

# The Horse Listener

Julie Arkison brings horses and riders into harmony.

by Debbie Eisenberg Merion



Julie Arkison has never given up on a horse, but Flashman is taking her to the brink. The big white horse with freckles on his neck is ignoring her, circling her as though she were not there, as unreactive as the day he first came to her farm. He refuses to gallop his fastest when she asks him. He won't speed up even when Arkison stands next to him and gives him the horse signal for "Run with me"—moving her feet more quickly, walking purposefully toward him, and taking a deep breath.

Arkison is tough. By age eighteen—she's thirty-eight now—she'd had her bones broken and reset seven times in painful operations to fix the worst case of clubfeet her doctor had ever seen. She had to relearn how to walk five times. She doesn't really know how to give up.

But this blasted horse might be tougher.

Flashman—half Arabian, half Thoroughbred—is 1,000 pounds of muscle, ten years old, strong and stubborn, and set in his dysfunctional ways. He's tried to bite people and buck riders off.

Flash can gallop just fine in the pasture by himself. But he won't do it for Arkison—not even after five days of patient, ingenious efforts to communicate with him.

She has one last trick up her sleeve. From the side of the arena, she picks up a red, bandanna-size flag that flickers in the wind. The sudden motion and the flapping sound scare most horses. The flight response typically takes over, and they canter around the arena. But not Flash. No way. He digs his hooves in.

Frustrated once more, this woman who has brought dozens of miscreant horses into line is ready to buckle under Flash's

unflagging obstinacy. "I'm not going to do this," she decides. "This is way too hard."

Then something amazing happens. In her mind Arkison hears the horse speak to her:

"Please don't give up on me."

For the rest of the lesson, she senses that Flash is trying to learn. He looks at her a little longer and moves his ear just a tiny bit toward her as he listens. He canters at her command. His whole body looks softer.

Don't call Julie Arkison a horse whisperer—at least not in the presence of her cowboy mentors, who include Buck Brannaman, the stand-in for Robert Redford and technical consultant for the film that popularized the phrase.

"They'll get angry if you call them that," she says. "They don't want to use a label just so people think they know something. There's no bragging with these guys. They say, 'Just watch me on a horse, and see if I know anything.'"

If you watch Arkison with a horse, you'll see she knows plenty. But she doesn't like labels either. In fact, there's no term that accurately describes what makes her so special in the competitive, ritualized world of horse training. By combining two distinct styles of training—English and western—she challenges popular views about how to work with horses and how humans and horses communicate through language, movement, and thought.

For most of her life Arkison rode and trained in the English or dressage tradition. In the mid-1990s a dressage instructor with an interest in horse psychology

and an open mind suggested she hook up with some cowboy trainers. She met Brannaman at a horse clinic that she attended in Petoskey to hone her cowboy riding skills. Today, she describes herself as "an avid dressage rider and a closet cowgirl."

Each tradition has a distinctive philosophy about working with horses and its own equipment and outfits for horses and riders. An English saddle is lighter and doesn't have the horn that cowboys use to hold a lasso. English riders hold two reins, western riders one. Dressage riders wear black velvet helmets, white dress shirts, jodhpurs, and knee-high tight black riding boots. Western riders wear cowboy hats, long-sleeve button-down shirts, chaps, and spurs. A typical outfit for Arkison is a maroon tank top, light brown English riding pants, and ankle-high black paddock boots—attire that she laughingly calls "cross-dressing."

A cowboy's horse has to catch cattle and separate them from their herd—a job that takes speed, patience, gentleness, fearlessness, and good balance. Dressage horses were originally trained as reliable mounts for cavalymen. Today dressage is a competitive art form in which show horses must master various tests while maintaining a beautiful, lofty gait. Well-trained dressage horses are highly controlled and follow even unspoken commands exactly.

Arkison's approach is both practical and intuitive: she uses whatever techniques work with the horse she is training. She has had to learn on her own to blend the techniques, because few other people do so.

"I have cowboy mentors and dressage mentors," she says. "The dressage folks don't talk to the cowboy folks and vice



Arkison challenges popular views of how to work with horses.



