

## PART ONE In this feature... > Training your horse at liberty

### Our trainer



**Farah DeJohette** is an American trainer who has developed her own brand of horsemanship that includes liberty work, in-hand work with a headcollar or bitless bridle and under saddle. Her experience spans many disciplines and while she has trained to a high level in dressage, she works with all types of horse – regardless of discipline – to help them be light and responsive. For more information, visit [fdhorsemanship.com](http://fdhorsemanship.com)

### Our rider



**Ebo** is a four-year-old Andalusian gelding owned and ridden by Lauren Barber. He is in the early stages of his training, having been broken in last year, and Lauren aims to do dressage with him. He is full of energy in the school, especially when turned loose.



► Gaining his focus ► Building a rapport ► Establishing leadership

# Listening at liberty

*American horse trainer Farah DeJohnette shows how to use body language to train your horse, without tack, from the ground up*

**F**arah DeJohnette calls herself a horse listener as opposed to a horse whisperer, because she uses her body language and energy to engage in a conversation with the horse.

In the first part of this series, she works with Ebo, who is prone to having a hooley when he's let loose in the school. Farah uses liberty work to gain his focus, then uses that to develop his strength and suppleness through movement. Farah continues...

## Safety first

Everything that we do on the ground crosses over to the work we do in the saddle. At liberty, I can build rapport with Ebo. I can work on his flexibility, his responsiveness and even collection – all the things we work on under saddle, too. While liberty work can be fun for both horse and rider, safety is important. I always wear a hat and gloves, and I also carry a dressage whip. The whip isn't something I ever use to hit the horse with, but I can use it to back up my gestures and body language if the horse is unresponsive – especially if I need the horse to get out of my space quickly.

Some people feel that they have to be close to the horse, but to me that's a potentially unsafe situation. I try to project my energy to influence the horse's movement and my hands are an extension of that energy. I think of myself as an impenetrable barrier because horses don't generally run through fences or challenge a solid barrier. So when I move towards the horse, he should move away, to keep an arm's length of space between us at all times.

Square your shoulders and think about being strong. I see quite a few people use their hands and gesture, but without the energy follow-through it doesn't work. They then use the whip as a tool to do the 'talking', but if he's only paying attention to the whip, he's not listening to you.



I think of myself as an impenetrable barrier

Farah DeJohette

Keep an arm's length space between you and the horse

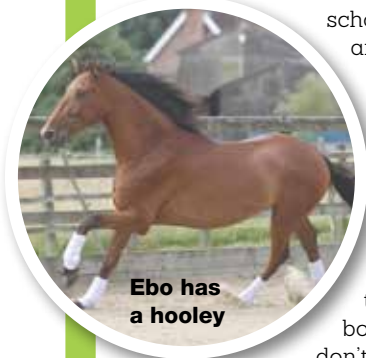
## Watch and learn

When I first meet a horse, I'll just watch him. I want him to be seeking me out, so I will not pursue him. I look for places where I can interject into the conversation. I want to build a rapport and become the leader of the conversation.

At first, Ebo gallops around the school, but slowly he comes in and starts to check me out because he's interested in doing something. I work in the horse's context – training him in a way that he can understand. When two horses are communicating with each other they don't use tack as we do, they use body language and they also don't do something repeatedly to get their point across. That's

what I'm trying to replicate in training – using my body language and energy to gain his focus.

At first, when I approach Ebo, he'll let me get a certain distance from him but then blast off at a canter in the other direction. It's a little bit about him being fresh, but also it's how he reacts normally when Lauren lets him loose in the school. I keep watching what he's doing and looking for an in-road. I'm observing him, noticing his sensitivity level, where he's looking and whether he'll move away when I approach him – a lot of what I'm doing is about reading the horse.



Ebo has a hooley



## Eye contact is fundamental in my training

Eye contact is fundamental in my training. When Ebo gives me eye contact, that's the beginning of focus. Horses are wired to respond to sound and movement. I want to get to a point with him where he watches me, as if to say, 'Where are you going?' when I move, and react by moving with me. That's the basis of getting the horse's focus, which is what everybody wants, on the ground and mounted. This is a really natural way for them to understand and I've yet to meet a horse who didn't understand this type of language!



