

## **I Used To Call Him The “Rooni Monster.” Now It’s Just A Nickname...**

*By Marcia Buhler*

How do you put into words what it means when, after literally over a decade of trying and floundering, you finally begin to find that elusive connection with your horse?

I won't go into all the history, but the truth is I had never been able to connect with my highly sensitive Thoroughbred, Rooni. We had moments where we seemed to progress together but there were always setbacks. Mostly he was resistant. I often felt unsafe, particularly when riding him alone. He was flighty, irritable, and honestly, not much fun to interact with, much less ride. Going to the barn became an obligation. I saw to his needs but I didn't enjoy it much.

And I felt so sad about the fact that what had once been my complete and total passion had deteriorated into such drudgery. But mostly, I worried about my horse.

I consulted endlessly with veterinarians, bodyworkers and alternative care professionals, thinking Rooni's problems might be physical. I moved him to another boarding facility. I changed his diet several times. I tried all manner of supplements and even some drugs. I checked and double-checked my tack.

There were many theories and each practitioner seemed to find something that sounded like a plausible explanation. But the pattern never really improved and, in fact, our relationship continued to deteriorate.

In the early days we had positive experiences with a beloved clinician, Terry Church. After she became unable to do clinics, I rode with other trainers here and there but never found anyone to work with regularly who seemed to understand either Rooni or me. We did a lot of groundwork but every time I rode him he acted out.

In early 2013, I began to realize that Rooni's advancing age (he had just turned 21) meant that if we didn't figure this thing out soon we might run out of time. Although I didn't really think it was possible, I harbored a small hope that perhaps we could enjoy trail riding in his later years. Trying to do dressage seemed to compound his resistance but his flightiness made the prospect of trail riding just too dangerous.

Finally, in May 2013, I contacted Denise Lesnik of Inside Out Horse Training at Snodell Farm in Elgin, IL to find out if she would take Rooni for a month to see if she could make some progress with him on trails. Denise is an amazingly intuitive rider and one of the very few people I would trust with my horse. And she was up for the challenge of working with Rooni.

A couple of days after I delivered him to her, I arrived for my first lesson. As I was tacking Rooni up I could tell it wasn't going to go well for us. Denise offered to ride

him while I watched and he basically threw everything at her that always intimidated me: head tossing, rushing, kicking out behind, crow-hopping, refusing to go forward. It was ugly but at least he was validating my experience.

What was different was that Denise wasn't intimidated. As a veteran owner of several highly sensitive Thoroughbreds, she loves the breed and can ride through pretty much anything (and make it look easy). Her feeling was that Rooni was trying to intimidate her into getting off but, of course, she didn't. Instead, she called his bluff. No matter what he did she kept riding him forward on a loose rein, encouraging him to stretch. She was kind but firm and his antics never escalated into the rodeo I feared when I rode him. He didn't quite settle down that day and apparently Denise had a similar experience the next time but again she just rode him through it.

By the time I arrived a few days later for another lesson he was, quite literally, a different horse. Everything about him had changed. He was relaxed, he was calm, he was willing. No more shenanigans. We had a terrific ride.

Denise's explanation was that he had "settled." The environment at Snodell Farm and the training were helping him find a peaceful place inside himself. It was so wonderful to see him let go of his agitation and resistance, I nearly cried. (Well, yes, I did cry on my way home, such was my joy and relief at the shift in him.)

As the weeks went by Rooni continued to progress. Although he was clearly out of shape, having had no regular work to speak of for a couple of years, Denise found he was completely sound. And she discovered he had the mentality of a much younger horse. Once he got over his half-hearted resistances, he settled into the daily work routine and started displaying the attitude of a horse who really wanted to please. Denise genuinely enjoyed working with him and I think he enjoyed finally being enjoyed by someone!

I made the four hour round trip about twice a week for lessons and either Denise or her assistant, Sofia, rode him most other days. Soon they were taking him outside with no problems. And then, so was I! I can't really describe the feeling of elation that first Spring day when we went cruising around the farm on the trails between the paddocks. No muss, no fuss. A few days later we were out in the fields trotting big loops and circles. Rooni never missed a beat and was simply a joy to ride. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined this outcome!

On days when it was too hot or wet to ride outside, we worked in the arena and he was always cooperative. Every ride was huge fun. I now had a trail horse AND a dressage horse.

But wait, there's more... Some of his other "bugaboos" included refusing to allow sheath cleaning and resisting fly spray. Denise and Sofia worked him through those issues, too.

In the end, he stayed a little over two months so Denise and Sofia could ride him regularly to condition him. If you ask either of them how they worked such magic, you will probably get a very modest response – something like, “It’s just what we do.” Actually, they possess an amazing “feel” for the horses they work with. And Rooni needed someone who had that feel. I thought I was always extremely sensitive with him but I learned I could be even softer. Not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. And as I learned to appreciate his need for all of these qualities of softness, he began to trust me. As all of this unfolded I was able to let go of my judgments about both of us so we could start over with a clean slate.

It’s been about five months now since Rooni’s training. We had a few minor setbacks after his return that helped me re-learn, again, just how soft I need to be with this incredibly sensitive horse. Now, when he displays irritation, I understand what he is trying to tell me. Softer, please. Softer. Sometimes I need to brush him more sensitively. Other times I need to slow down my breath or quiet my mind. He always tells me. And now I really understand how to listen. When I’m soft enough, everywhere, then I can be firm if I need to be. (If that makes any sense. It does, now, to me.)

We had a great time this fall exploring the miles and miles of trails just outside our back door. We did have to work up to it but the experience with Denise left me confident that Rooni can do whatever I may ask of him. He doesn’t have to be flighty, or resistant, or irritable. And I don’t have to be afraid.

We can figure it out. And we do. We are forging that elusive connection.

If I have any regret it’s that I waited so long to work with Denise. I have known and admired her for over fifteen years but it literally never occurred to me to send him to her. No stranger to the concepts of feel, timing and balance, I kept thinking I should be able to figure him out myself. For a long time I really believed he had some sort of undiagnosed unsoundness. In the end, I just needed the guidance of someone who better understood the nuances of feel and how I could refine my approach to achieve a connection with him. I guess I also needed validation that he was mentally and physically sound so I could finally stop looking “outside” for solutions to our challenges.

Denise is the sort of trainer who meets every horse and rider where they are. She harbors no judgment about breeds or disciplines. She prefers not to dwell on the rider’s past problems. She just quietly goes about the business of sorting out a horse’s issues and helping riders understand how to be more in tune with their horses. There is a Zen-like atmosphere in her barn that reflects her calm, focused approach. Turned out in groups in large pastures all day, the thirty-plus horses who live there are quiet and content.

If I lived closer I would definitely want to be a full-time boarder at Snodell Farm. The care there is superlative and having regular access to Denise and Sofia would be fantastic. But the irony of their approach is that I really don't need to board there or train with them full time. They helped me understand my horse at a deeper level so I can work more effectively on my own. They gave me some techniques, sure, but mostly they showed me I have a great horse who really wants a healthy relationship with me. We just needed some help finding our way back to each other.

I also recognize that his extreme sensitivity is a gift that offers me the opportunity to learn more about myself. It would be easy to feel ashamed that all of this was pretty much about me, all along. But I won't go there because, in the end, I am so profoundly grateful for this second chance with my horse.

Yes, I still call him my "Rooni Monster." But now it's a term of endearment instead of the truth!