Flashman had tried to bite people and buck riders off.

versa. There is a lot of fear, which keeps people from seeing the similarities.” Arkison believes the two approaches are actually compatible: “Each has the same goal—to produce a relaxed horse that is using their body properly and is teamed with a human.”

**I**t’s sweltering at dinnertime at the Synchrony horse farm in Saline Township. Julie Arkison’s big blue eyes are vibrant and intense, locked on a visitor in conversation. There’s a half-eaten veggie pizza on the wooden kitchen table in front of her, and her big, friendly German shepherd pants at her feet.

Arkison is describing what happens at cowboy horse competitions when suddenly she stops in midphrase. A faint sound is drifting in through the kitchen window—a certain type of whinny that to her ear is as plaintive as a baby’s cry.

“I need to find out what is bothering that horse,” she says, jumping up from the table. The cry could mean that one of the fifteen horses she owns or trains is in trouble.

She returns a few minutes later to report a false alarm: the horse, she says, was merely griping about being lonely. In her translation, it was asking, “Where’s my best friend? When is he going to come back from the pasture and keep me company in the stall next to me?”

Listening to horses is Arkison’s greatest strength. She helps others listen to them, too, and also to talk to them in their own language. “I can’t teach it,” she says, “but I can set it up so a person can learn it from the horse.”

Pinning back ears, swishing the tail, kicking, biting, and quick movements are all part of a horse’s body language. Arkison teaches her clients how to watch horses interact and find out which ones are dominant. Then she shows clients how they can communicate with their horses by standing at attention or in a relaxed pose, using hands and arms and feet to signal various intentions, and manipulating and

defining the space between horse and human.

Arkison’s grandfather, Joe Sinkule, owned Little Lexington Farm on Ann Arbor–Saline Road, and Arkison started riding horses when she was five, even though none of her four siblings ever rode. Arkison’s riding was physical therapy for her clubfeet. Keeping her heels pointed down in the stirrups, as riders must do to keep from falling off, helped her stretch her congenitally short tendons. After eighteen years of treatment, many months in casts, and the seven operations, she finally could walk normally. But she will always have feet that are unusually wide and scarred.

In 1985 she graduated from the U-M with a degree in art history and psychology. She planned on being an art therapist but ended up working for a veterinarian because she had always dreamed of being one. She also volunteered as a riding instructor for the handicapped, in the same kind of program that would have helped her as a child—if it had existed then. The program serves adults and children in Washtenaw County with physical, mental, and emotional handicaps. Arkison eventually became its director.

“It meant offering back something to kids that made a difference in my life,” Arkison says. “Horseback riding built my confidence, was physical therapy that was fun, helped me to learn how to relate to a horse without words, taught me about responsibility, and gave me a feeling of normalcy.”

She got married in 1987. When she found out that Jim, her husband, had a bad back, she urged him to get treatment—because, she told him, she planned to have a horse farm and he’d be picking up bales of hay. After being treated and cured by a Rolfer, he was so intrigued by the process that he became one. Now he works half time as a controller at Cleary College and half time as a Rolfer.

Two years after their marriage, Arkison and her husband bought Synchrony Farm, fourteen acres on Willow Road southeast of Saline. She wanted the farm to house the riding school for the handicapped and

to provide a home for her favorite horse from her college days, Magic. Two years ago Arkison took a leave from her job as director of the handicapped-riding program when it moved to a larger farm on Joy Road.

Today Synchrony Farm includes a barn from the late 1800s, indoor and outdoor arenas, fifteen horse stalls, and ten paddocks for horses to play and graze in. The stalls are home for Magic, who is now thirty, and five other horses that Arkison owns, along with up to nine horses she is training. Between giving riding lessons, training horses, and managing the barn, Arkison works fifty hours a week. She works with all kinds of horses and sometimes handles very difficult cases. Rarely is any as hard as Flash’s.

**B**ess Ohlgren-Miller, Flash’s owner, first met Arkison at a horse clinic that Arkison held at Synchrony, where an out-of-town dressage expert was giving lessons. Flash’s dressage training was going miserably. He was such a difficult horse that Ohlgren-Miller couldn’t find a trainer who could help him stand straight enough to enter a show, let alone win one. Even worse was his aggressiveness toward her children.

