PERLE'S PROGRESS:
STUCK IN TROUBLE

In this first in a series, clinician **Peggy Cummings** identifies and addresses the reasons for a young Arabian mare's impasse with her rider.

By Bobbie Lieberman

He was the magazine's namesake, the gray Arabian colt who pranced into the hearts of readers with the inaugural issue of EQUUS in November 1977 and remained an engaging presence through issue 43. The "Equus Foal/Yearling/2-year-old/3-year-old" series was designed to provide readers with a window on the uncertainties, the joys and the discoveries of raising a youngster. As the months unfolded, readers learned along with "E." They saw their own experiences in horse raising and training reflected, their own possibilities and hopes defined.

Now, 26 years later, we embark on another equine journey of discovery. This time our subject is not a foal but a young Arabian mare with a penchant for mischief. Perle was born on May 8, 1996, at Farnley Farm in White Post, Virginia. Her dam, Perchanceka (aka "PC"), Equus' maternal half sister, had been so admired by EQUUS Medical Editor Matthew Mackay-Smith, DVM, that she became a permanent fixture in his mother's broodmare band at Farnley. Perle and her full sister were PC's eighth and ninth foals, both daughters of the Arabian endurance stallion Myntyfa.

After Mackay-Smith contacted me in 1999 to ask if I wanted one of the two sisters, we bumped along in a Jeep through the vast Farnley pastures searching for Perle, then a 3-year-old. Although she was small, she was the tallest horse in her group, for the others were all Welsh ponies. Even though she had been raised on 800 acres, she was friendly and engaging. "This is the one," I said without hesitation.

Yet Perle has proved to be more than the garden-variety training challenge. She is highly intelligent, coming from a line of mares who might be described as independent thinkers, and her round-barreled, short-backed conformation makes her extremely quick under saddle. Her compact build demands great fluidity and responsiveness from her rider. We came to a point early in her training where we seemed to be stuck, despite all my previous experience and education in working with horses. I sought insight and guidance from Peggy Cummings of Lebanon, Oregon, whose Connected Riding® approach redefines how horses are ridden and riders are taught and explodes some of equitation's most enduring but counterproductive precepts.

Cummings conceives of equitation as a reciprocal

LYNNE GLAZER

STUDENT AND TEACHER

"I think of Perle as a bright and gifted student who needs to be understood as if she has a temporary learning disability," says Peggy Cummings.

exchange between the two partners. Under her tutelage, riders rediscover their inner elasticity and buoyancy by finding effortless balance on the foundation of a "neutral" pelvis. Perhaps even more significant for ridden harmony is Cummings' ability to identify the underlying messages in horses' resistant behavior. Using these tools I realized a whole new set of possibilities for communicating with my challenging mare. In the spirit of learning that has always defined EQUUS, we'll track Perle's progress over the next several months.

Two years after I had met Perle on that dusky Virginia summer evening, my young mare arrived at Park Equus Farms in Escondido, California, near my home. She had traveled well, bedded down in the front third of the "big-rig" horse van for the entire cross-country trip. I recalled Equus' reverse journey in 1977, creating a sort of ironic symmetry.

Perle walked off the van into a radically different environment–from the Virginia Piedmont's rolling, green landscape to Mediterranean/desert, from split-rail fence to pipe corrals, from 24/7 grazing to hay served three times per day in a 24- by 24-foot partially covered corral.

She adapted well to her new surroundings, and we began training with Angie Gomez, resident trainer at Park Equus. Perle was flighty and sensitive, overreactive to the slightest touch. We spent a month on basic groundwork to educate her to accept pressure without triggering her well-tuned flight reflex. Gomez, a dressage trainer, was flexible and understanding when I suggested utilizing TTEAM® concepts of neckline driving, using a labyrinth and working in teams (see "From These Roots," page 60).

With Gomez's patient guidance, we progressed to under-saddle work and eventually our first trail rides. At 54, I had grown cautious about riding a young, green horse. Perle proved to be an apt learner, and she was one of the most fearless horses I'd ever ridden (a "spookless" Arabian!). Slowly but surely we progressed, and by April 2002 we were ready to expand our outings to include more trails and hills. My goal was to make an endurance horse of Perle, and we needed to cover more ground as her training advanced. That month, we moved to a barn with access to 20-plus miles of trails over challenging terrain.

