

# Horse Sense

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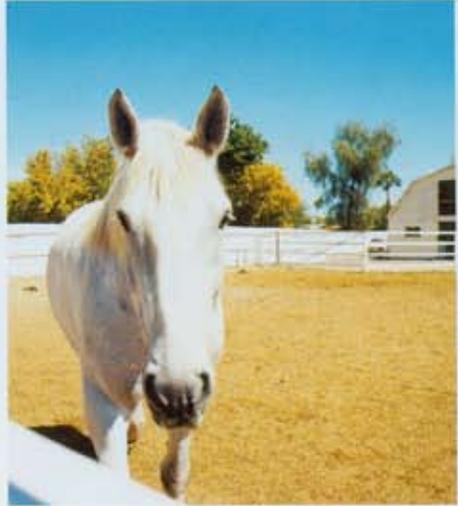
**Polly the Clydesdale doesn't pull a beer wagon:  
She helps golfers rein in their bad habits. Care  
to go for a ride?**

**Horse Sense** by Karen Karbo





After an equine session that includes grooming a horse and cleaning its hooves, Crews watches LPGA Tour player Wendy Ward's concentration and control on five-foot putts. Crews' menagerie extends to Magic the gray Percheron (below), Zoey the zebra and even her lamppost.



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One afternoon in Mesa, Ariz., LPGA Tour player Wendy Ward stands in the center of a big corral surrounded by 10 huge horses dozing in the sun. A few wispy clouds litter the sky and the temperature hovers around 102, balmy for this the Southwest in mid-autumn. Ward, 35, wanders the herd in khaki shorts, powder blue polo shirt and tennis shoes, carrying a halter and lead rope. The sight is like something out of an old Bill Murray comedy, as if Ward took a wrong turn and wound up at the corral instead of the driving range. Her task is to pick a horse she likes, catch it, put a halter on it and lead it out of the corral. But first, she has to hit it off with one of them.

The horses eyeball her and wander off, indifferent. "I'm not feeling the love here," Ward says drolly as she approaches, one after another. "Can't get close to 'em. Can't even get a meet and greet going." Finally, she takes the plunge and slings a halter over the neck of Polly, a bay Clydesdale with a white blaze, the biggest horse in the herd.

A small-boned, blond woman with sharp blue eyes stands near the fence, watching. Dr. Debbie Crews is a scientist in the School of Community Resources and Development at Arizona State University and a sports psychologist for ASU's top-ranked golf teams. Crews also studies how brain activity and stress affect athletic performance particularly in golf. She has worked for five years helping players on the PGA and LPGA Tours, as well as amateurs, practice a form of biofeedback to help balance their left and right hemispheres of their brains during play- key in high performance. Crews is an expert on the "yips," a condition that renders players suddenly unable to chip or putt. The technical term for the small, uncontrollable spasm or jerk in the hands that characterizes the yips is *focal dystonia*.

Most recently, Crews has pioneered an equine therapy program geared toward helping golfers recognize and correct emotional, psychological and physiological weaknesses that can hamper their games. She scribbles notes as she watches Ward.

Crews' herd consists mostly of Clydesdales, the huge horses made famous by Budweiser, and a few Percheron and a

Belgian, all of them draft breeds used primarily for logging and cart-pulling. "Animals are touted for their therapeutic effects, but horses are especially effective because they are able to interpret a person's emotions and mirror those emotions," Crews explains. "If the person is tense and upset, the horse will be. If the person is calm and confident, the horse will be too."

Ward, a former U.S. Amateur champion and four-time winner in her 12-year LPGA Tour career, sought out Crews in 2003. After helping the U.S. win the 2002 Solheim Cup, she had begun to struggle with her putting. "I'd lost a lot of confidence in my game and my ability to score," she says.

Crews suspected that Ward might be suffering from the yips, that dreaded affliction which few golfers have the chutzpah to acknowledge, because to do so is to risk being driven around the bend. Yips affect more than 25 percent of serious golfers (Tom Watson, Tommy Armour and Fred Couples were famous victims), and those who've been playing for more than 25 years are especially prone to the condition. Some scientists believe that the yips-which also affect musicians, dentists and stenographers-are the result of muscle and nervous system deterioration caused by prolonged abnormal movements.

The yips are crazy-making because they tend to occur most frequently during pressure situations (e.g., tournaments). And there is no consensus on how to cure them. You can work on a new grip-sufferers may be holding their putters too tightly-or try a longer putter. Some yippers practice meditation and relaxation techniques, because anxiety is guaranteed to make the yips worse.

