



by Elizabeth Kaye McCall

Photos courtesy of Christine Emmert

Nine years ago, I made an overnight decision about a straight Egyptian stallion that changed my life. He was dappled, handsome, and seemingly had the movement for a dressage prospect. But my thoughts of showing, or even riding him in the near future, evaporated, as the scope of his issues from former training as a halter horse turned every interaction into a challenge. I finally threw out my agenda and focused on reestablishing trust.

A big breakthrough came at three months. By that time, he was calling to me at the first glimpse. Almost overnight he began

audibly responding when I asked. Rajali KA's "speaking" did compensate for his erratic behavior.

After some consideration, I opted for liberty work as the best way to clear ghosts from the past and work on trust. I'd worked with live shows like Cavalia (and before that, Arabian Nights) where liberty is an equestrian art form that revolves around the horse-human bond and connection.

So when a one-day liberty clinic with Cavalia alum, Sylvia Zerbini, came up this spring where my horse is stabled, I seized the opportunity. I've seen Sylvia perform enough to admire her masterful talent and special affinity for Arabians. Still, I wondered how Rajali KA would respond in a single 45-minute liberty session on his first meeting with her. It turns out Rajali KA not only excelled, he was the star student. Seeing Rajali KA in Sylvia's clinic that day was a testament to this extraordinary "reborn" horse, who has educated me about horses in ways I never imagined.

If only I could grasp Sylvia's liberty training techniques as easily as he did.

As Sylvia explained, "As soon as I come into an arena, I connect with the energy in front of me. All the work I do with horses is with energy and through eye contact."

Zerbini, who typically works without sunglasses during training sessions to gain maximum eye contact with a horse, explained, "When I start with a horse, I just look and can see how he is right away. I'm pretty quick at reading their characteristics. I can tell if the horse is dominant or if the horse is very insecure just by its mannerisms, the way he holds himself, the way he comes,

Facing page: "This was taken after we'd done a couple of draws — asking him to come to me. He decided to come in before I told him to, so I was creating a line. He's not in movement. If you look at me, I'm about to walk two steps before I pivot to face his neck and shoulder and send him off on the right lead. I've got his attention. You can see we're eye to eye, but you can see the softness in them. He's attentive, but he's not worried."



"In this shot, I've drawn him in and I'm walking with him. We're both in a relaxed state. I'm the confident one and just telling him to follow me. In herd behavior, the horse that's in charge is always the one that is almost a step ahead, just a step. It looks like I'm just about to cut him off a little bit to turn to the left. My hand is about to come up."



"I'm trying to get him to come to my right side. You can see the horse is very attentive to me. I'm walking to my left because his eyes are going to start connecting to my hand and I'll get him to come in on my right side. I don't stop. I'll continue to walk and the horse will join up on my right side. You can see how his right eye is looking at my hand. With the attention on that hand as I cut him off in movement, he will slow down a little bit to let me get ahead of him. As I turn, I'll be able to cut him off to where he's on my right side. It will be like shoulder-to-shoulder."



Sylvia Zerbini meets Elizabeth McCall's stallion Rajali KA (Ali Barba x Rajkumari) for the first time moments before she worked with him in a one-day Liberty Clinic. Both Cavalia alums, Sylvia formerly starred in the acclaimed equestrian spectacle; McCall was Cavalia's original horse industry liaison.



"This is right when I'm telling him to stop. I did a draw with him. He came running toward me and then my hand came up. I didn't know him before the clinic, and he's a stallion, but his eye contact and everything told me he was not going to bite me or attack me. I could tell right away. We connected instantly."



"This horse was willing to give me so much, he was quite amazing. As we stopped, I think I tapped his shoulder, to ask him to back. As I was putting my hand up, he started doing a sidepass of two steps. It's amazing to point out the look in his eye. He's still watching me."

or walks away. Every little trait tells me about the personality. I'm really good at reading energy in horses, so as soon as I see a horse, I can tell where he's at mentally.

"When I met Rajali KA, I looked at him and he looked at me," she continues. "I could tell right away that he's a horse that's been there, done that. He's very confident," she said. "I just came in with this great energy like, 'You're pretty amazing, but so am I. We're going to have fun!' And, he just cocked his head and looked at me and did his little Arab turn and I said, 'OK, here we go!'"

Explaining how the clever stallion could instantly grasp the nuances of her training process and virtually perform in a 45-minute clinic session, Zerbini remarked, "It's because this is their

language. Horses react to energy. Horses communicate with eye contact. A motion is everything.

"I'm beyond the stick," she added. Gifted in using body energy to build enduring trust, Sylvia teaches communication with horses without halter, whips, ropes, or carrot sticks. Specific body language and vocal cues are understandable by horses of all breeds and ages.

"I get people to use their bodies and their hands," Sylvia says. "We start with our shoulders. We apply pressure. Sometimes, when I'm running, I pick up sand and get a huge response. Just the energy associated with the movement of tossing sand," she added. "I'm always very clear in my direction."

At the multi-day clinics she gives



"The whole time we were out there, we were having a conversation. We totally have eye contact. I think I'm about to go on a left lead, maybe having him do a join up with me. It looks like my left hand is about to go up to give him directions to go left. When I finish with a horse and we're walking at the end, he would normally be on my right side."

across the country and at her Grande Liberté Farm in Williston, Florida, Zerbini repeatedly mentions, “Walking a straight line. Watch people with horses. They don’t pay attention, they’re just walking, especially when they start liberty. When we start walking crooked, if we’re constantly walking right, then walking to the left, our horses tend to fall back and see where we’re going. Horses are very clear in the way that they move. Ten years ago, I started making

a point of walking very straight lines as they did. The response was incredible. Our appearance is important, too, like keeping our chins up when we’re walking with horses, means a lot.”

Multi-lingual, Zerbini spoke to Rajali KA in French during his session — something she does with her own horses and while teaching any breed or age. “Every time he gave me an inch, I would just say ‘Brave’ (pronounced as a drawn-out ‘braahv’). Does he know French?

No! Does he understand the energy associated with the tone? Absolutely! They all do,” said Zerbini.

“I wish they would step up the liberty they do at Arabian shows a notch,” Sylvia added. “We need to do a little bit more. In my liberty there is communication. I’m expressing the horse’s beauty, but at the same time, we’re having a conversation.”

And, a conversation she truly had with Rajali KA.



“This is where I give the good memory cue. After we’ve done everything, we stop and I give them a tone and I scratch them. As I do that, my energy drops down. It’s a point where I have a good eye contact with him. Even if I don’t scratch him, with the release of the energy, he knows he’s done well. When I don’t know the horse, I normally make a physical contact at the same time.”



“This looks like we just got done working and I released him. My energy’s dropped; his energy’s dropped. He’s allowed to go once I release him. If he wanted to walk away from me at that point, I would let him go, but he chooses to stay. I’m talking to the people. He’s looking at things going on.”