Perplexing behavior

Sometime that spring, Perle began a baffling habit of ducking out to the right under saddle. At first I thought her teeth were the issue. Although my equine dentist had done some major work with power tools soon after the filly's arrival, I called him back. Perle's teeth needed some touch-ups, but nothing seemed painful enough to account for her ducking. Next, I had a chiropractor examine her and make an adjustment on the left side of her atlas-axis, the joint underlying the poll, an area that would prove to be troublesome in the months to come.

The ducking and spinning seemed to come and go early on, and it didn't become a serious issue until we started riding out of the new barn. That May while we were negotiating a rutty, abrasive hillside, Perle slipped and cut her pastern. During the following three weeks of recovery, she was taken often to hand-graze on the lush, irrigated pasture at the new barn. Being an opinionated, intelligent girl, she apparently decided that eating was much more interesting than being ridden.

When we returned to riding, her evasions escalated. She became more aggressive with her spins and twirls and began adding little accelerations to her actions. The spins were always to the right and at specific places on the trail: at the beginning of the meadow, at

FIRST CONTACT

When Cummings met Perle, "She didn't know where her feet were," says the trainer. "When I asked her to do something simple, such as walk in a circle or walk down the hill, she began flinging her head left to right."

the base of the first big hill and at a cutoff spot narrowed by erosion about halfway up the hill that intersected a shortcut toward home.

I was riding through a lot of spins, sometimes successfully straightening her out, sometimes not. We spent a few weeks revisiting TTEAM ground exercises to improve her ability to focus and respond to light signals while lowering her head and releasing tension. I thought we were over the hump when we were spin-free for several weeks. Then one day a riding partner's horse refused to go forward on the trail, and Perle's evasive behavior returned with a vengeance. I knew I needed some hands-on help with these deep-seated issues.

Getting connected

I had worked with Peggy Cummings, then a Centered Riding instructor, about 12 years before in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, and had never forgotten her inspiring way of teaching. Her students experience the elastic connection and reciprocity between horse and human that speaks to the heart of our reasons for riding. Cummings built her system on a foundation of TTEAM and Centered Riding–two biologically based methods of training that honor the horse's individuality. Cummings had expanded her work, which she now calls Connected Riding, in the intervening decade and was traveling throughout the United States and Europe giving clinics and private instruction.

When I heard she was coming to Descanso, California, just an hour and a half south of our barn, I signed up to audit the clinic. Participants of the weekend clinic would be introduced to a new language of riding. Cummings purposely uses words that denote motion and lightness rather than static positions to override riders' unconscious habits of stiffening and bracing when they ask something from the horse.

Rather than grip with thighs and knees, we would learn to sit on our horses like a "frog on a ball." Rather than kick with the heels and drive with the seat to move horses forward, we would "fluff" our mounts' sides with wiggly, springy legs. Instead of the familiar "heels down," we would be invited to ride with the soles of our feet level in the stirrups, "like little sewing-machine treadles." Rather than sit up straight with starched spines, we would learn to ride with the elasticity of a buoy floating on the sea, always coming back to what Cummings calls the "neutral pelvis" position. She considers this the foundation for in-saddle stability and security, the only place where the axis of the upper body is unbroken and the core muscles can automatically engage with ease in every situation.

Her mission is to take the struggle out of riding, stop

LEARNING TO LET GO

When Cummings first attempted a simple *cheek press* with Perle, the mare flung her head. "The poll just wouldn't yield. It was physically impossible," says Cummings. Observing Perle's reactivity was the first step in understanding that her difficult behavior stemmed from habitual bracing patterns.