That's where Crews believes horses can be helpful-and why she has suggested that Ward go through one of her equine sessions. As prey animals, horses are hardwired to read and process minute clues from the environment-their survival depends on it. They are also able to read human emotions better than any shrink or psychic. Horses can smell our anxiety, aggression, impatience, frustration, placidity trust and joy. If the rider is nervous or apprehensive, the horse will be nervous and apprehensive. The rider is confident and relaxed, the horse responds this way too. Everything goes down rein, or so the saying goes.

Deb Vangellow, an LPGA instructor (and a GFW Top 50 Teacher), has experienced Crews' golf-centric brand of

equine therapy. “Because golf is such a metaphor for life, what I learned about myself definitely transfers to my golf game,” she says. “Horses mirror your thoughts to such an extent that you can’t even be with these animals unless you have clear and good thoughts, and solid, confident intentions.”

Equine-assisted therapy isn’t new; for the last half-century, horses have been successfully used to treat people with a number of disabilities, diseases and difficulties. The birth of so-called therapeutic riding can be traced back to Lis Hartel, a Danish woman confined to a wheelchair after contracting polio at age 23, who rehabilitated herself via horseback riding and went on to win the silver medal for dressage at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics.

Crews arrived at this nontraditional therapy in a traditional one thing leads to another fashion. She grew up playing golf in Madison, Wis. “I was terrible,” she says. “After I got my BS at the University of Wisconsin, I moved to Arizona to see what I could do with my game.” Her fascination with the brain’s role in performance led her to obtain a master’s degree in exercise physiology; she then continued on to the PhD program where she specialized in attention and focus.

In 1991, as part of her research, Crews began studying the effect of exercise and sport on children with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders and autism.

For four years she put the kids through an eight-week athletic program that included basketball, weight lifting, running, archery and horseback riding. The most beneficial sport across the board turned out to be riding. “Horses read human emotions so well that a child must learn to trust, be patient and be positive, or the horse simply won’t respond,” she says. As a result of this work, Crews founded a horse outreach program at ASU called Hunkapi (a Lakota word meaning “related to everyone”). In 2004, she struck upon the idea of matching her horses to golfers and started working with some of the women on the Sun Devil team. Players at every level of the game have followed; currently, Crews is working with several dozen professional, collegiate and junior golfers. But isn’t it a stretch to imagine that a few simple interactions with a horse might help a golfer acquire the trust, patience and positive attitude that contribute to a solid, dependable game?

Not at all, says Crews, who is collaborating in a yips study sponsored by ASU and the Mayo Clinic. “For example, we’re discovering that yips exist on a spectrum. On one end, the disorder is purely psychological, on the other end, purely neurological. In the middle, there are both psychological and neurological components. To work through the yips, especially if there’s is a neurological component, the golfer has to change their hands, their putting position, or

*something*,” Crews explains. “A simplistic way to describe it is to say that the old motor program has worn out. It’s stuck in a loop and isn’t working. But it’s tough for a golfer to see what she’s doing on the course and adjust it. The course pushes too many buttons. She needs to divorce herself from that world. The horses help create an environment outside the course where I can observe the golfers, and they can also observe themselves.”

In Ward’s case, Crews is determined to help her find the focus that will get her through her entire putting stroke: “We work from both ends. Big picture, little picture. What she’s doing over the ball, and a what she’s doing in her head.”

While most of the golfers Crews works with have little if any experience with horses, Ward lives on a cattle ranch 30 miles outside of Spokane, Wash. Her husband, Nate Hair, is the horseman, and Ward claims a natural passion for animals. “But I’d never worked with horses the way Debbie asked me to,” she says. “Debbie addressed my mental approach and encouraged me to work on the process more than the outcome, which had become my main focus.”

The day of Ward’s session, she arrived at Crews’ home in Mesa, 20 miles from Phoenix, in a community of low-slung ranch houses on large plots of land that allow for pastures. Some of Crews’ neighbors keep livestock, but many don’t, and Crews rents corrals and pasture space from them. Crews’ own backyard is consumed by an enormous corral, a few paddocks and a wash stall. In her front yard she pastures Betty and Becky, a pair of miniature horses, stars of the local kids’ birthday party circuit, and a zebra named Zoey. She also keeps two monkeys and a few tortoises. In an iconoclastic neighborhood, she is the resident iconoclast.

Each of Crews’ 12 horses possesses its own personality and temperament. Normally, Crews won’t tell her golfers anything about the horses, even their names. But Ward is clever: Before arriving for her equine encounter, she spoke with another golfer who had visited Crews earlier the same day. That golfer had worked with Dolly, the oldest horse in the herd, sweet but also stubborn. Since Dolly had just been used, she would be calm and willing. But Crews encourages Ward to have a look around before settling on the easy choice. Perhaps Ward would like Dominator, a black, fierce-looking gelding? Or Magic, a mystical-looking gray Percheron who seems agreeable but also inscrutable? “Usually people pick horses that mirror their own personalities, but sometimes they’ll choose a horse with traits they’re trying to develop in themselves,” Crews says. “They’ll pick the horse that mirrors what they’re evolving into.”

