over with the owner and have coffee while I ride Laddie."

When I got Laddie home I bathed him with the garden hose and cleaned the dirt and sweat from his body. He seemed to really enjoy the bath and drank water directly from the end of the hose. We measured and photographed his feet at this time. His feet were over 6 ½" (they should be about 3 ¼") and the size of dinner plates. They were flared and very misshapen. It was quite remarkable that his legs and tendons had been able to take all the abuse with all the years of not being trimmed. He is a remarkable example of the will to survive!

I bedded him in deep shavings in the barn. This was another first for the old gelding. After 3 days of rest I led him to the 60 foot round pen to trim his feet. All four feet were foundered and extensive abscesses and large amounts of torn tissue. The toes on all four feet were squared off and large amounts of the flaring were removed. As much heel as possible

was left on all four feet. These trimming techniques are used to aid in making a horse more comfortable and to remove the stresses from the tendons. It also allows the horse to break over the toe of the foot with the least amount of stress. (It took a year of trimming and dieting to get his feet to normal shape and condition.) Although I am familiar with heart bar shoes, it was decided that I would continue to trim his feet and work him in the soft ground in the round pen. After a couple more days of rest in the barn it was back to the round pen to teach him the basics. Without being restrained he was saddled and bridled on this day and taught to go right and left, walk on, trot and canter. Laddie had a big soft kind eye. He was so full of try and his kindness showed as he always gave 100% in whatever I asked him to try.

Laddie was about 200 lbs. overweight so I decided to put him on a diet of last year's hay and continue with a program of gradual conditioning in the round pen. At the end of 8 weeks he continued to lose weight and had been trimmed a second time. His conditioning and training was now allowing me to ride him in the 70 x 120 ft outdoor riding ring. I was pleased with the progress. He felt solid under saddle.

Corresponding with the arrival of Laddie, the second little laddie entered my life. His name was Joshua and he was a 4 year old autistic boy. (Autism is a disorder that causes delays in social and emotional development, language skills and behavior difficulties.) He visited the farm quite frequently as the care and training of Laddie continued. Joshua loved to be outside and the farm offered a safe, secure and new environment for Josh to explore. I was able to establish a relationship with Josh very quickly and he was very willing to take instructions from me. Although many other people had great difficulty in communicating with him, I was able to create a special bond with him right away. Joshua functioned at the higher end of the autism spectrum and he did have some verbal skills and was able to understand instructions that were short if he had time to process the information. Joshua always took everything that was said in the literal sense. Josh loved all the horses at the farm but he seemed to show special fondness of Laddie. Whenever I was working with Laddie Josh wanted to help. Many times he would bring his favourite toy, a Star Wars light saber and run around the riding ring waving it at Laddie who got his work out by running away from Josh.

One exercise with Laddie using the lunge line was to teach Laddie to stand still and face me and then to come to me by giving him a hand signal. Josh would watch this process. Josh loved to make the lunge line whip up and down like a large green snake towards Laddie but wouldn't keep eye contact with the big gelding. (People with autism have difficulty making eye contact.) Being concerned that Josh should know where the horse was I would shout "Josh keep your eye on the horse!" Josh would still shout "Whoa Waddie!" whip the lunge line and look down at the ground. On closer observation I noticed he would peek at the horse by slightly raising his head and indeed had one eye open and one eye closed. He had one eye on the horse!!

Josh could not say Laddie, he used to call him Waddie. He got very confident working him in the round pen and the arena. He could lead him and give him instructions to whoa, and walk on. Their relationship progressed to the level where Josh would walk alongside him going to the left, Josh would say "Who Waddie" and lift up his right arm and the big horse would stop. Then Josh would lean his upper body forward and point his right

arm and say "Waddie walk on." Laddie walked on. This is a unique example of the bonding that is possible between a human being and a horse.

School was especially trying for Joshua. He required constant supervision and they had not yet mastered the skills required to communicate with him. One day the school called his mother to tell her that she would have to pick Josh up from school because she did not want to take him on a field trip. Josh's mom could not believe that with all of their education and knowledge that they would refuse to try and take Josh on the outing with his class. Joshua was also upset so his mom brought him out to the farm as a special trip. Joshua then asked if he could RIDE Laddie. "Robert, Robert, I Want to ride Waddie, please, please!!" I saddled up the big gelding and Joshua got up on the horse without any fear. I led them around the farm as Joshua gave Laddie and I directions to go right, go left, cross the bridge, walk here, walk there, whoa, walk on. Nearing the end of the ride we crashed through brush and walked through an old creek bed. As we got closer to the barn Joshua could see his mom. He shouted at the top of his lungs, "I Win!! I Win!!" His mother and I looked at each other in amazement. Where did that come from? When I helped Joshua down from the horse he said to me "Thanks for the most beautiful horse ride!" We were both brought to tears. A day that had begun with frustration and hopelessness had ended in exhilaration and success!

In retrospect, both this horse and this boy had many challenges and obstacles to overcome and yet each in their own unique way were doing their best and giving their all. We couldn't have asked for more.

I know my role was that of teacher and trainer but I know I learned so much from Joshua and Laddie about facing life's challenges and obstacles that may be in our paths, on how to start a new life and to leave the past where it belongs, in the past. Live in the moment and live in hope of an ever unfolding future. For this I thank them both.

p.s. I wintered Laddie on a strict diet. He continued to do well and in the spring a little girl and her mom came and took Laddie to his new home.

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