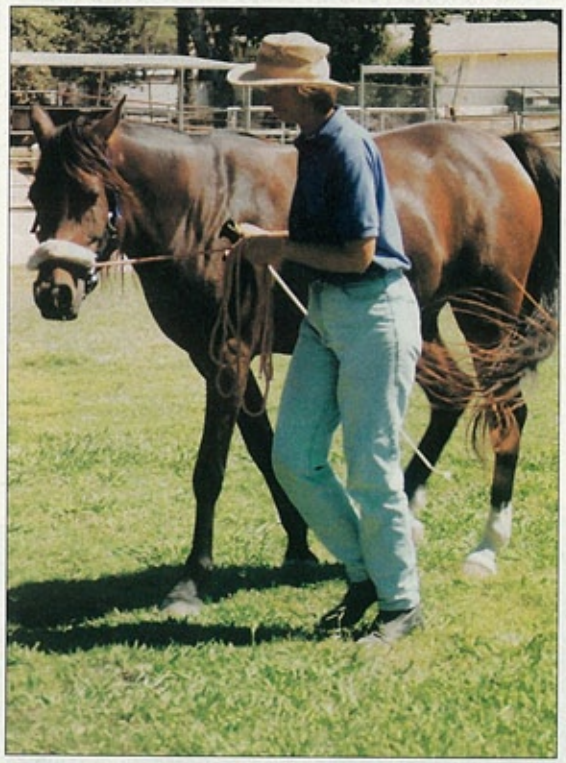
As Perle explored the head positions that she associated with prior discomfort, Cummings gently followed. Although this was initially more difficult on the right side, Perle started releasing her jaw and poll when the movements were alternated with shallow serpentines Cummings calls *S-curves*.

Perle enjoys the new sensations as she begins to accept contact without overreacting. As Cummings traces the groove along the back of the jawline in a *cheek delineation*, it "reminds the horse's nervous system that her body can release and rotate in that place," says the trainer.

RELEASING AND CONNECTING

The *caterpillars* movement encourages the horse to stop bracing, telescope the neck and lower the head. Here, Cummings gently presses using the heel of her hand while her fingers plow through the hair in an opening and closing motion.

As Cummings walks Perle she does a *shoulder press*. The mare responds by softening and yielding on the left side while bending and floating to the right. The goal, says Cummings, is for Perle to "come through" with her inside hind leg and yield through the shoulders.



the bracing and get horses and riders "unstuck." And there's a sound physiological basis for her approach: When the relationship between horse and human is less than harmonious, both partners fall out of balance and become asymmetric and crooked. Mysterious little lamenesses sometimes show up; backs become ouchy; attitudes grow sulky and uncooperative. Coupled with unrecognized saddle-fit problems, it's a recipe for riding dissonance.

When Cummings observes horses under saddle, she is seeking answers to two key questions:

- What is the pattern of movement that is preventing him from being the best he can be?
- Is the rider causing a drag on the horse's action?

"If the rider braces, the horse braces, leading to static or stuck energy and resistance," Cummings explains. "Horses get stuck when they can't figure out how to lift and organize their feet. When a rider loses her resilience and becomes like deadweight, she takes away her horse's ability to bring up his back, shift his weight to the rear and come under himself."

At the clinic, Cummings showed us how to unlock our upper bodies, soften our backs and release tension. I experienced the sensation of my torso literally expanding in two dimensions. Cummings describes this process as "floating and growing roots," as the sacrum sinks backward and downward and the sternum floats forward and upward.

It's the beginning of the cycle that Cummings calls "connection," that often-elusive reciprocity that imbues everyday riding with an almost mystical quality. Yet, she insists, this seemingly indefinable quality is available to every horse and rider. I saw it happen time and again during that 2 ½-day clinic, as every rider–English and Western, male and female, astride Paints, Arabians, Thoroughbreds, Morgans and gaited horses–experienced the connection and felt the change in energy.

"You are asking the horse to engage, to refire the engine, allowing him to find his own balance and self-carriage," says Cummings. "A wave of energy comes up through the horse's body into ours, flows out through the arms to the horse's mouth to be received and sent back down through our body, out the soles of our feet and finally back to the horse's hind feet. When a horse truly 'comes through,' you can feel the energy of the hind feet. It's a process of proactivity and reciprocity, and once you get it, it becomes as natural as breathing."

When a horse is "through his back," there will be a ripple of energy into the spine and a release at the poll and base of the neck. Whether working one-on-one with clinic participants or just looking at still photos of horses and riders, Cummings has an uncanny knack for seeing "where the flow gets stuck."