Ebo starts to focus in on Farah

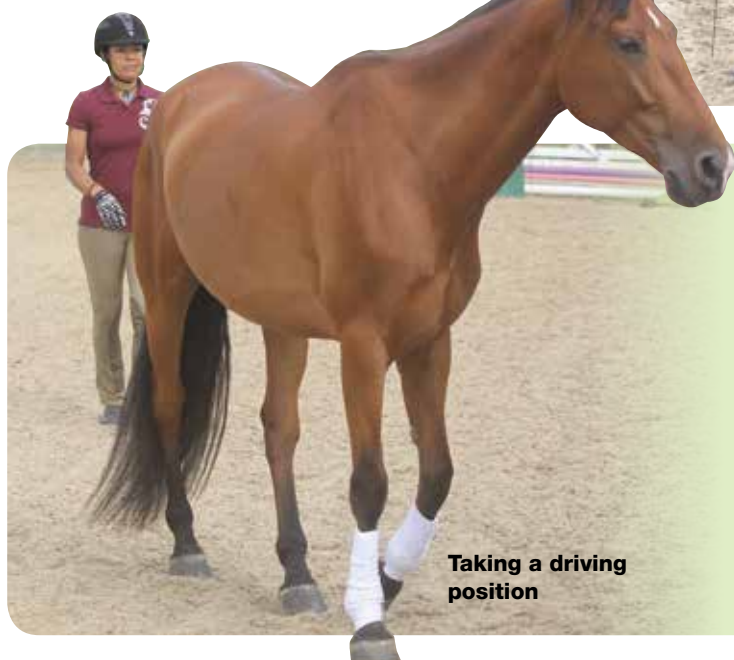
## Getting focused

To start to gain his focus, I interrupt Ebo from eating some stray grass along the fence line. I work a lot of my horses loose in hay fields and food is never an issue to me – I simply tell him, 'You can't eat right now'. It's a conversation and he did have an opinion about that, but I'm not bothered at all. This is the beginning of our conversation.

I'm guiding him with my body and I have to be very aware of how my body language shapes his response. It works just like my leg would if I was on him.



**Farah interrupts Ebo and gains his focus**



**Taking a driving position**

How I stand and where I stand can influence different parts of his body. I can work to move his shoulders, barrel or hindquarters and I can switch into a driving position to move him forward, too. I use my hands, with 'shoo'-like motions to back up my body position. And it's all underpinned by my energy – I'm very calm, grounded, clear and firm. A lot of people get fizzy with their energy and your horse can sense this. If you stay soft but clear, his response will be soft and you won't encounter tension in the resulting movement. It helps him to stay in a clear state of mind. That doesn't mean that you can't rev a horse up from time to time, especially when you need to motivate them.

### Top tips

- ▶ Gain his focus by entering into a conversation with him – I started by telling him it wasn't the time to eat.
- ▶ Use a clucking noise and gesture with your hands – horses are wired to follow movement and sound.
- ▶ Eye contact means focus – watch out for him looking at you.



**Moving the shoulders**

Slowly, Ebo starts to focus on me and I can guide him with my body. I walk alongside him and I can direct him onto a circle by positioning my body and directing my energy towards his shoulder. I can function as an inside or outside aid by changing my position to the inside or outside of the horse. We can change direction and I can beckon him towards me by walking backwards. His focus is on me and when distractions crop up, I step back and cluck as if to say, 'No, look here' and he focuses in on me again.

It's quite relaxing for him, and you can tell by his body language that his energy has come down to a relaxed and focused level. I also use this sort of exercise with horses who are spooky. Horses spook because something suddenly catches their attention, but if he's focused on one thing – me – he's less prone to spooking.

This type of work also helps horses' biomechanics. When I initiate a circle by walking along the inside of the horse, he's looking towards the inside, with correct flexion. My horses never learn to look to the outside on a circle with counter-bend. They are taught from the beginning to look into the arc of the circle and I can teach this without any tack.

## Learning at liberty

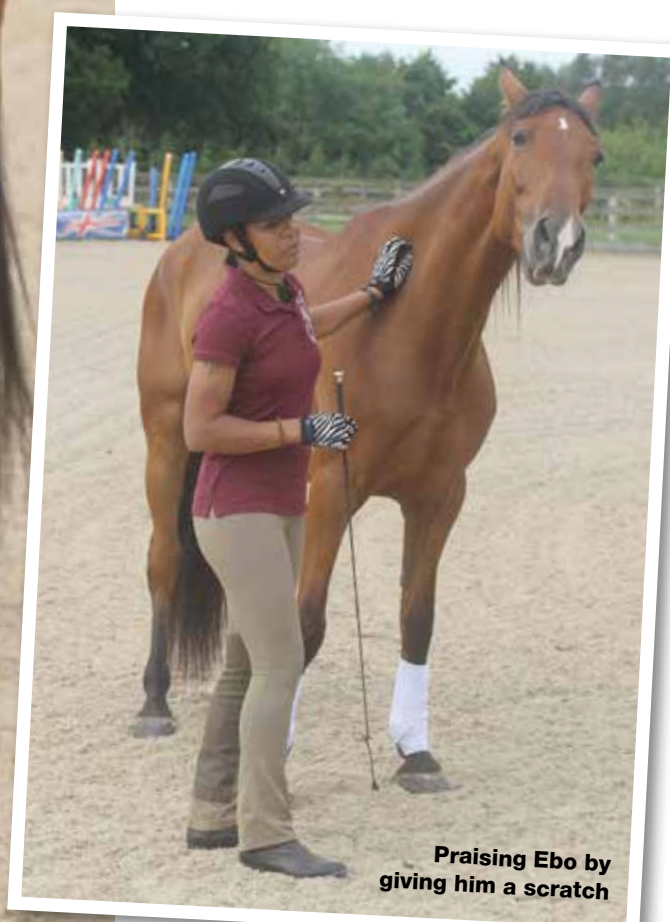
I can tell a lot about a horse by working with him at liberty. I can see whether he's prone to being bargey, or sensitive like Ebo. At one point, he approached me and just kept coming – he almost ran into me. I immediately asked him to leave, and this will teach him to come into me lightly and respect my space. I want him to experiment with how he approaches me and when he gets it right, I give him a good scratch as praise. It's an opportunity to teach him how to be softer and lighter. I can tell how sensitive horses are and in this case Ebo is typical of his breed – light and sensitive. Sometimes certain horses are 'heavy', and take more energy and pressure to move and influence them.

