

## **The Language of Equus conveyed through Two Horse-Human Conversations**

*My interpretation of Ruckus's body language and my interpretation of how Ruckus read my body language.*

Each time a human interacts with a horse, the two are having a conversation. Horses, however interpret our actions in their own language, so for an authentic, respectful and two-way conversation to occur it is important for the human to learn the language of Equus.

This paper explores the language of Equus, using two (of many) interactions and hence conversations I had with the six year old rescued Icelandic gelding Ruckus, as a case study. As horses communicate primarily through body language, the conversations have been presented conveying body language (including positioning, posture and movement of shoulders, hips, limbs, ears, eyes and feet), elements of heartbeat, intention and feel – together with my human interpretation of what they might mean. Through observing our body language and reflecting on what it communicated, I have been able learn a little about Ruckus' personality and learning style, which if I was to continue working with him, would help me tailor experiences and lessons in ways to set him up for success, by building trust and bringing out the best in him without dominance.

Before meeting Ruckus I learnt that he has been in ROTH inspired schooling at Zuma's for more than four years and has come a long way due to much time and effort spent with him going through kindergarten level schooling on and off during this time. However, he also remains highly sensitive, has a tendency to bolt when spooked and push through pressure when blocked and is currently learning a lesson in empathy by being placed at the bottom of the pecking order after pushing his previous herd mates around disrespectfully. Lastly, I was told he shows a preference not to face his fears over showing intrinsic motivation to progress. This behavior perhaps stems from experiencing various levels of trauma before being rescued by Zuma's, which had a significant impact on his confidence and belief in himself and capacity to trust humans. As such grounding and confident leadership from someone who will take as long as it takes without getting frustrated would be supportive for him.

Being highly sensitive also suggested that his communication may be subtle to the beginner learner of Equus like myself, so in order for him to feel seen, heard and acknowledged and develop a sense of trust, it would be important not to miss his whisper. A lack of confidence also meant plenty of positive reinforcement of good behavior, along with reassurance that "nobody is mad", and "you're not in trouble" would be required when unwanted behavior presented itself.

Taking the above information into account together with my inexperience in the foreign language, the following interpretations of two conversations between Ruckus and I share some snippets of what I have learnt about the language of Equus during the first week of this course. The conversations also convey where much improvement and refinement on my part is needed, for the more precise and accurate I can be in my communications, the better chance I have of understanding and being of value to Ruckus and other horses in general.

**Conversation 1: Meet & Greet****Location: In paddock****Day & Time: Tuesday 8:00am**

- Sophie: Arrives at paddock relaxed and calm, feeling happy and curious. Smiles and looks casually in Ruckus' direction, standing from a distance.  
(“Hi Ruckus, its good to see you. I wonder how you are doing today?”)
- Ruckus: Raises head and turns it so his nose is pointing in my direction. Ears turned forward.  
(“Something has appeared in the distance and I'm not sure what it is. It doesn't feel too scary but I need to check it out because it is unfamiliar and therefore could be a threat”)
- Sophie: Enters paddock some distance away, briefly walks around for a minute looking at shelter in middle of paddock, then sits down leaning up against fence in the shade, aware of, but not focusing energy on Ruckus at all.  
(“It's OK Ruckus, I know you don't really know who and what I am yet, but most importantly I'm not a threat.”)
- Ruckus: Watches for a time in same position, then slowly turns his whole body to face me, ears still forward and head now at medium level.  
(“This is interesting, this new thing is now just sitting in my territory. It's not coming after me, but I still don't know what it is, or what it wants. I'm curious, I need to know more.”)
- Sophie: Stay where I am, looking around, seeing where the three horses are and taking in the rest of the environment.  
(“I'm curious about you and your environment Ruckus, and still not a threat. You can do what you like, even though I am here.”)
- Ruckus: Walks directly toward me slowly but alertly stopping once or twice for a moment moving his head from side to side, then continuing until he reaches me. Lowers head and sniffs me all over occasionally opening and closing lips  
(“What are you? What do you smell like? Why are you here? Are you safe?”)
- Sophie: Stay where I am and reaches out hand in closed loose fist, slowly towards his nose, letting him sniff it.  
(“I'm safe and not a threat. Nice to meet you Ruckus”).
- Moves hand up towards the topside of his nose to scratch it  
(“I like you and want to make you feel good and comfortable in my presence, can I come closer and scratch you?”)
- Ruckus: Immediately raises head, eyes look downward, pulls away and takes a step back

("No you can't come closer at my head like that. I am still not sure about you. I need to protect myself.")