After the clinic, Cummings came to work with Perle and me for two days. That's when we decided to chronicle Perle's progress over time as a way of demonstrating some of the facets of Cummings' work and put it to the test on one challenging little mare.

Perle's sticking points

When Cummings arrived at our barn in San Marcos, California, it didn't take long before Perle's habitual patterns were revealed. "Perle was uncomfortable in her body and intolerant of being handled," Cummings noted. "She couldn't walk down even a little piece of downhill without bracing through her shoulder and stopping. If she didn't get her way, she got fried; when she got out of balance, she became angry. She didn't like to be

touched on her neck and head, often throwing her head up violently at the lightest contact."

Perle remained fixated on the area of irrigated green grass that boarders use to hand-graze their horses. She was grouchy about being groomed and tacked up and didn't want to move forward under saddle. She had saddle issues and tightness throughout her body. Cummings noted that Perle's pattern came from bracing, which leads to compression, which inhibited her motion, restricted her stride and affected her attitude. Bad posture begets bracing, stiffness, crookedness, discomfort and evasions, Cummings says.

"The way she had been using herself was accentuating the 'stuckness,'" Cummings continues. "Her pattern was clear: When she started to slow down or get tense, she would cock her head to the right, tense her muscles on the left and suck back. The conventional approach would be to longe her, put her in the round pen or tie her head down with a martingale. Yet this would only reinforce the bracing pattern. Some horses might shut down, others might explode. I think of Perle as a bright and gifted student who needs to be understood as if she has a temporary learning disability. From a teaching standpoint, when she's in that pattern, she can't hear anything. She's not in her body–she's reacting, not thinking."

The initial release

Cummings began by replacing Perle's standard halter with one of her own design. It has multiple adjustment areas for a snug fit as well as no ring under the jaw, where lead ropes usually attach. Instead, she crisscrossed one or two soft, stretchy lines around the sheepskin-wrapped noseband for clear, yet gentle communication. Now she was ready to begin some of her system's basic ground exercises.

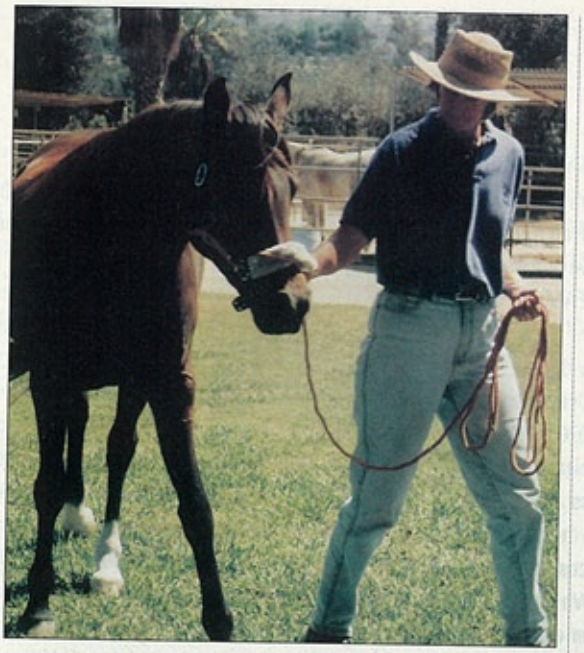
First she did a *cheek press.* By lightly pressing her closed right fist into Perle's left cheek while supporting the mare's head with her left hand on the noseband, Cummings asked the mare to move her head minutely in one direction. Perle responded by throwing her head in the air, indicating how locked she was at the poll. "Cheek press reminds horses they can let go in that area, which they have learned to protect from riders pulling on leads and tightening reins."

Next came a *cheek delineation,* as Cummings' fingers traced the groove along the back of the jawline. Perle responded by twisting her head from side to side. "This further reminds the horse's nervous system that their body can release and rotate in that place," Cummings noted.

Cummings alternated cheek delineations with walking Perle in shallow serpentines she calls *S-curves.* Perle stopped barging forward and became more interested in the world outside herself. Cummings gave her breaks every couple of minutes so the mare could "process" the new learning patterns without overloading her circuits.