When Ward chooses Polly, Crews tells her that Polly is the lead mare, the herd member who, in the wild, decides what

and where the herd eats. She's the caretaker, but she doesn't let the other horses push her around. In other words, she's a lot like Ward.

After haltering Polly, Ward leads her out of the corral and tethers her to a fence without difficulty. Nearby, there's a bucket of brushes, curry combs and hoof picks. Crews watches while Ward sets about grooming Polly. This routine task has greater meaning than meets the eye. Strangely enough, golfers seem to approach the horse in the same way they approach their game. Crews has worked with golfers who lack follow-through, and only brush the neck and middle of the horse, quitting before they reach the rump. Golfers with a weak left side to their swing tend to only groom the horse's right side. Golfers who are reluctant to deconstruct their stroke tend to give the horse a quick once-over, avoiding all parts below eye level.

Cleaning out the hooves is a key part of grooming, and many of Crews' clients struggle with getting the horse to give them a hoof. Horses have one response to danger--- to flee--- and they're not going to lift up their foot for anyone who's not in control.

How golfers deal with this frustration is telling. Says Crews, "A horse won't give his foot if he doesn't trust you. You've got to be calm, but you have got to show him you're running the show. When we're in a positive, confident state, the horse will respond. It's the exact same way in golf. When the little white ball starts running the show, we're in trouble. You've got to stay in charge of your game, and if you're not in charge, you've got to find a way to get in charge, the same way you have to find a way to get the horse to give you his hoof."

Ward is methodical and efficient. She brushes one side, then the other, runs the brush once down each of Polly's legs, then returns to her neck. Polly lifts her hooves desultorily, and Ward gives each hoof less than a minute of attention. Ward is competent but tentative. She wants to do it right, whatever right is.

It's a different matter when it comes time to lead Polly up and down Crews' street. Ward tugs on the lead rope, hoping that she can muscle the 2,000-pound Polly in the proper direction. Polly prefers to wander over to a tree and snack on some leaves. Likewise, when Ward climbs aboard Polly, without saddle or stirrups, the horse goes where she pleases. Ward pulls on the reins. She tells Polly to go, whoa and turn. Nothing works. Polly is impervious to all of Ward's tongue-clicking, pleadings, strict orders (we all tend to talk to horses as if they're dogs-good luck with that), rein-pulling and side-kicking.

"You have three tools at your disposal to control the horse: words, behavior and thoughts," Crews tells her.

"I'm using the reins," Ward protests.

"I'm giving her a hard kick."

Crews hangs back and explains, "I can't get Wendy to trust her thoughts enough to influence the horse." Then she says to Ward, "Polly's not hearing you."

"I think I'm missing the thought part," Ward says. "I'm trying to fix it by doing."

"Where does your real control come from?" Crews asks later. "If you want the horse to be in a certain place, you've got to be there first, in your head. It's the same with your swing. It can only flow out of your thoughts."

Polly is returned to the corral, and Crews asks Ward to practice putting on one of the 12-foot practice mats she has set up. Ward's pace clips along, but even at five feet she keeps missing the hole by just a few centimeters to the left. Ward squares her shoulders, exhales, tries not to submit to frustration. Crews tells her that her hands look good, as does the pace of her stroke: "If your thoughts are in the right place, your behavior will fall into place."

A few days later, Crews and Ward meet for a debriefing. Crews is interested in what she's been interested in for decades: how patterns of attention affect performance. "Wendy wants to get it done, but it's a lot of work to stay with her stroke until the very end," she explains. "Aside from her struggle with the yips, this is an issue for her in general. Wendy immediately went for Dolly, the easy pick. Her choice was the result of her essential nature. She wasn't interested in exploring what it might be like to work with an unpredictable or more challenging horse. And she was resistant to experiencing the power of her thoughts to affect her behavior. She has formidable gifts, but she needs to learn that her behavior can only follow her thoughts. She has to be able to see herself focusing forward on her putting stroke, all the way to the end."

Ward understands this is a work in progress. "Debbie has helped my game across the board," she affirms. "I've become much more aware of my process and less concerned with the outcome. She's taught me to pull the trigger only when I've fully visualized and committed to the shot I want to hit. No second-guessing. Commit and trust." Ward pauses. "For the record, this works great in real life too."