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Viewpoint: The State Of Our Art

In Horses As in Men

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Not too far southwest of Denver is horse country. During the warm months, it's a place of dark-green grass and ice-cold mountain streams. It features ranches, some historic mansions built in the Roarin' 20's, and a place where a few remaining "old timers" exchange tales over a table of Coors, that often contain the wisdom of Solomon. A story overheard one evening has lingered with me for many years. The casual conversation began with politics and then drifted to what it takes to have the insight of a "leader," what it takes to get a job done. All this was wrapped comfortably in the following legend:

Around the turn of the century, that there was a particular piece of horseflesh that would make any equine lover drool with envy when appreciated from a distant viewpoint. The horse's name was "Sport" -- a gray stallion who often flashed his ebony mane and tail and stomped his feet to show off his evenly matched white stockings. Sport stood about 17 hands high at the withers, weighed about 1200 lbs., and was one of the most proportionally designed thoroughbreds anyone had ever seen.

Unfortunately, Sport's disposition was not as refined. He had been purchased several times but quickly returned because of his cantankerous nature -- a potential threat to any handler's life. Yes, Sport was what one would call a problem horse. He would resist being harnessed, snap at his feeder, and attempt to butt his groomer. If anyone would approach him from the rear, he would lash out with hind-feet kicking. If anyone would approach him from the front, he would try to remove a piece of arm or stomp on a foot.

Sport eventually found an owner that apparently understood him, a young nonconformist called Johnny. As the months and then the years went on, neighbors could not understand why Johnny never complained about Sport and why he didn't shoot him or at least sell him. "Why put up with such behavior, the grief?"

Psychologists were unheard of during this time. Such terms as personnel motivation, fringe benefits, and job security were unknown. Successful people were driven by one motto: "Get the job done the best you can with what you've got." Employee relations were essentially hiring, firing, and meeting the payroll. It was a tough world where only the strong-hearted and smart survived.

Sport proved to be a topnotch worker -- far superior to the average of his size and age. When Sport set his feet and leaned into his collar, he forced his teammates to equal his performance or be pulled back on their haunches. Thus, Sport not only set an example of tough-minded workmanship but also forced his teammates to match his gait. When on the job, Sport was strictly business -- no fooling around or needing prodding. These were Sport's admirable qualities. On the other side of the ledger was the fact that before and after the job he was consistently sharp-tempered. Johnny was no exception to these ornery actions, but he learned to avoid Sport's attempts to express his irritable disposition.

Johnny was a good boss, and Sport was a good worker. Together they became highly successful. Together they got the job done. Most of the credit goes to Johnny because he believed that ability is measured not by one's nature but by the purpose for which it is employed. He was wise enough to recognize that a kicking horse that leans into the collar and pulls forward is a better member of the work team, than a good-natured Joe with an overabundance of gluteal lead.

Many years later Sport died. Rather than sending his remains to be rendered, Johnny had his carcass placed in a grave on which a memorial was built. It read: "In horses as in men, those who never feel anger never care."



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