At one point, Ebo approached me and just kept coming... I immediately asked him to leave

### Top tips

- ▶ If at first your horse doesn't understand your cues, simply ask again.
- ▶ Make sure you back up hand gestures with energy – it should be calm, firm and grounded.

Using hand gestures to ask Ebo to leave



Praising Ebo by giving him a scratch

Liberty training can also teach me a lot about the riding horse. For instance, when I put pressure on Ebo to move his shoulders to the left, he doesn't immediately cross his legs over – instead, he shuffles and goes to back up. This indicates that he's a bit stiffer in his left shoulder – a problem Lauren says he has while ridden, especially in the canter. I can start to address that ridden problem at liberty. I ask him to bring his awareness to his shoulder by placing my right hand on it and I place my left hand by his head, just in case he decides to flip his head in my direction. Then I use my energy to ask him to step sideways – I'm not pushing him over. He shuffles at first, but then he gives one crossover step and I praise him for that. For him this is an awareness exercise.

We need to support any stiffness we find in our horses. If you think of it in terms of a human Pilates class, the instructor would help you work through a stiffness in several sessions – they wouldn't put you through 20 minutes of intense suppling on one side to try and sort it out in one session. It's the same with the horse, I want to support his muscular development. By altering my body position, I can influence him to strengthen the areas where I see weakness. He is slightly weak in his hindquarters and by doing wide turns with him, standing just behind or directly beside his weaker hindquarter, I can start to supple this area up. I can influence him to start to cross his hindlegs on the turns and this is the beginning of turn-on-the-forehand. I can then take these skills into in-hand work.

**By altering my body position, I can influence him to strengthen the areas where I see weakness**

## Next steps

Before we go on to the next step, working in-hand, I like to build our relationship at liberty. I like to assess where the horse's weaknesses are – when he has the freedom to avoid doing my requests, it can be very clear! I can listen to when he says, 'That's difficult for me,' and I can start to shape the rest of my work around that. It's a two-way conversation – I find quite a lot of training can be one-way. Sometimes it's the horse who does all the deciding and sometimes it's the trainer who dominates the conversation, but with my method we're listening to each other. I plant the seeds of the foundation in his training and progress from there.

## Next month

Farah works with an event horse in-hand.

## ★★★ Rate this feature

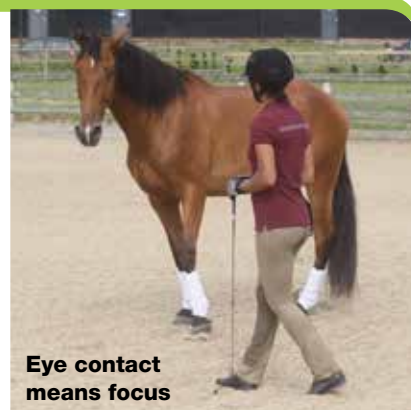
Go to [tinyurl.com/RateOct14](http://tinyurl.com/RateOct14) for a chance to win a Mountain Horse Crew jacket (see p9).

Placing a hand on his shoulder



## In a nutshell...

- Once your horse has focused on you, you can influence his movement.
- Eye contact plus movement equals direction – so get his focus, be strong in your energy and walk alongside him in the direction you want to go.
- You can influence different segments of his body by aligning yourself with the shoulders, barrel or hindquarters. You can also take a driving position by standing slightly behind him.
- Safety first! Wear a hat and gloves and carry a dressage whip – just in case. Always read your horse for any signs of discomfort, so you can move away quickly if he starts to act up.



Eye contact means focus

For more information on Farah DeJohette, visit [fdhorsemanship.com](http://fdhorsemanship.com)