“We tried everything: homeopathic remedies, acupuncture, a chiropractor,” Ohlgren-Miller says. “He was even about to join a study for horses on taking antidepressants.” She was strongly considering selling him.

On the day when Arkison first saw Flash, the horse tossed his head so hard that it almost hit Ohlgren-Miller. “I don’t know what to do,” she confessed to Arkison, who told her, “I’d be willing to try some things if you’re open, but I can’t promise you anything.”

It was a mutual commitment. Arkison wanted to use ideas taught to her by her cowboy mentors. If these proved successful with Flash, Ohlgren-Miller would have to take the time to learn those techniques too.

A few days later, Ohlgren-Miller brought Flash over to Arkison’s farm in her silver horse trailer. At first he went back and forth from his home in Ann Arbor to Synchrony for each lesson. But soon Flash moved into Arkison’s stables so she could teach him daily.

Ohlgren-Miller says she told Arkison, “Call me when you get somewhere.” She adds, “I didn’t even want to see him, I hated him so much.”

Every day Arkison worked alone with Flash. She started with what cowboys call “groundwork”—standing in the middle of a round pen and trying to define a spatial relationship with the horse. The horse and the trainer use body language, their eyes, and a rope halter to stay connected. The trainer teaches the horse how to follow commands, using some of the same body language a mare would use to communicate with her foal, giving direction, and praising the horse when it does the right thing. But a horse shouldn’t be encouraged to nuzzle up to a human for comfort as it

does with its mother; it might step on toes or knock the handler over. The trainer must teach the horse to come close on command—but not too close.

*Arkison stands in the center of the arena. She wears her hair in a chin-length bob, and her biceps and triceps are as buff as a gymnast’s. She is twirling a twelve-foot lead rope in one hand. This is the cowboy way of asking a horse to move away from her.*

*Aloud, she speaks to Flash—and for him. “How come you’re not letting me stay in?” she asks, answering, “Because I didn’t invite you in.”*

*Suddenly she stops twirling the rope, whacks her thigh, and stands motionless. The noise draws the horse’s attention to her. He stops and looks and then looks away, his attention drawn elsewhere. Arkison starts twirling the rope again, and Flash starts running around the arena again.*

*The process is repeated over and over until she holds his attention with her eyes and he walks towards her and stands squarely in front of her, relaxed, feet straight, head slightly down. She pets the horse’s forehead.*

*Later, when Flash walks too close to her, she withholds the petting. “He’s in my space,” Arkison explains. “See how he has to turn his neck to the side to avoid touching me?”*

*The stubborn horse won’t back up, even when Arkison walks purposefully toward him or bumps the knot of the halter rope against his chin, gently pushing him away.*

**“I** took him back to ground zero,” Arkison says about her early work with Flash. “I treated him as if he was a horse that hadn’t been started. It was as if he had been to school but skipped a few grades and really didn’t know how to add but was in an algebra class and pretending to be able to keep up.

“At times he was very annoying, but I’m committed to helping the horse feel better, and I can’t take it personally. It changes you from the inside. You have to offer something from a place not overly aggressive or submissive.”

The day Arkison finally got through to Flash, she was deeply moved.

“I felt like I touched the center of the universe,” she explains. “Anyone who’s meditated, that’s what it is. I thought, ‘I can keep doing this, because I’m gaining as much as he’s gaining.’”

Week after week, she and Flash worked. Even after she had broken through to him, it was slow going. She started him bareback. When she put a saddle on him, it was as if he had forgotten everything he had learned the week before. When she added a bridle, the same thing happened.

Eventually, Arkison introduced the lunge line, a dressage technique that would strengthen Flash’s back.

*Arkison is standing in the dirt in the center of the indoor horse-training arena. A horse and rider are circling her.*



Friends again: Flash and owner Bess Ohlgren-Miller.

