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# METRO

## TRAINER WITH HORSE SENSE TALKS (IN A WHISPER) TO THE ANIMAL

### A new life for beaten horse

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A week ago, when Kim and Dale Blackmon took Cheyenne from Johnston County to Jan Leitschuh's horse farm near Southern Pines, they feared it was their last hope. The formerly docile 4-year-old Palomino had been unridable since August, when a horse trainer beat him almost to death.

The Blackmons took the horse to Leitschuh, who uses a method known as natural horsemanship. And Cheyenne seems to be on the mend.

The ancient technique — made famous by Buck Brannaman, who inspired The New York Times best-seller "The Horse Whisperer" — doesn't employ conventional methods of force. Horsemanship is practiced as a gentle, intuitive method of connecting with the animal by reading its body language and building trust.

Leitschuh spent part of Sunday working with Cheyenne. A sun-drenched spring breeze



Owner Kim Blackmon nuzzles Cheyenne after he'd gone through a natural-horsemanship session with trainer Jan Leitschuh.

STAFF PHOTO BY CHRIS SEWARD

shimmered through the pine-banked training ring where Leitschuh led Cheyenne using what she called "the golden thread."

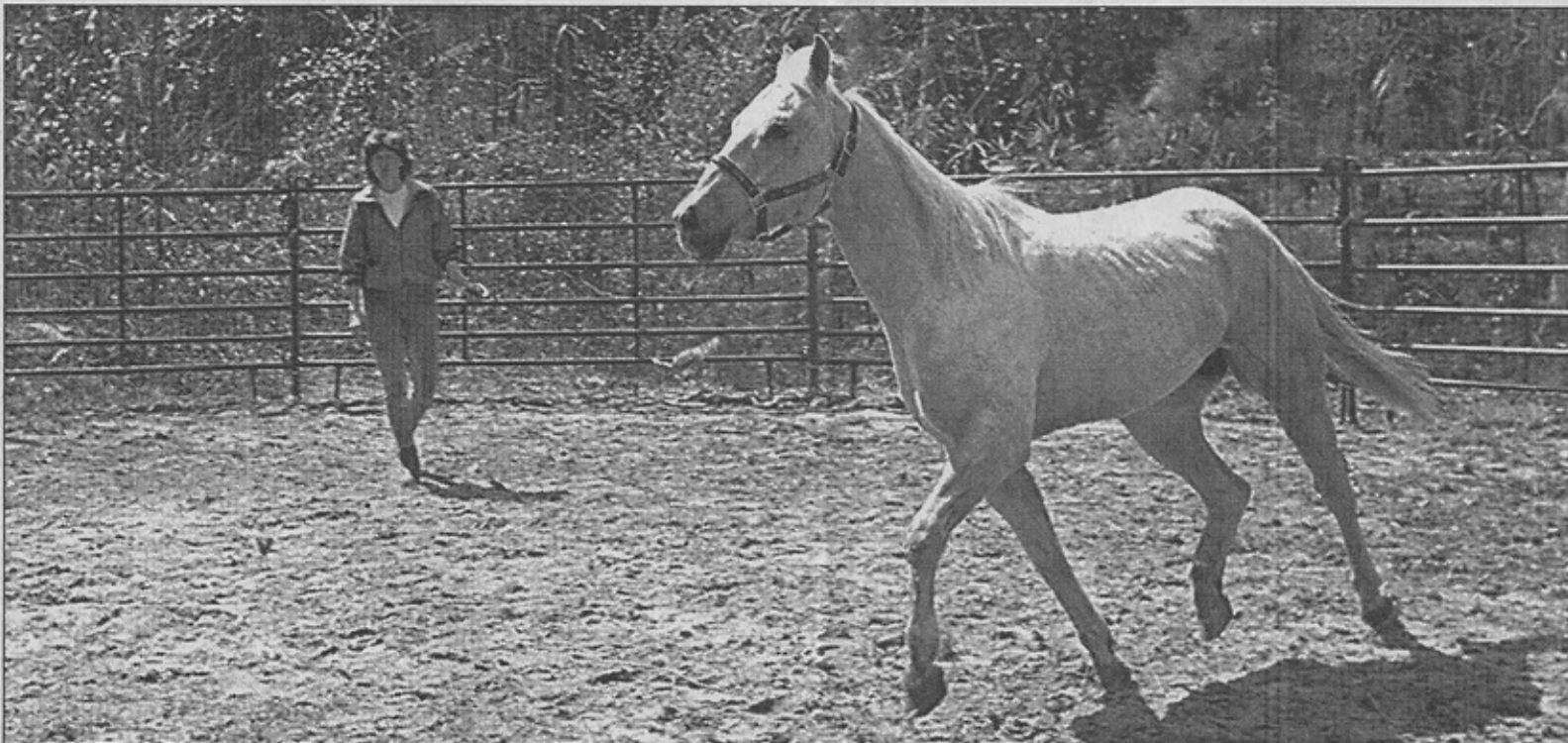
It wasn't a rein or a rope. But when she walked, he walked. When she stopped, he stopped. When she pivoted, he pivoted, and so it went. Leitschuh stopped to nuzzle Cheyenne's deeply scarred forehead, where crisscrossed wounds serve as a permanent reminder of the night he was

