

Horse Trainer – Lani Nakachi  
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For someone who didn't even know how to "make the horse go," five minutes on one of Lani Nakachi's horses and I felt like I knew what I was doing. I tried to steer him left and he went right, until Lani directed me on how to hold the reins. "Sit up straight so she feels you on her back," Lani said. "And keep the balls of your feet in the stirrups away from the horse's body."

We were at Honoka'a Rodeo Grounds, one of only three public county arenas in the state of Hawaii; Panaewa and Honaunau Rodeo Grounds are the other two. Lani of "Flying Z Performance Horses" had brought along three horses to demonstrate his training techniques; a two-year-old horse "whose call name is Nellie, but her official name is 'Little Miss Freckle Haida,' his family horse 'Miss Pickle' who had been a local race horse before he purchased her, and six-year-old 'Levi' who is in the process of training.

Lani Nakachi is all about horsemanship; a horse trainer, a buyer and a rider. Born and raised in Waimanalo but living on the Big Island since he was 19 years old, Lani said, "I learned from my Uncle Tommy, who was rough on horses...to feel compassion." On the other hand, he learned from his grandfather who was "soft around his cattle" that being kind to the animals got them to perform just as well. Lani's mode of operation is to harmonize energies with his horses, and to teach with trust and pleasantness.

"The horsemanship life is very hard," Lani said. "It's not all glamorous as some think it is." Lani brought Nellie out into the arena after laying down a crinkled blue tarp and two poles onto the dusty ground. Her mane and tail were braided beautifully and Lani explained that the braids promote growth as well as give both eye appeal and athletic appeal. "If the horse looks crappy, then it's a direct reflection on our program," he said.

Without a saddle or reins, Lani mounted Nellie and rode her around and over the "obstacle course" he had put down. He explained that much of the training has to do with conditioning the horse to overcome outside stimuli so that she continues on calmly, especially with a rider on her back. "The horse has to carry on despite any distractions," Lani said, whether the rider is a cowboy, or is riding on a trail for pleasure.

Watching him stand on the back of his horse and then slide down her rump while she stood there patiently was amazing. He was demonstrating how, with good training, a horse can handle almost anything without bucking or getting frightened. Then he took Nellie into a small fenced-in arena and had her run in circles.

"What I'm doing is teaching the horse to be committed to what we are doing," Lani said. "I put the saddle on her, but loose, then I encourage her and support her." He demonstrated how his hand motions, stance and even his breathing could be very meaningful to the horse. Standing in the center, Lani was able to get Nellie to lope, jog or walk in a tight circle around him, using just

his stance and hands. “There is a fluctuation of energy before a rider even gets on a horse,” said Lani. “I’ve created a bond with her, a friendship,” he said, and patted and complimented Nellie on her performance. “I give her love instead of swearing at her when she does something wrong.”

Lani believes that anyone can train horses this way, that consistency and trust are the biggest keys in training a horse. Ultimately he is training Nellie to be a show horse, who will be able to go anywhere in the world with him, but they need to establish the trust first. “There are some very large egos in the training arena, and if we allow them to get in the way, we can’t train our horses consistently,” Lani said. He would like to see progression in how people train horses, and open other minds, especially in Hawaii, to the possibility of training without mistreatment.

Training a new horse is much different than training an older horse that has had a previous owner. “A new horse has no mental baggage,” Lani said. He took three of his fingers and tickled the inside of her mouth in order to get her to open up. “She’s so new that she doesn’t know what I’m asking her,” Lani explained. Lani said it can take about eight months to train a new horse, but sometimes eight years to train a feisty horse that was previously trained.

With three children ages 7, 8 and 9, and all of them riders, Lani said he and his wife Liz can’t take any chances of having their horses hurt anyone. He believes that instilling trust in horses at a young age can make all the difference in the world. And yet, if he’s training an older horse who has been in someone else’s possession, he matches their energy and uses assertiveness and kindness, not aggression, to “take out the *opala* [garbage].”

Miss Pickle, the horse his children ride, came with baggage, he said. Born and raised at Panaewa, she was formerly on the local racetrack and was both “hyper and moody” when he acquired her. But after working with her, Lani said Miss Pickle is gentle and one of the easiest horses to ride. “The kids love riding her and though we are introducing them to something we can barely afford to do, we as parents are going to find a way,” Lani said regarding the horse life. “This horse teaches us about balance,” he said as he put a saddle on her. “Balance is the key, the foundation, and even with ‘green people’ [new riders,] we can teach.” He feels that every person is athletic and can learn how to ride.

It’s a matter of perception, and as Lani put it, the horses may look “candy ass” but they are “gritty as hell under there.” “You can’t just judge a horse by its cover,” he said laughing.

Lani teaches riders that the alignment of the spine, the way one sits on the seat or holds their feet in the stirrups are all signals to the horse from the rider. Lani can ride his horses bareback and without a bridle and still be able to get them to do whatever he wants. He has even roped a cow in a show, without a bridle. “I’m not showing off...there really is a deeper meaning to all of this,” Lani said. And the deeper meaning is that a relationship between a horse and rider can be accomplished through compassion and assertiveness rather than yelling, beating or swearing.

Many of the lessons that Lani has learned with his horses in the arena also applies to relationships with people; that care, trust, assertiveness and good communication rather than aggression and too much ego, can improve relationships immensely. “Building a foundation is the first key,” Lani said. “And then you need balance to achieve your goals. You need good horsemanship to achieve your goals, with no forcefulness in it.”

Lani did say that most times, he would rather deal with animals than people, because animals respond directly to how you treat them, as opposed to humans, who sometimes have a way of not saying what they mean. “How I work with the animals is *pono* [right] and I want to get people to realize that this is real,” said Lani.

Beverly Kalani of Honoka’a brought her horse from the mainland, but said that “a couple of bad things happened to me and the horse” so she had a lot of fear around riding her. After contacting Lani for lessons and training, she said, “Lani restored my confidence in riding. He has the natural ability to get in the horse’s head and also into the person’s head.”

Saying she had a positive experience with Lani, Beverly found he was firm and has a “fairly gentle hand with the animals.” “He was really good about giving emotional support, like telling you if you are doing good,” Beverly said. Has she conquered her fear of riding? Beverly said, “Although it’s not been to my liking, I now have actual rodeo experience, and I actually stayed on the horse.”

Besides training horses and giving riding lessons, Lani is available to assist buyers with horse purchasing both in Hawaii and on the mainland. Currently he is working with “Levi,” whose owners have committed six months of training with “Flying Z”, which Lani said is the minimum time for good training. “In a horse’s life, he never stops learning,” said Lani.

Passionate about horses and children, Lani said he is happy at what he does and wants to continue to use his “God given talent.” In addition to growing his business, Lani said he would like to apply for a grant that would allow him to spend more time with children “who aren’t soccer players,” who have a desire to ride, but have no money. “If I could teach six kids every afternoon, that would be ideal,” Lani said. He also believes that this same riding program used with youth can be applied to recovering addicts. “I’d teach them life skills, and how to implement them, because I’ve seen these programs work,” he said.