

hip joints, seat bones and thighs—is relaxed, balanced and following the motion of the horse. With the legs relaxed, the rider is free to give aids and communicate with the horse. Gripping causes muscles to contract, which can pull the heel and whole leg up. Riders can grip in the buttocks, inner thighs, knees and even in their calves. The best solution for developing balance is to work the rider on the longe line.

Not everyone has the luxury of taking longe lessons. It takes two people and a good longe horse. On the longe line, the rider can work without the worry of controlling the horse. Working without stirrups, doing a variety of exercises, the rider can use a strap around the horse's neck to help maintain and develop balance—and confidence—and help break the habit of gripping.

If you do not have access to a longe horse, you can put a neck strap on your horse (a stirrup leather or a side rein works well) and do exercises while you go around the arena. Hold the strap and a fairly short outside rein together with your outside hand. Use your inside rein as you would normally when you ride. Your outside hand on the strap is used to stabilize your body and pull your seat into the saddle.

If you have a trustworthy horse, you can work without stirrups and do the same exercises you do on the longe: leg lifts, scissors and bicycle movements. Once the “grip is gone,” you can relax your leg along the horse's side and allow its weight to drop down into your heel.

2. Locked joints. A stiff ankle, knee or hip can cause the rider's leg to “lock” with the heel up or even braced down. The joints in our legs need to have a subtle bit of movement to absorb the motion of the horse's barrel when we sit the trot. There should be a slight spring in these joints in a small circular action.

If you find your joints are stiff, one

of the best ways to get some motion in them is to shorten your stirrups and come forward in a jumping position. Balance your torso forward over your leg and be careful not to grip or brace. Try to keep your back flat or slightly rounded but not arched. Bring your weight slightly over to the left and bounce into your left knee/ankle for a few strides, then bring your weight over to the right and bounce into your knee/ankle on that side. Then, center your weight and bounce into both ankles. You really want to feel your joints spring slightly up and down. This will drop your heel and loosen your joints.

Be careful with this exercise as it takes a lot of fitness and flexibility to do it for any length of time. Build up your time slowly. Even a few minutes a day at the walk can make a huge difference. Gradually build up to trot. When you put your stirrups back to dressage length, make sure they are not too long. You want a length where you can comfortably maintain the weight of your leg on the ball of your foot and keep a length that allows your heel to slightly spring down every step.

3. Incorrect use of the driving leg is another major cause of heels coming up. Many riders use their ankle or heel to drive the horse forward, or to apply bending or lateral aids. We really need to ride off our upper, inner calves instead. The calf is applied by using the hamstrings (the back of our thighs, not inner thighs). This contraction of our hamstrings will cause a slight bending of the knee. This will draw the upper calf into the horse's barrel. Think of a string, connecting your toe to your knee, shorten the string to help keep a bend in your ankle. Then think of a string from your upper calf to your hip. This will help you close your upper leg on the horse. A combination of the two will keep your heel down, your leg long and

draw your seat deeper as you apply your lower leg aids.

When we sit the trot, we need the weight of the torso balanced across our seat bones, our hip joints and our bottom. Then the weight of the leg is hanging all the way down into the stirrups. By recognizing your own individual position tendencies, you can use one of the above exercises to loosen up your “stuck” area. When you free up these areas, you can encourage the weight of your entire leg down into your springing heel so you feel deep, secure and wrapped around your horse.

Book Review

Playing With Lukas, How a Woman and a Horse Found a Private World of Animal Intelligence and Themselves.

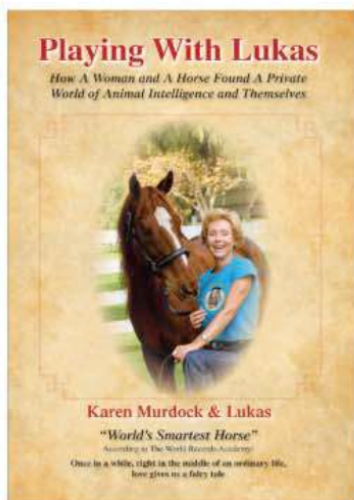
By Karen Murdock.

*Softcover, 83 pages; available
at playingwithlukas.com.*

Reviewed by Mary Daniels

This is the most unique book on training I have yet to see, though it can be called that only in the broadest sense of the word. Author Karen Murdock heads one of her chapters with a quote by Helen Keller, who overcame blindness and deafness to become an icon of spiritual strength: “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.” This is what this self-published book really is about—how two beings, who couldn't find their place in life, finally did through each other. It's a wonderful story of the triumph of spirit.

Lukas is a 17-year-old Thoroughbred gelding who bombed on the racetrack and ended up emaciated and forlorn in a backyard until someone took pity on him. He was ultimately found in 2002



at the age of 9 by Murdock, a rescue trainer for more than 30 years in California. Despite her experience, she found challenges she had never met before. He was sullen, resistant, aloof and spooky to the point of being dangerous. But she was up for it, and her patience and compassion transformed Lukas into an Internet sensation, dubbed by both Yahoo and Google as "The World's Smartest Horse."

Lukas has attracted global attention for his tricks at liberty, his movements, such as the Spanish walk and passage, and his phenomenal skills, like spelling, counting and identifying shapes and colors. His Facebook friends number more than 5,000, and he is now spokesperson for the California Thoroughbred Breeders Association, TROTT (Training Racehorses Off The Track) and CANTER (the Communication Alliance to Network Thoroughbred Ex-Racehorses).


In the book, Murdock shares the extraordinary journey that made Lukas the poster horse for the potential of all horses facing untimely ends as slaughter candidates. Lukas had serious behavioral problems, bucking and spinning, as well as health problems. The question comes to mind, what made her stick it out, when friends suggested it would be better for both of

them if he went to the feedlots.

Murdock gives her own background as the answer. She came from a troubled family—a teen runaway, school dropout, homeless wanderer and teenage mother. "I had no idea how to be in the world, no concept of conversation or interaction skills, I was entirely lost," she says. "But sometimes you can save yourself by saving others in need."

Through her love for animals, the dogs of her childhood and horses, particularly Thoroughbreds, Murdock, rehabbed herself, going back to school and becoming a psychiatric technician. She worked in psychiatric facilities in lockdown units, applying the power of love and acceptance to severely damaged human beings.

Dressage had always appealed to her, and she tried formal training at the start of Lukas' career, but it did not work out. So she created her own method, achieving impressive results. She uses a form of liberty training—no whip but with subtle physical cues—in a non-confrontational way. Her three primary tools are "shaping" (light touch), a behavior modification term; a version of clicker training, using vocal sounds instead; and positive reinforcement.

Murdock did it her way and feels Lukas gave her as much as she gave him. Their journey serves as an example of how far-reaching the healing powers of love and compassion can be. 

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