

# A MASTERCLASS

## with Linda Parelli

Story: Anna Sharpley.  
Photos: Julie Wilson

“The horse was fine until we showed up,” declares Linda Parelli. And of course she is right. All our issues with the horse are related to our ability or inability to persuade it to do our bidding. But as all Parelli students will know, training a horse is not a one way street. Pat and Linda Parelli have not invented the wheel where horse training is concerned; however their huge success involves a superior knowledge of horse behaviour and horse training and their ability to make their students feel good about themselves. The vast majority of horse owners just want a happy and calm relationship with their horses and as the Parelli’s point out, most horses want the same thing. The Parelli’s are manifestly fair in their dealing with students, and the not so gifted receive equal time with the gifted; training is fun and by often ever so small steps, everyone advances. Some advance more than others, but that is the nature of human beings, some are more gifted than others. But all Parelli students feel empowered and that, along with some good old fashioned horse sense is why Pat and Linda Parelli have such an enormous following.

### THE TRAINER: Linda Parelli



“A lot of people think that Parelli is just about wiggling ropes and riding around bareback and bridle less.

That’s not what it is, but you see a lot of people doing that because they are just learning. I have become passionate about people becoming better leaders and better riders. We have a lot of techniques and these students know all our programmes, but sometimes they are not thinking of the bigger picture. As a leader they have to have a plan for what they want to do with their horses, not just ride in circles and wiggle ropes. I have gone back to dressage over the past eight or nine years and studied that. I have tried to bridge the gap between basic work and more advanced riding and make it simpler to advance and not have a lot of people yelling at them all the time.

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“I have a curriculum; I do problem solving on the first day. I watch them on the ground and help with any problems and I watch them ride and I help with any behavioural problems they have there. Then I move on and give them exercises to improve their posture and their leadership. It is about using this training to be better dressage riders, better jumping riders, better showing riders and better trail riders etc. with a happy horse. Calm, connected, responsive, supple and successful are the five things I try to achieve with a horse; that is my goal and I try and achieve that with my students. People talk about a happy horse, but what is a happy horse? To be happy, a horse needs to feel safe, comfortable and they need to play. When the horse is not safe it is nervous and tense and if it is not comfortable because of the rider’s actions, it is not happy. And if they don’t get to play, another word for which is learn and develop their curiosity, then they are not happy either.

“Either we are going to bring out the best in a horse or the worst in a horse. The most important thing is to find ways that are natural and easy when we are teaching horses. We as teachers must realise that many riders are doing as much as they can just staying on the horse. What I do is try to break progress down to little steps and make it as easy as possible and then help people feel really successful and empowered. That is a big part of what we do as teachers and we want people to feel successful and have fun when they are learning. I have done everything my students have done and I understand that they are doing the best they can.”

### THE STUDENT: Madison Kerney



Maddie is a 28 year old artist from Point Lonsdale. She has ridden all her life, been to pony club and thought of herself as a capable horseperson. But Maddie encountered problems with her Warmblood mare, Grace, that had been bred by her family. Maddie takes up the story. “We bred her and had her broken in and I started riding her, however she came to be a bit more of a challenge for me and was not at all like the ponies I had that did it all. At times I feared for my safety, especially when riding her amongst other horses at events or on trail rides where she would become extremely anxious and I really doubted the ability that I thought I

had established over the years. I thought I should have been able to deal with Grace’s issues because I had been around horses all my life, but I wasn’t and Parelli really saved me with that. I could not handle her and I did not know how to manage her personality. Fortunately Parelli came and rescued me. A friend of mine, Vici Crowley-Clough commenced training using the Parelli methods and I wondered what she was doing. I was curious and thought it a bit weird at first, but because I saw how much progress she made with her horse, I thought I should give it a go.

Working with Parelli instructor, Rachel Clarkson, I began to see huge changes in Grace when I started doing classes. I started to get a connection with Grace that I had never had with horses before. All the ground work, teaching the horse to be comfortable and asking them to move their forehead and hindquarters etc. on request really helped Grace to trust me. I didn’t realise that Grace was a pushy, left brain extrovert with a dominant personality. Once I worked that out, I was able to do the Parelli training more effectively and that enabled me to get a better connection and feel safer. I realised the importance of the work on the ground and getting a connection before I jump on, this really works with Grace. So now I do ten minutes of that rather than two hours work in the saddle before taking her in to an arena like this at Boneo Park. I have been working on the Parelli system over the past four years and I have noticed a huge difference in Grace and most importantly in my outlook towards training horses and it has helped me to be calmer as a person. Had I not discovered Parelli, I doubt that I would still be riding, because I was not enjoying it; I love riding now.”

### THE MASTERCLASS

“On day one the morning session was all ground work, getting a connection with our horses,” continues Maddie, “and Linda gave us individual help and guidance. In the afternoon we were mounted and continued to work on our connection. Walking forward, reining back, and moving sideways. Little steps to get connected. It is all part of working together and getting a happy working partnership. It is about getting our horses comfortable and to trust us.

