

Horse whisperer turns hand to sport of kings

When it comes to teaching respect, people are harder to train than horses, trainer Andrew Froggatt tells **Seamus Boyer.**

As a boy, Andrew Froggatt's first experience of horses was on his grandfather's Ohariu Valley farm.

He would visit on weekends and holidays, every spare moment he had, and was drawn to the few work horses and race horses kept there.

It was there in the valley, on neighbour's farms, he first saw horses broken in, and it affected him deeply. He remembers watching workers trying to dominate the animals physically, riding a horse with one of its legs tied up, or tying together all the horse's legs and leaving it struggling, terrified on the ground.

"It was all about breaking their spirit, and a lot of the time by pain and fear," he says.

Even as a boy he knew it was wrong, and couldn't help putting it right when he got the chance. When Andrew saw the men driving off after tying the horses' heads to their own tails, leaving the creatures to desperately lead themselves round in circles for up to four or five hours at a time, he would sneak in and untie them.

"I just hated it. I've always hated it. I sort of always knew in my head that there must be a better way out there."

That better way was horse whispering, a radically different and gentler approach to dealing with problem horses, and the way in which the



Close bond: Horse whisperer Andrew Froggatt with one of his race horses, Rhythm in the Wind. "Basically there's not really any bad horses out there, it's lack of education or they're made bad by people," he says.

36-year-old now makes his living.

Based on a 50-acre property in Peka Peka, Andrew has run his horse whispering business, Talking Horses, for eight years. Instead of physical domination or the inflicting of pain, he establishes a trusting and respectful relationship with the animals, and projects his calm, laid-back attitude on to them.

"I always had a pretty quiet, gentle way with horses. I'm naturally pretty laid back and relaxed, and very, very patient."

As such he doesn't mind spending three or four hours getting a reluctant horse into a trailer, finally achieving what a frustrated owner or trainer might never get done.

But does he actually whisper?

"Oh yeah, people think

'horse whispering', I'm just going to whisper in their ear, and that always makes me laugh. No, it's more a marketing term now, but what they mean by that is just somebody that can read and understand horses."

After growing up in Khandallah and attending Wellington College, Andrew tried his hand at landscaping, before heading to Australia for a horse business management course where he came across horse whispering. Like people, horses suffer from a range of emotional and psychological problems.

"There's the emotional wrecks out there that won't stand still, the pacers - horses are big worriers - and there's the ones that need their confidence built up."

And while there is clearly more to it than he lets on, at a

basic level the technique is to inspire calm and confidence in the horse, while still keeping control.

"We talk about them being an emotional mirror of us, so in terms of energy levels, high energy people can create high energy in them. If we're too timid or project a bit of fear they're going to pick that up and think, 'Yeah, I've got this person'."

There's also reverse psychology, and sometimes you need to get tough, he says, but fundamentally horse whispering is pretty simple.

"I just try and get them to like me," he laughs.

After helping thousands of horses back to happy, manageable states for clients all over the country, Andrew is now changing direction.

CONTINUED Page 5

Saddling up corporate leadership training

FROM Page 2

He's moving more into race horses - where the money is, he says - helping horses with starting-gate problems and the like, as a cheaper and better option than the knackers yard for owners trying to get the best out of troubled but potentially good runners.

He and partner Janine Sudbury - an ex-BBC and Radio NZ journalist "pretty involved in the corporate stuff" - are increasingly hosting corporate leadership workshops on their property. It includes function rooms and cottage accommodation.

For the past two years they have hosted groups of managers from several big companies including NZ Post, Transpower and ASB Bank, teaching them about true leadership.

Corporate managers, used to commanding respect, face much less deferent opponents in Andrew's horses - apparently natural judges of leadership skills - and learn to get the best out of something much bigger and stronger than themselves.

"You could get the prime minister out here and the horses aren't going to give a stuff who he is or what he does. You can't buy

horses. They give you pretty much 100 per cent honest, immediate [feedback] on your leadership style."

Another on a two-day leadership programme was All Blacks' assistant coach Steve Hansen, "a bloody character" and a race horse owner who thought he knew a thing or two about horses. He left admitting he knew absolutely nothing about them, Andrew says.

There is also the work with dis-

advantaged or difficult kids, in the past with the Eponi Boys' Home, and currently a pilot programme with Child Youth and Family. The aim is to get kids respecting the horses, hopefully earning a bit of respect for themselves.

At the moment, Andrew's just getting on with working through another cold and windy winter in Peka Peka with Janine, 18-month-old son Luca, and the family's nine horses.

The ultimate goal is to get his business - and his reputation - to the stage where he can pick and choose the horses he treats, and travel the world doing it.

More broadly, Andrew hopes to convince people to have a little more respect for the animals he loves, a proposition that could prove more difficult than building his business.

"Horses are easy; people are hard," he says.