whipped and kicked into a concussion.

"This is amazing," said his owner, Kim Blackmon of Benson, as she watched Cheyenne follow Leitschuh's every step. "That's the way he was. He loved to be touched, he loved to be groomed. If you called him, he came to you."

But since the beating, Cheyenne hasn't let humans touch him — or ride him.

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Trainer Jan Leitschuh goes through a workout with Cheyenne in Southern Pines; another trainer abused the horse in August.

## RECOVERY

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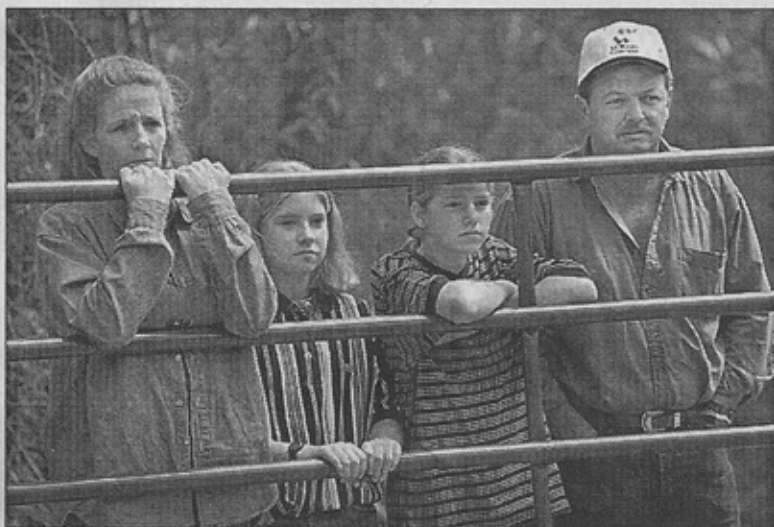
"He tensed to the point where he felt dangerously explosive," said Leitschuh, recalling the day last week when she first tried to ride him.

By Sunday, she had worked with him for four days. Sensing the building trust, Leitschuh slowly climbed onto Cheyenne's bare back and stroked his mane.

He didn't bolt. "This is a miracle," Blackmon said.

According to followers of Brannaman's techniques, gentleness works on horses that are emotionally scarred, much the same way caring and understanding help abused humans become whole again.

Cheyenne's plight became public in February when Cale Godwin, a Benson trainer previously employed by the Blackmons, was convicted of cruelty to animals in Harnett District Court. The Blackmons testified that Godwin kicked,



Kim Blackmon and her daughters, Katie and Jessica Pfell, and husband, Dale Blackmon, watch the training session.

STAFF PHOTOS BY CHRIS SEWARD

whipped and stomped Cheyenne during a training session. The Blackmons had hired Godwin to stop the horse from balking, or stopping without his rider's permission.

Kim Blackmon testified that after two hours in Godwin's care, Cheyenne had been beaten so

severely that his side looked like a washboard. His eyes were swollen shut, and shards of fiberglass from a whip were lodged in his groin. Veterinarians from N.C. State University in Raleigh determined that Cheyenne lost part of his eyesight from the beating.

Godwin acknowledged the beating, but said he was merely using common training regimens.

The ruling was bittersweet for the Blackmons. Godwin was allowed to continue training horses, and Cheyenne had become a dangerous horse who might bolt and trample at the snap of a twig.

On Sunday, Blackmon watched intently from outside the ring as Leitschuh continued watching for Cheyenne's body language. As she approached him, he looked for an escape, so she stopped. She moved back a step, and he moved forward. She reached for his face. He tensed. She stopped.

"This is how we build trust," Leitschuh said. "The craft, or the art of horsemanship is reading the horse's expressions. It is moment after moment after moment where I say [through body language] that I won't hurt you."

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