“Linda is adamant about correct posture and position and the effect that has on the horse. Linda spent the morning explaining and correcting our posture on the ground. She really made us



Linda works on correcting posture and position. The students were asked to adopt the position as if they were on a horse. “Sink down on your knees and push your pelvis under and forward,” instructs Linda. “Sink down in to your knees and your stirrups; don’t lean back. Have your knees over your toes and push your heels down and back. Look ahead and stretch your neck up.”



“If I can push you over backwards, you are not balanced.”



“Instead of rising trot, we are inclined to FLIP/FLOP. You need to be able to stand straight up from the barrel, this tells you your feet are in the right place. My body stays straight with my tail bone pointing forward. Are my shoulders over my hips? When you lean back, you push your horse’s withers down. Control the rise and stay with the engagement of the horse’s trot. Control the up, as much as the down and no banging on your horse’s back.”

“How we sit on the horse affects its movement.”



Linda corrects her student’s positions. “Stretch your upper body up, to help the horse’s back to lift and come up. Rise forward and up, not just up. Loosen your body a little, you are just a bit too rigid.”



When it comes to exercises that both instruct and entertain, the Parelli's are at the top of the game. This exercise called the Precision Box demonstrated how we control our horse by our own body control. "We have to give our horse the ability to find comfort." This exercise was about influencing the horse, changing direction and speed by our own body control. In this case Linda was the rider/driver of the exercise. The other two were attached by a light hold on the carrot sticks. Linda uses her eyes and her shoulders to determine the direction, not her hands. She turns and the others, to stay within the box, turn too. Linda ups the pace and the others follow. It was a great exercise to give their students the feel of using their bodies to influence the horse. "I do it and my horse feels it and does it. It's my horses responsibility to stay in the box where it's comfortable."



Before mounting up, all students gave their horses ten minutes work on the ground establishing a connection. Here Maddie lets Grace explore her surroundings and satisfy her curiosity. In this case Grace checks out the mounting block herself. If mounted, this could cause some stress to both horse and rider.



Happy that all seems to be non threatening, Grace comes to Maddie with a positive, interested and calm expression. "If your horse is calm, connected and responsive, get on," says Linda.

“When the horse is not safe it is nervous and tense and if it is not comfortable because of the rider’s actions, it is not happy.”

understand how we sit on the horse affects its movement, and I had never really thought about that so much before.

“On the afternoon of day two, Linda rode Grace and that was such a bonus for us both. Linda explained about maintaining the contact and taking as long as it takes to get that connection. I never really got to that stage, because I would give up and think it was enough without ever making a breakthrough. Linda rode Grace, quietly asking Grace to take a consistent contact. Linda was patient and at the walk and trot rode Grace until we could see signs that she was accepting the contact. Her resistance in the form of teeth chattering diminished. When I got on Grace after Linda, there was a huge difference, Grace wanted to hold my hand and accept the contact instead of avoiding it. She was much more willing to stay in the box and stay between my legs and hands and not push me out. It was like WOW when I hopped back on.

**What did you get out of the Masterclass?**

“I now really understand the importance of my posture and position and how it affects the horse. I became aware of my uneven posture and Grace’s uneven posture and with Linda’s ‘keeping everything in the box’ exercise I have more of an idea how to correct it. I can certainly correct my posture, which will in turn help with Grace’s. So much of riding comes down to feel and you have to feel it to understand it. When I got on Grace after Linda had ridden her, I really got the feel of correct contact and how important that contact is when riding.

“I used to compete and I put that on hold to study Parelli and get a better understanding of my horse. This masterclass with Linda has been very good for both Grace and me, because I want to progress and use what I have learnt and get back in to competition”.

Horse Deals attended an afternoon session and an afternoon with Linda is not enough. However, we were able to see how Linda progresses on from the rope spinning and opens the door to riders who want to translate what they have learnt in to a competition situation. The emphasis Linda put on position was like a bolt from the blue as most instructors spend very little time on what is a very important and influential subject. It was an afternoon well spent.



Linda rode Maddie's horse, Grace and began to establish what Grace was happy to do.



Grace was not willing to back up. “Be consistent with the contact and if the horse does not respond, hold the aid and the horse will work it out and seek the more comfortable option and get into harmony with you.”



“To get her to relax, I do more turns and give the outside rein more and I want to make sure I have a connection with her mouth. To turn, I stretch my leg down and turn my shoulders. As soon as she gives, so do I. When she is in the box she finds her own release from pressure. However, I will keep the contact and wait for her to find it. You have to set it up and wait for the harmony. Keep the horse straight and turn with your hips and shoulders, not your hands. Don't let her move the box, you control the box like driving a car. It is a matter of principle to purpose.”

For more information and DVDs on The Precision Box (new release) and Finesse Training Sequence, go to [www.parelli.com](http://www.parelli.com) or call the Sydney based Parelli office on 02 4630 9677.