*In her right hand the trainer holds a lunge line, which looks like a long rein. In her left hand is a fifteen-foot whip. The whip seldom touches the horse, but the horse knows it could be used as an extension of her hand, and that's a big motivator. With her voice she issues commands to make the horse move, clicking with her tongue. She uses the lunge line to steer the horse and her body language, voice, and whip to keep the horse moving forward no matter what the rider does.*

*"Feel that?" Arkison asks the rider. "Feel the hind leg come under there? There—that should feel good." The change is so subtle a nonrider can't see it, but the rider smiles with pleasure. The horse gives a snort, a breath of relaxation, because its body is now in a comfortable position. "See? That's what I was waiting for," says Arkison. "I wouldn't have been able to do that without the work with my cowboy mentors."*

Horses often get confused during a lunge lesson when working with a rider and a trainer together on dressage techniques, Arkison explains. The rider may be inadvertently telling the horse one thing with her body while the trainer's lunge line is communicating something different. "The work with the cowboys has helped me to be able to read a horse's con-

fusion and try to change things so it isn't so hard for the horse," Arkison says, "before something happens that would be unsafe for the horse, rider, or handler."

Arkison believes each tradition of horse training has its strengths and weaknesses. Cowboy horses are less easily spooked by sudden sounds and motions. "We ride into our clinics holding flags," Arkison says, "but the flutter would spook many dressage horses."

The discipline and physical demands of dressage help horses too. "Dressage is like physical therapy for a horse," Arkison explains. "It strengthens and straightens the horse, so his back is strong for a rider." But she also insists that "a dressage horse needs to be just as gentle as a cow horse, so a piece of paper won't cause it to bolt."

Arkison dreams of a new kind of success: one that would show the horse world that the two methods can coexist. To tweak the dressage folks, she wants to enter a dressage competition dressed as a cowgirl, with her horse dressed as a cow. "My ultimate dream," she says, "is to take my horse to the highest level of dressage—called Grand Prix—using both dressage and cowboy training." If she won the top prize and then revealed how she had trained her horse, she'd create as much shock as a football player who credited his ballet teacher when accepting the Heisman Trophy.

**A**fter Arkison got Flash straightened out, she had to teach Ohlgren-Miller the cowboy techniques he'd responded to.

"I had to teach her the groundwork, when he was soft, when he was bracing, where to stand, how to stand, how to get the right shape when I lunged him," Arkison says. "She had to learn how to speak the same language. The horse can make all the right changes with me, and it will be worse than if I never touched the horse if the owner doesn't have the guts to stick it through."

After months of training with Arkison and Ohlgren-Miller, Flash has a new attitude. All the discipline—and the clear-channel communication with humans—has relaxed him.

"He actually enjoys being around people," Ohlgren-Miller says. "When I get home, he'll come to the barn to see what I'm doing. Two years ago he never would have done that—he wouldn't have cared less. Now he enjoys working. He's a happier horse."

"It's like attention deficiency for children. He had that and now he doesn't, and there's no Ritalin involved."

**P**eople who dream of being the best continually take clinics from experts. On a hot, sunny morning, eight women have signed up for a clinic at Synchrony Farm. They've paid \$325 apiece to take lessons and hear lectures from Paul Belasik, a dressage expert.

Ohlgren-Miller is riding Flash. It's six months since Belasik first saw her riding him at a previous clinic here. Belasik stands in the center of the large rectangular outdoor riding arena, tall and lean, wearing trendy sunglasses, a blue denim shirt, tight pants, and high black boots. He holds a pair of leather gloves.

Ohlgren-Miller is wearing dark purple pin-striped jodhpurs and high black riding boots. She rides Flash around and around the arena, looking like a live ornament on a merry-go-round, while Belasik blocks the sun with his hand and comments on her technique.

Belasik is not very open to cowboy ideas: he says unequivocally that "dressage excels above all other systems in training horses." But last year Arkison decided she had to "come out" to him about what she does.

"I felt I needed to be honest with him because he wasn't very complimentary to the round-pen techniques," Arkison recalls. "When I said, 'I've had some success with techniques I've learned from those guys,' he was very gracious, and it was nonconfrontational."

Today the dressage expert is giving his latest comments on Arkison's training into a cordless microphone. His words boom over a loudspeaker for all to hear. "All I know is this is a huge difference from the last time I saw this horse," Belasik says. "He was unruly, and this is an awful amount better. What I'm most happy about is this disposition, this workmanlike attitude."

"Me, too," says Ohlgren-Miller, beaming. She leans down and gives Flash a little hug around his straight, freckled neck. ■