The next morning, Perle was significantly more accepting of Cummings' hand on her cheek, poll and neck. Now Cummings began *caterpillars* at the base of the neck, following the line of cervical vertebrae to just behind the ear. She gently pressed the heel of her hand on the neck while her fingers plowed through the hair with an opening and closing motion. This encouraged Perle to stop bracing, telescope the neck forward and lower the head.

Perle again braced when Cummings leaned her forearm across the mare's shoulder. But when Perle walked



BREAKING THE PATTERN
Cummings leads Perle in shallow serpentines *(S-curves)* to help break up habitual bracing patterns in the shoulders and neck and to encourage the mare to lift her back and push from behind. Here, Cummings demonstrates the simplest type of S-curve, leading with one hand on the halter. Placing a hand on the shoulder can enhance the connection.

Perle is reciprocating by taking up a connection on the line. The mare is listening and focused as she begins her transformation from resistance to acceptance.

RELATED METHODS

From these roots

PEGGY CUMMINGS

Peggy Cummings' equitation and horse-handling methods have evolved from her early work with two pioneering approaches: TTEAM® and Centered Riding®.

TTEAM, developed by Linda Tellington-Jones beginning in the 1970s, is an acronym for Tellington TTouch Equine Awareness Method, a way of training, healing and overcoming common resistances in horses. According to the TTEAM Web site (www.tteam-ttouch.com), a series of ground exercises, known as the Playground for Higher Learning or Confidence Course, enables horses to override old patterns and to learn without fear or force. Exercises involving such obstacles as a labyrinth and ground poles produce self-control, focus, self-confidence, cooperation, balance and coordination in horses. Additionally, TTouch addresses tension, fear of contact, soreness or discomfort in horses using specific touches and movements.

Sally Swift developed the concepts and practices of Centered Riding, beginning in the 1980s, as she sought to express the classical principles of riding more effectively through body awareness, "centering" and imagery. According to the Centered Riding Inc. Web site (www.centeredriding.org), the practices encompass all seats and styles of riding by teaching a language that allows clearer communication between horse, rider and instructor.

off, her stride was longer and she took bigger breaths. The mare shook her head–a sign she was letting go of old patterns. This press "reminds the horse that she can release and bend in the rib cage, shift the weight from one side to the other, and from front to back," Cummings said.

One of the interesting things about Connected groundwork, Cummings commented, was that even when you don't think an exercise is working, if you give the horse a chance to think about it, he usually moves off with more freedom. This certainly proved true for Perle. With each round of basic movements punctuated by short breaks, she was able to stand quietly for longer stretches with her head and neck level with her withers. She was learning patience and becoming more comfortable in her body. She started standing squarely and ignoring distractions around her, tuning in to her handler.

We gave Perle another few minutes to process, then walked her down the hill she hadn't been able to manage before. At first

Stall Doors & Grill Units

CM81 Painted Steel Stall Door $95.00
CM80 Painted Steel Grill $69.00
CM50 Galvanized Stall Door $135.00
CM52 Galvanized Grill $90.00
CM84 Sliding Door Hardware $95.00
Aluminum Doors and Grills Available

Dutch Doors

Requires 2 sections for a double door.
CM93 Crossbuck $160.00
CM91 Frame Only $85.00

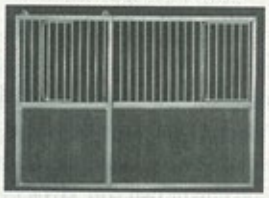
Manure Spreaders

Model 1200 75 bushel $1995.00
Model 600 25 bushel $1195.00

Rotary Conditioner Harrow

RC-4 4' wide $395.00
RC-6 6' wide $495.00
RC-8 8' wide $595.00

Modular Stall Fronts



ST10GF 10' Front Painted Steel $470.00
ST12GF 12' Front Painted Steel $495.00
GA10GF 10' Front Galvanized $660.00
GA12GF 12' Front Galvanized $695.00

CMI **www.countrymfg.com**

FREE SHIPPING! * Some Minimums Apply

* All pricing includes freight to the nearest freight terminal or commercial business address in the Continental U.S. 48 States.

