

# Horse sense helps rugby coaches learn new strategies

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SWEAT pouring from his brow, Hurricanes coach Mark Hammett watched hopefully as his horse tentatively lifted a hoof.

The brief was simple: make friends with the horse, walk it around the arena, and lead it across a series of wooden bridges.

In an attempt to improve their leadership skills, the New Zealand Rugby Union sent Super Rugby coaches from around the country to Te Horo's Talking Horses farm to partake in two days of what can only be described as "horse whispering."

Only, this horse wasn't going anywhere.

"No," Hammett said firmly, admonishing the chestnut as it tried to veer to one side.

He changed tack, climbing on top of the bridge and pulling the horse towards him. It stopped flat, refusing to budge as it gazed up insolently.

"He's making good progress," horse trainer Andrew Froggatt said softly. "I like the way he's working with it. He's just sticking to his guns and he's got that confidence that he's going to get there in the end, which is great."

As Highlanders coach Jamie Joseph, Chiefs coach Dave Rennie and Hurricanes assistant coach Alama Ieremia walked their horses past, Hammett performed an intricate sequence of movements with his horse's lead rope.

It didn't blink an eye.

Twenty minutes later, Hammett abandoned his efforts. Moments later Joseph sauntered up, leading his obedient pony across without a struggle.

"It's not about the horse in here today, it's about the guys being self-aware," Mr Froggatt said.

"Some will come in with quite a determined style, and try and control the situation straight away. All we say is, 'why don't you build a relationship?'"

It may have stirred familiar feelings for Hammett, who has struggled to rein in some big names at the Hurricanes. All Blacks Ma'a Nonu, Andrew Hore, Aaron Cruden, Piri Weepu and Hosea Gear have all departed.

Though it might seem a bizarre way for coaches to spend pre-season down time, Mr Froggatt says horses can often teach more about commitment and leadership style than people.

"The horses are an emotional mirror of us, so we're showing them things like how to communicate, how to praise. High-energy, aggressive sort of people, the



**Self-determination:** Hurricanes coach Mark Hammett comes up against equine resistance and has to admit defeat – for the moment.



**Andrew Froggatt:** It's all about building a good relationship.

horses are going to mirror that with tension.

"On the other hand if we're too timid, they're not really going to take any notice of us – so we've got to set ourselves up as the boss."

In a corner, Ieremia was having no luck convincing his gigantic Clydesdale to walk across a wooden plank. Plucking a handful of grass, he tried to entice it with the treat. "One more leg, one more leg," he cooed softly, as the horse got three legs on to the plank before losing interest.

Ieremia tossed the grass on the ground. "No more soft love," he warned his charge.



**Well matched:** Left to right, Highlanders coach Jamie Joseph, Chiefs coach Dave Rennie and Hurricanes coach Mark Hammett with their "trainees" at Sudbury Fields in Te Horo.

"It's about keeping calm, keeping cool and being confident in what they're doing," Mr Froggatt said.

"A horse will give you honest

and instant feedback about your leadership style. If you go about things the right way, they're going to work for you."

Afterwards, a tired-looking

Hammett said it had been helpful. "It actually relates a heck of a lot," he said, in terms of relationships, boundaries, praising and acknowledging consequences.