Sophie: Takes hand away from near nose and leans back, heart beats a bit faster and slightly anxious.

("Uhuh I see you did not like that so much, that's OK, I'll give you more space and take space myself.")

Ruckus: Stays a few steps back, looking back at me. Eyes more alert, one ear turned on toward me.

("Well that worked. When I pulled back a bit, the thing in front that came at me moved back too and that felt better. It did not hurt me, but I'm still not sure about it. Its energy is confusing.")

Moves forward once more slowly and reaches out muzzle towards me, moves his lips around and tries to nibble my chest.

("I want to get a better sense of this thing.")

Sophie: Moved away somewhat quickly and yelped when nibble felt more like it could have been a nip.

("That was unnerving and I need to protect myself and I do that by removing myself from the danger.")

Ruckus: Pulls back again too.

("Agh what was that? It happened so fast. Predators move fast. Am I in danger?").

A few seconds later turns head to right, ears forward, as breakfast approaches in distance. Then moves toward it.

(Food. Food is good. There is no more movement here. I feel safe. I'm going to eat).

Extra learnings/things for me to remember:

- Further elements of Ruckus' learning style where when it feels safe he is curious to check out new things.
- He likes to sniff/smell and touch with muzzle to explore new things.
- He is sensitive to quick movements and up close pressure too soon.
- He is drawn to grounded and confident energy.
- He greets through sniffing/smelling and sensing through muzzles and whiskers
- To always consciously end conversations on a good note, because most horses will remember how it felt when it ended, and if it ended positively, there is a higher chance they will be glad to see you and be willing to engage the next time. (Which given our relationship dynamic to date seems an especially important concept with Ruckus). It also means any feelings of safety and trust created in the conversation will be preserved and perhaps even brought to a higher level, further enhancing any learning that took place.

**Conversation 2: Feeling Out Zones of Awareness, Decision-making & Inter-pressure****Location: In paddock****Day & Time: Thursday morning**

- Sophie: Enter paddock and walk toward Ruckus very slowly and tentatively in an arc with some crab walking. Eyes hovering between his chest and the ground.  
("You are sensitive and I'm unsure of myself. I'm not sure how to speak your language and may even seem creepy like a predator.")
- Ruckus: Facing lengthways with head up and turned towards me. Eyes wide and alert and watching me. Ears facing me. Legs bracing a little in position ready to move.  
("Who are you? You are somewhat familiar yet seem creepy and I'm worried. What do you want from me? Do I need to flee?")
- Sophie: Keeps moving around slowly, tentatively stepping closer toward Ruckus when he is still, and stepping fully backwards when he moves.  
("I want to respect your space and for you to feel comfortable with me close, rather than run away. But if you gently tell me I'm giving too much pressure, I may not listen to the whisper and instead we will go back to the very beginning and start again.")
- Ruckus: Always keeps eye on me, and inside ear turned on, body at approx. 90 degrees facing me lengthways, though often more with his hind slightly facing me. When I move closer, he either stays still, leans backward, shivers skin, moves his weight from side to side, picks up one foot or moves all his feet away from me. When I step back he stops and settles somewhat.  
("I know you are trying to talk to me but you are not really listening to what I'm saying. I'm not slow, it's your messages that are confusing. I'm getting anxious because I don't know what you want. I need you to be more clear in your communication, and to give me more space to feel comfortable to engage in this conversation because you're still a bit creepy).")
- Sophie: I recall Elaine telling me how creepy I can look and to move more casually yet confidently, with more flow and conviction, and not to always move my feet so much. I take a breath and smile and instead of stepping forward and back as my only moves, I start to just lean forward and backward in response to more subtle cues from Ruckus as to when I'm on the edge of his decision zone/bubble. I also try to mirror his leg positions when he is standing still, just like Mac had demonstrated. And sometimes stay leaning backward slightly for a longer pause until I notice signs of relaxation like a lick or chew, and anticipate movement before it happens and lean backward at this time to reward standing still – as Michelle taught me.  
("I'm listening to you more Ruckus. I see this conversation is more subtle than I realized and you respond quickly. I see you are motivated to engage by quick releases of pressure, followed by checking in again not too long after with a new ask, so there