Adjusta-Flex Tine Harrow

AF-5 5' wide $295.00
AF-10 10' wide $495.00
AF-5C Wheel Carrier $150.00
AF-3P 3-point lift $300.00

Swing- out Feeders

CM121 Steel $125.00
CM221 Aluminum $225.00
CM321 Galvanized $170.00

Swing-out Utility Doors

CM122 Steel Door $70.00
CM222 Aluminum Door $120.00
CM322 Galvanized Door $90.00
CM912 Bucket Holder $23.00

Cast Aluminum Feeders

CM33 Wall Feeder $69.00
CM34 Corner Feeder $69.00

Stall Mats

CM46 Heavy Duty 4' x 6' $72.00
CM47 Wash Mat $115.00
CM48 Aisle Mat $95.00

Thermo- Buckets

TB-1 Painted Steel $63.00
TB-2 Aluminum $98.00
TB-3 Galvanized $75.00

For more information and a free catalog contact:
Country Manufacturing, Inc.
P.O. Box 104 EQ * Fredericktown, OH 43019 * E-mail: info@countrymfg.com * Phone: 740-694-9926 * FAX: 740-694-5088

she pitter-pattered down, tilting her head to the right and bracing her left shoulder. Every time a horse tightens the neck and shoulder, it shortens and inhibits the stride and doesn't allow the push to come from the hind end, Cummings said.

She stopped the mare halfway down the hill and moved from Perle's left side to her right. This small change instantly made it easier for Perle to continue with Cummings' hands on the halter and shoulder. This non-habitual change allowed her nervous system to release the holding patterns that had been so entrenched on the left side. From then on, she walked easily down the hill, taking up the connection and releasing in her body. Conventional suppling exercises such as sending a horse sideways from pressure and longeing with side reins do not address such habitual patterns, Cummings said.

"Perle was consistently gaining confidence and freedom in her stride," Cummings noted. "I was amazed at her progress. Even when the mare appeared to be resisting–which is really the horse saying 'I can't do this now'–after a few moments left alone to process the new information (which has an almost meditative effect), the mare became quieter and more willing. When asked again, she would do what she hadn't been able to do before."

The exercises introduced to Perle in her first sessions with Cummings are designed to reeducate the walk, return elasticity and swing to the stride and allow any horse to realign and work more evenly in each direction. And the walk is the place to teach them, Cummings emphasized, or any issues will "come back to haunt you in the other gaits." She sees these concerns as the underlying pattern challenging almost every horse and rider she meets in their quest to achieve harmony.

"This is all about teaching horses how to learn and process," Cummings says, "so they can safely change from the inside out." By the third day, Perle was significantly more responsive and less reactive. She had come a long way, but we knew it was just the beginning of her transformation. More discoveries were in store for all of us.

Coming in December: *Learning Together*

RESOURCES

For further information

For the story of EQUUS's first training series, in which Bobbie Lieberman raises the magazine's namesake, see "Equus: The Ride of a Lifetime," EQUUS 301.

Peggy Cummings' book, *Connected Riding: An Introduction*, written with Diana Deterding, is available from The Equine Collection (800-952-5813; www.theequinecollection.com). Cummings' workbook *Keys to Connection* and other products are available from Connected Enterprises, Inc. (800-310-2192; www.connectedriding.com).

One Supplement for Every Horse

Opt·E·Horse COMPLETE

From the trail to the arena...

from growing youngsters to active adults, Opt-E-Horse Complete meets the needs of horses in every stage of life and performance! Multiple supplement power in a single formula that is effective for all horses – the one and only Opt-E-Horse Complete!

* Easy-to-Feed * Nutrient-Packed * All-in-One Supplement!

* Multivitamins & Trace Minerals * Digestive Aids & Probiotics
* Biotin * Selenium & Natural Source Vitamin E * Rich in Copper and Zinc

*based on recommended daily maintenance serving of .5 oz. for adult horses.

WEAVER LEATHER

Ask for this great supplement at your local store, call us or visit our web site to find a dealer near you.

Toll Free in the U.S. & Canada:
1-800-932-8371
www.optehorse.com