



# A Trainer's Case Study "Fyre"

By Christa Petrillo

## A Trainer's Case Study

A "case study" is examining the personality of an individual horse in for training, overall health, and conformation, known past experiences, their problem areas, and my approach to their training and management accordingly. In this article I'd like to present one of the most challenging cases I ever came across in my career.

### Meet Fyre

Fyre, was an Arabian stallion I once owned early on in my training career who taught me more than I can begin to communicate here. Fyre had a unique history. Prior to my owning him, as a promising weanling, he had been syndicated for \$180,000.00 and was to be shown in halter, but before he ever got the opportunity, he got away from his handler and had a terrible accident that left his front end scarred, his hock damaged and his front legs malformed. With hopes for his future as a star dashed, his owner decided to breed him and placed him with a trainer to manage him. At the young age of five, considered dangerous and uncontrollable, he was put into retirement to live out his days on green pastures.

### Enter Christa.

I had arranged to purchase Fyre to use in my breeding program and went to pick him up. At the retirement home the manager explained he was being isolated from other horses as he was considered a "maniac" around other horses. She had two handlers halter him by sheepishly holding out a bucket of grain while they quickly slipped the halter on and attached not one but two lead ropes to him, one of which was attached to a stud chain. "What have I gotten myself into?!" I thought. The manager explained that Fyre had a habit of walking on two hind legs

and striking for the lead ropes. He walked along and loaded into the trailer quietly and traveled the 8 hour ride home quietly. Once home, Fyre off loaded and walked quietly next to me to his stall. "Piece of cake." I thought.

The next morning I went out to bond with my new stallion! All I had intended was to brush him but he must have thought I was going to kill him as he tried with all his might to get through the solid wall and away from me. Fyre had serious fear issues to overcome. The next week I spent time around Fyre but everything I tried resulted in a struggle and was full of close calls for me with very little progress. He wouldn't allow me anywhere near his head and would come around at me, teeth barred or he would strike or kick. Finally after a serious close call, I realized that perhaps I had met my match. Reluctantly I called the previous owner. We had agreed if he didn't work out that she would take him back, but in my phone call with her, she said that if he were that unsafe, rather than risk someone's life perhaps it would be best to put Fyre down. She asked me to sleep on it. The next morning after a sleepless night and much prayer, I went out and worked with Fyre. We had a small breakthrough that day. Each day thereafter he got better and better to work with.

### Fyre's Training

Initially Fyre's biggest problem was haltering and leading. Fyre was extremely head shy. I overcame this problem by gently rubbing his neck, starting low on his neck at the withers and working towards his poll and then back down his neck towards his withers, each time moving up his neck closer to his poll. Eventually I was able to slip the halter on. I found if I positioned my body a little too far away from Fyre he would rear, strike, try to kick or bite so I tried to position myself close to his shoulder. Once haltered, trying to lead Fyre was more like watching a rodeo with me flying through the air as he would rear up, strike, trying to hook the lead line, and turn away from me, launching

forward, dragging me behind him. The stud chain was useless on him. I had to think outside of the box with the training techniques I knew. I began by teaching him the John Lyons' calm down cue which is effective in teaching the horse to control its emotions. Round penning is effective for gaining respect but he physically couldn't round pen due to his malformed front legs and weak hock plus entering into his space sent him into a panic. I decided to use the John Lyons' bridle technique. Bridle work is useful for control with steering, stopping and backing with softness but getting the bridle on was a very difficult process and then once on he would try to bite me. I decided to put a surcingle on and attach side reins. The reins were loose enough to allow me to do the bridle work correctly but not loose enough to where he could bite, rear or strike. By modifying the bridle work technique in this way I eventually was able to teach him to lead. Through ground driving I was able to fine tune the leading. By being behind him I could drive him forward when he tried to rear. Once we had a respectful relationship established, I modified the round pen technique. Originally he would have flown around a round pen thereby doing himself bodily harm. I worked him in his 40 x 40 paddock. When I stepped toward him he would quietly move away. I quietly made him change direction. It really taught me to control my bodily movements as he was so intensely reactive. He always was more fearful than aggressive. Eventually I got Fyre to the point where I could ride him and drive him. I taught him to collect off of a phantom. He would lead without a stud chain. He would stand quietly for the farrier. Stable management of Fyre required that he be located in a spot on the ranch where he could see the entire goings on and have a buddy over the fence. He got bored easily and would become problematic. He needed a "chew toy". I slowly introduced a young gelding into his area, moving the gelding's pen closer and closer by using

portable panels over the course of a week until finally they were over the fence together. They loved social grooming and playing over the fence together! I also used herbs in Fyre's management to manage his leg issues. Devil's claw, hawthorn, meadowsweet, nettle and willow were useful for his arthritis as an anti-inflammatory. Buckwheat helps to strengthen and repair capillaries and improves blood supply. Dandelion, useful in rheumatism, is rich in vitamins A, B, C and D and will cleanse the blood. For the lymph system and I found clivers, calendula and kelp beneficial. I chose rose hips, which is high in vitamin C, to encourage hoof growth, and along with vitamin E, to boost Fyre's immune system. I used glucosamine for his joints.

Not everyone is capable of handling a stallion like Fyre but I wanted to share his story as an example that sometimes you have to think outside the box and sometimes situations are so extreme that it can take literally years to get a horse trained. **DISCLAIMER:** I have found herbs to be extremely beneficial but I am NOT a veterinarian. If you are interested in using herbs with your horse I would suggest finding a homeopathic veterinarian. **THE CALM DOWN CUE, BRIDLE WORK and ROUND PENNING:** John Lyons has many publications and videos that describe his training techniques. The calm down cue, bridle work and round penning are just a few of them.