is no need to keep ending the conversation and starting again. I like it when you stand still, and I would like you to do that more. Thanks for your patience with me”)

Ruckus: Licks and chews a little and relaxes his muscles, eyes still on me, and head drops a little from being up high. Hind end is facing more away from me. He allows me to gently come in a little closer to about 3-4 feet away, toward his shoulder.  
“That feels better, you are speaking my language and listening to me more. Maybe you are trustworthy... but only at this distance for now).

Sophie: Turns to the right whilst slightly dropping shoulder and stops in the position so rib/side area is exposed to Ruckus. Eyes move from his chest down slowly across the ground in front of me.  
 (“I am trustworthy, and not a threat. Here is my vulnerable area for you to see. Would you like to join me? Do you trust me enough for me to lead you at all?”)

Ruckus: Slowly follows his nose in my direction watching me, and lines up his body to face me. Eventually takes a step towards me.  
 (“I’m interested. I’m paying attention. I’ll try. And I’ll maintain my bubble.”)

Sophie: Turn to face him, shoulders, heart and eyes on his heart.  
 (“I see you. I acknowledge you and I thank you for being you.”)

Extends hand out again to scratch his head  
 (“Can I love on you? I want to give you some love?”)

Ruckus: Tenses up body, lifts one forefoot up, pulls head away to the side a little.  
 (“No, you cannot scratch my head, I prefer release of pressure as a reward.”)

Sophie: Puts hand back down, pauses, wonders where to go from here – if anywhere - then starts to curve around slowly in front of Ruckus from shoulder to shoulder eyes looking ahead, pausing when Ruckus moves his nose in my direction.  
 (“OK I respect that. I won’t touch your head. Would you still like to come with me though?”)

Ruckus: Stays in his same position, eyes watching me, ear turned on me 50% of the time but doesn’t move towards me.  
 (“Ahh no... You’re losing your conviction so I’m losing interest and willingness.”)

Sophie: After a while moved I away somewhat then turned to face him again from the side in the driving zone (but not at an accurate 45 degree and no eyes on eyes) and guided my hand closest to his nose to out to the left, and lifted my right hand up to the right. When he doesn’t send out I try to get bigger by mostly jumping up and down with little rhythm, and possibly moving into the inter-pressure zone.

(“Let’s change this up then to see if I can re-establish the conversation/connection. How about you move out to the left? Let me influence your feet. But I’ll block you in that direction, and wont drive you very directly because I’m flying by the seat of my pants somewhat now and just trying things without a lot of mind, body, spirit alignment. Move if you want to, but you don’t really have to.”)

Ruckus: Stays mostly in same position though pulls back slightly and raises head slightly. Alert to my movements with an inquisitive look in his eye.  
(“You want me to move somewhere but your giving me mixed messages again. I’m *really* not sure about your leadership capacity now. I don’t believe you know or mean what you are asking or why. I’m not totally comfortable with you, but don’t feel a need to flee. I’ll just stay here for now until you work out what you want and become present or I find something more interesting to do.”)

Extra learnings/things for me to remember:

- Offered great opportunities for me to
  - practice dancing the language of Equus by moving my body in different ways in, out and around the different bubbles and zones of awareness, decision, and inter-pressure; and;
  - get a feel for how the bubbles constantly shift in size, relate to each other and influence the horse-human conversation through the ideas of pressure, release, energy, blocking, asking and checking in.
  - continue to refine my ability to see, hear and listen to the subtle communication/cues and respond appropriately and timely – and observe where I need improvement.

---- The End ----