



## My Join-Up Experience by Allie Springer

I started riding horses when I was nine years old. I had loved them my entire life, and it was such a thrill to learn to ride such an amazing animal. Unfortunately, like most of the equine world, I was taught using what is now the 'normal method' of riding a horse. This involves harsh bits, whips, spurs, and the mindset that the horse must be taught to do as it is told. I never thought twice about it, as it was what everyone around me was doing. I believed that I was always kind to the horses I rode, however I had no problem slapping a nipping horse or putting on the biggest pair of spurs for one that was a little too slow.

I had heard of natural horsemanship, but it wasn't until recently that I knew how incredible it was. I saw it as something different and nice, but not for me. I was interested in getting first place in the show ring, a horse with perfect collection that never disobeyed me. In my mind at the time, natural horsemanship was just silly people believing they understood how their horses think – something I didn't believe possible. Thankfully my views have changed.

I bought Emerson in the summer of 2009. He was seventeen months old, and had little to no handling. He had never been haltered, and had lived in a field with his father his entire life. He was the closest thing to a wild horse I had ever met. Once I tackled the task of haltering him, I spent weeks physically dragging him around the field trying to teach him to lead. It was more of a power struggle than a partnership. He bit and kicked me, and I hit back. I believed that if I overpowered this headstrong little horse, I would win, but eventually I started to see this wasn't working. When he didn't understand me, he would get upset. In turn, I would get upset, creating a vicious cycle that wasn't getting us anywhere. For months it went on like this, until I saw an ad at the local feed store.

The ad was for a clinic being held by Pam Allen-LeBlanc of Hidden Brook Farm in Durham, New Brunswick. The title read "Are you ready to ride?" As it was nearing time to start riding Emerson, it caught my eye. Then I saw that this clinic was based on Natural Horsemanship. I had never thought of trying it, but as I was beginning to see, my way wasn't working with this horse, and we needed a change. I signed up, and a few weeks later Emerson and I showed up at the farm where the clinic was being held.

I had no idea what to expect when I arrived. The first exercise we did after Pam had spoken was the Join-Up. I had seen variations of this on television and the internet, but didn't really understand it. Emerson was anxious, circling around me and pawing, so Pam asked me to go first. Before we began, she commented on what she saw between Emerson and I: a strong bond, and his complete trust for me. I have to say, I was surprised. How could a horse that I had fought with for so long trust me?

Pam talked us through the basics of Join-Up as we worked. After quite a long time, and a good workout on my part, I began to see what Pam had told me to watch for – Emerson licked his lips, his inside ear turned in my direction, his focus on me entirely. Finally, he dipped his head to the ground, and I did as Pam had told me. I stopped moving him out, turned my back to him, and relaxed completely. Immediately, Emerson walked to my side and rested his head against my arm. Pam told me to walk forward, and so I did. Emerson followed. When I stopped, he stopped. When I backed up, he backed up. I was in awe to say the least. Only a week ago, I had been chasing this horse through the field, trying to catch him. Now, he was following my every move, completely connected with me.

Tears came to my eyes as we left the ring with a loose line, his head staying steadily at my arm. I have never felt such a connection and it's difficult to describe, as no relationship with a human has ever come close to the feeling I felt at that moment. It was like knowing without any doubt that one person in this world understands, trusts, loves and would do anything for you, and that person is a horse. If only everyone who works with horses understood this the way I am starting to.

Since that day, I've taken another clinic with Pam, increasing my knowledge of Natural Horsemanship and of my bond with my horse. We have grown as a pair in an incredible way. This horse that left bruises and bite marks on my arm now knickers when I open the barn door, lays down and lets me lay with him, and is a better listener than any person I know. I'm even starting to hear him too. Some people may say it's crazy to talk to animals, but I know my horse understands me. When I've had a bad day, he rests his head on my stomach and stays there until he knows I'm feeling better. When I talk to him, I know he hears, perhaps not the words, but the feeling behind them. He knows now that I am starting to understand him, and that is the important thing. I used to think I had to teach a horse, but now I know that they are already aware, they're just waiting for us to figure them out. I credit Pam Allen-LeBlanc and the Join-Up with my journey towards understanding and living harmoniously and gently with horses.

In the end, I must give credit where credit is due. Pam has opened my eyes to Natural Horsemanship and what I can do with it. I also have to thank the founders of NH and the people who have helped to spread the view – people like Monty Roberts. Above all there is one person who deserves the most credit, and that is Emerson. He has been my true teacher in all of this. On days when I feel like I can't achieve anything without force, he proves me wrong. When I am losing faith in our bond, he reminds me. I'm still learning, still trying to change what I have been taught my entire life. I have so much more to learn, I don't believe there is an end to what horses can teach us. I am just thankful every day that I have a patient, trusting, incredible horse to walk with me on this journey.