

MORGANTON, NC. — As the sun rises over the pasture, Debra Carswell leads a large palomino gelding into the center of the round pen. Short but strong, with sun-weathered skin and pale blonde hair, she moves with confidence in her thick leather riding boots. With a clear command, she sends him running in circles—left, right, left, right—until she sees his ear flick toward her. His golden head lowers, and he licks his lips, finally ready to listen.

When his nose touches her shoulder, Carswell rewards him with a gentle pat on the neck.

"Horses synchronize their heartbeat with yours," Carswell explains. "If you're angry or scared, your heart rate rises, and in a herd, it signals them to run away from danger. That's why progression in training stops if you get angry or frustrated with them—they just want to flee."

Debra Carswell, 68, has always had an innate connection with horses. With an intuitive sense for understanding horses' emotions—whether they're anxious, sad, or simply in need of care—Carswell is part of a growing movement of trainers rejecting the harsh, forceful techniques of the past. She doesn't shout or whip horses into submission. Instead, she builds trust, transforming her relationship with each horse into a partnership.

Horse training has evolved dramatically from the commonly used "breaking" methods. In the past, trainers relied on punishment, fear, and exhaustion, to control their horses, using techniques like tying the horse's head still or "longing till dead" to force submission. These methods frequently resulted in "learned helplessness," where horses became passive but emotionally withdrawn. Trainers like Carswell emphasize communication, mutual trust, and respect, working with the horse's instincts rather than against them.

The youngest of four children, Carswell was born in the small midwestern town of Winamac, Indiana. Her father worked as a truck driver and was often away from home for long stretches, leaving her mother to raise her and her siblings alone.

When she was 6, the family moved to North Carolina to be closer to family, where they frequently relocated within the county. At the age of 10, her family settled on a small farm. The farm's landlord owned a herd of cattle, including a massive bull named George. Carswell was fascinated by George and decided to befriend him. She began bringing him treats and singing to him, and eventually, she mustered the courage to ride him. It became a nightly ritual for Carswell to sneak out of the house and find George.

"We became friends," she says. "I finally got the courage to sit on him while he was eating. Now I could ride him all over the pasture."

Though her family couldn't afford a horse, Carswell found ways to be around them. She would befriend classmates with horses and, through them, met her first husband, Darroll Baldridge. They married young, and Carswell had her first son, Shannon, at 17. But just three years later, tragedy struck. Darroll was killed in a robbery at his workplace, leaving Carswell eight months pregnant with their second son.

Carswell found solace in her faith and community, which helped her rebuild her life. In 1976, she married Sandy Carswell and the two moved to Hartford, Kansas. They had two more children and began to build a new life that included her dream of owning horses. After returning to North Carolina, Carswell bought two horses.

"I was so excited," Carswell says. "For the first time in my life, I had my own horses to ride."

Horses have remained a constant presence in Carswell's life. Her home is filled with horse-themed decor: painted portraits of horses hang on the walls, horse salt and pepper shakers sit on her table, and figurines line her stairway, tucked inside decorative riding stirrups.

Carswell studies well-known horse trainers, adapting their methods to fit her approach. Like in *The Horse Whisperer*, she emphasizes the importance of understanding a horse's body language, as their reactions are closely tied to the emotional state of their handler. Drawing from Monty Roberts' "Join-up" technique, Carswell gives the horse a choice—either accept her as the herd leader or not. She keeps the horse moving in a round pen, watching for signs that they're ready to listen and come closer, much like a mare guiding her foal to accept her gentle authority.

"You have to establish who's the leader," Carswell explains. "If they doubt you, they'll become leader and run you right over."

When looking for horses, Carswell searches for those considered past their prime—older horses left in paddocks or those whose owners have lost interest. She often finds them cheaply online.

"With horses, there's no guarantee that what you see is what you'll get. Unfortunately, not everyone is honest when selling them," Carswell explains.

She stresses the importance of examining a horse's feet and overall composition. Despite their size, horses are fragile and prone to foot and leg injuries, which can lead to costly medical issues.

Carswell takes these horses, helps them regain their strength, refines their training, and eventually sells them to friends and family looking for a reliable ride. Over the years,

she's worked with all kinds of horses, from twenty-year-old mustangs to purebred American Paints.

"I love a challenge," Carswell says. "Horses are just like people with different personalities. Some are shy, some are hateful, some are intelligent, and others a little dull. Breaking through what has damaged them and helping them to trust you and heal—that's what inspires me."

Josh, Carswell's youngest son, who lives on the same land as her, worries about his mother's well-being but knows better than to try and stop her from caring for her horses. "It doesn't matter how many times she falls or gets hurt...her love and passion for horses is more than the safety of herself," he says.

Carswell's passion for horses has also inspired the next generation. "Not a lot of people have grandmothers like mine," says Maddy, Carswell's 16-year-old granddaughter, who also lives on the property. "She was my inspiration to get started working with them and learning to ride. Ever since I moved here, we've been working them together."

Carswell says she is in tune with her horses' mental state each time she rides them. She knows when they're anxious or more spooky than usual. Horses can sense things we are unaware of, she says, and they share our emotions.

As the sun sets beyond the tree line, Carswell leans against the fence, watching her horses graze peacefully.

"I have a connection with them," Carswell says. "I feel our hearts beating as one. When I am riding, I feel total freedom."

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Sources:

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[Equine Abuse: Why Do Rough Training Methods Still Exist? - Paulick Report | Shining Light on the Horse Industry](#)

[Monty Roberts Courses - Monty Roberts](#)