

## Paints and Passion

*Paint horse breeder and competitor Melisa Pearce shares the life lessons taught by her horses.*

BY DEBRA BOKUR

LONGMONT, COLO.—It looks as though it may snow at any moment, but that's not slowing down Melisa Pearce. She's in her element, surrounded by a collection of American Paint Horses and a group of women suffering from various degrees of nervousness. Sitting astride her massive stallion Go Robin Bar and backdropped by that stunning assemblage of Paints, she smiles calmly at the attentive group and says simply,

"If you'll let them, horses can teach you a lot about yourself and about life." It's the first day of a retreat designed specifically for women, a retreat Pearce has dubbed, and literally trademarked, as "Touched by a Horse." Twelve women from various backgrounds and professions have gathered beneath the golden aspens at Pearce's Lil Bit North Ranch just outside of Boulder, Colo., for a five-day intensive experience. Collectively, their mission is to define goals, move beyond assorted fears, and to discover who they truly are. The horses, Pearce assures everyone, will teach exactly that.

She's met by looks of doubt and concern. The horses look especially big, and several of the women participating have never even stood beside a real, live equine before, much less touched one. But that's all part of the program. Pearce, a trained psychotherapist who had a private practice in Arizona for ten years, understands the doubt.

"Being disturbed by fear is a good thing,"

she instructs. "If something disturbs you enough, it will drive you into action."

Pearce's passion for horses began when she was a young girl growing up in Arizona. Over the years, she dedicated



**Pearce and her stallion Go Robin Bar. Pearce has an easy definition of horsemanship: It is the art of keeping the horse between one's self and the ground.**

herself to refining her natural aptitude for riding, and became successful at both showing and teaching—winning several World Championship American Paint Horse Association awards. In 1999, Pearce moved her successful horse operation from Arizona to the Front Range of the Colorado Rockies. These days, besides breeding and training Paint horses, Pearce is active as a motivational speaker, and she functions as personal coach for a number of entrepreneurs worldwide, as well as hosts a number of goal-oriented, horse-themed retreats at her ranch.

Over the following five days of this

particular women-only retreat, the participants are partnered together, and each pair is assigned a specific horse to work with for the duration of the event. There's nothing haphazard about the pairing, either. Before coming, each participant filled out an extensive questionnaire that helped Pearce choose exactly the right horse for each woman.

The lessons begin almost immediately, with the first one revolving around mindfulness.

"When you work with horses, whether riding or handling them on the ground, you absolutely do not have time to think about anything else," she says. "Horses require that you be fully in the moment. This can be a great gift, especially for people who are used to multitasking. Take the time to live the moment, to savor the experience."

Horses also teach us both patience and clarity. "You can't give mixed signals to a horse," Pearce explains. "You'll just confuse and frustrate them. Learning to be clear about your intentions and requests is something that will serve you well in every aspect of your life."

So, too, will patience. Achieving goals, she points out, requires the patience to identify them, the willingness to establish a plan for reaching them, and the determination to follow through. "But something else horses teach us," she says wryly, "is to not be attached to the results." In other words, one has to be willing to let go.

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