

The story of my life... so far

I've been crazy about horses for as long as I can remember. I started working full time with horses when I was 16 as a trainee at Granly Riding Center for the Handicapped. It was one of the most rewarding jobs I've ever had. In addition to the daily work, I assisted my boss with her therapy classes. It was amazing to see how much the riding meant to the pupils. I don't think they could have made better progress through any other type of therapy.



*(Picture) Blakken: a Norwegian Fjord Horse that I had the pleasure of riding when I was younger.*

I was equally impressed with how the horses handled all the different incidents. Many of the riders had difficulties controlling their movements. Every now and then a horse was hit unintentionally, but the horses seemed to understand that the riders didn't mean to hurt them.

My boss gave me riding lessons at least once a week, and allowed me to teach the pupils who were able to ride a bit on their own. In my opinion this was the best part of the job, and there was no doubt in my mind: I wanted to become a riding instructor!

The following years I worked at various stables and riding schools around Norway, from an Arabian stud farm owned by a count in the south, to a riding camp above the Arctic Circle. Work was usually demanding, but always interesting and varied, and I was constantly learning new things.

At E-K-T Riding School in Oslo I was finally given the opportunity to work as a professional instructor. It was a challenge to teach as many as 18 pupils at the same time!

My job at Fredrikstad Equestrian Center in Norway was another great milestone in my career. The centre had just been opened, so I became their first employee. The head of the riding club was very enthusiastic, and he had a flattering faith in my ability to perform miracles with the place. I had no intention of letting him down.

We made things happen with determination and optimistic ideas. After only one year we had the largest number of pupils who had accomplished passing the official Riding School Diploma Test in the entire country, according to the Norwegian Riding Association.

The girls who hung out at the stable were very helpful with the riding lessons and taking care of the horses, so twice a week I organized training especially for them. Just for fun we started practicing “gymkhana”; a playful race where the participants have to get through all kinds of obstacles. They were soon good enough to compete against other teams, and I was very proud of the school ponies and the girls when they won the Norwegian Championship at the end of the year!



*(Picture) Bratanek; a lively Polish Thoroughbred gelding I bought while working at Stable Monserud.*

Since we didn't have an indoor arena at the center, there was less activity during the coldest winter months, so the club decided this would be a good time for me to get further education. Thanks to them I finally came to Starum, Norway's Educational Center for Riding Instructors.

There is one more job in Norway that I just have to mention. A whole new world opened when I was hired at Stall Monserud. Many of the horse owners there competed at the highest level of show jumping and dressage. They were riders I had only previously read about in Norwegian horse magazines. My boss was one of the most active competition riders in the club in addition to being a serious horse dealer.

Initially he had hired me as a stable manager, but I got increasingly involved in the management of the riding school, so after six months my boss gave me full responsibility of that, too.

In 1994 I moved to the United Arab Emirates where I had been offered a job as an instructor and trainer at Abu Dhabi Equestrian Center. It was like living in a fairy tale! The gigantic center was famous for its horse races, and the stables were all situated around the race track. The stables belonged to various rich sheiks and were run as independent units with their own employees and horses. Most of them were for race horses, but some stables had horses for long distance races, polo and show jumping. In addition to those stables there was the riding school where I worked. In total there were over 500 horses on the grounds.



*(Picture) Abu Dhabi Equestrian Club*

Most of the horses in the riding school were Arabians that for different reasons couldn't participate in races. We constantly received new horses to train from the track. The horses that showed talent for jumping or polo got transferred to those stables, and we used the remaining ones in our riding school.



The riding school was exclusive, and only people with the best contacts could become members. The majority of our pupils were the sheiks' children who arrived in black limousines with their body guards and nannies. Every now and then the sheiks showed up in person to watch their children ride.

One day one of them approached me and offered me a job I couldn't resist. The sheik owned an island just outside Abu Dhabi where he had a stable with 26 horses. There were employees who took care of feeding and daily chores, but he had never had anyone there to train these horses. So my job would be to break the horses in, and I was given full freedom as to how I wanted to go about it.



*(Picture) Prancer; the aggressive stallion that made me forever change the way I work with horses.*

The Island had wonderful beaches to ride on, here I am out on Mutadil, one of the other stallions I worked on. (According to the owner he would not go near water!)

The island was enormous with sand dunes and beautiful lagoons. The stables consisted of two buildings; one for the mares and youngsters, and another for the stallions. The mares were outside together in a big pen all day, but the poor stallions lead boring lives. They only had three paddocks to share, so they spent most of their time in the stables with nothing to do. As a result many of them were frustrated and aggressive.

I had worked with the horses on the island for a couple of weeks, but the thought of one of the stallions was bothering me. He was by far the most aggressive horse I had ever seen. Whenever anyone came near his paddock, he would come running towards them with his mouth open and teeth showing.

I didn't really have much faith that the new Natural Horsemanship methods I had learned about could help me with this horse, but I didn't know what else to do. That's how Prancer became the first horse I trained with so-called Natural Horsemanship methods, and I'll always be grateful that he came into my life.

Describing everything I did with him would turn this story into a book, but the results of my new way of working with horses was that I could ride Prancer around the island with just a halter and lead rope only two months later. He was no longer aggressive, on the contrary, and I had a lot of fun working with him loose in the paddock.

The incredible changes that occurred with this horse made me use the same methods with the other horses on the island, too. It was an amazing experience. Not only did the training become more fun for both the horses and me, but this was also far more efficient than the methods I had used before.

The first year I lived in The United Arab Emirates I met a man from Texas whom I married. Because of his work we would have to move a lot, and now the time had come. During the following six years we lived many different places, like Greece, Texas, Arizona and South Korea. Fortunately horses can be found everywhere!

It was a fantastic experience for me to move to the U.S. Working in the Emirates had given me lots of practical experience, but now the possibility of taking courses was much better. I attended as many clinics with different trainers as possible. When it comes to learning about horses, the best teacher is the horse, but the clinics have helped me understand what the horses have been trying to tell me.

All the moving made it difficult for me to get a permanent job, so I started working as a freelance trainer. Some times I worked on ranches breaking in several young horses, other times the job would be to help private horse owners solve a specific problem they had.



*(Picture) Me working with Djunn, an Arabian gelding.*

Through the Internet I have met a lot of people who have meant a lot to me. One of them is Susanne Elfström from Sweden. After communicating through e-mail for a while, we decided to make a horse training video together, and the summer of 1998, Susanne came to Texas. The video "Motivate your horse" was the result of our work. This project exceeded all our expectations, so two years later we decided to make a second video: "Horses with Problems".

Thanks to the video's popularity in Scandinavia I was asked to give clinics in Norway and Sweden. My trips home felt good, so in 2001 I decided to move back to Norway in order to work there full time as a trainer.

Over the years so many people have taught me about horses that it almost feels wrong to name just a few of them here. However, I would like to mention those who have had the greatest influence on how I train horses today. Mark Rashid is my favorite among so-called horsemanship trainers. Karen Pryor has taught me about what is commonly known as clicker training. Then I've also been greatly inspired by Bent Branderup who teaches Baroque riding.



Recently I worked with Piet Bakker from Holland. He has been driving a classic riding school in the Netherlands for more than 40 years, and is well-known in the classic environment in central Europe.

We created a video together titled, "LongReining"