

WSJ. MAGAZINE | WHAT'S NEWS

## Will 'Horse Therapy' Make You Better at Your Job?

Programs that use horses to teach trust-building and leadership skills have become popular across fields like business, sports and art



An American paint horse at Miraval's new Austin property, opening in January. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MIRAVAL

*By Kate Donnelly*

Dec. 4, 2018 5:27 p.m. ET

**THE BENEFITS** of interacting with horses are hardly unknown. In around 400 B.C., Greek physician Hippocrates touted the effects of horse riding in his writings, as did Italian physician Girolamo Mercuriale in 1569 and French doctor Clément-Joseph Tissot in 1780. These days, the herd animals are being tapped to facilitate communication, nourish creativity, build teamwork and even inspire leadership—without the saddle.

At Miraval Arizona Resort & Spa in Tucson, guests can enroll in a class called “It’s Not About the Horse,” in which the takeaway is how to lift and clean a horse’s hoof with a pick. Taught by Wyatt Webb, the charismatic creator of the resort’s Equine Experience, the two-hour course is meant to help people overcome fear and self-doubt. When Indiana Pacers head coach Nate McMillan participated, he had to make two attempts to raise the hoof. “It’s learning how to train and condition yourself to calm down in stressful, emotional situations,” he explains. Webb’s take is, “What works with a horse works with all living things.”

Sessions at the Equus Experience, on an 11-acre sprawl near Santa Fe, New Mexico, are more improvisational. Participants list their ambitions and goals and then meet with six untethered horses in an open paddock. The way a person communicates nonverbally with the animals sets the stage for how the session takes shape. Founders J. Scott Strachan and Kelly Wendorf observe and interpret from the sidelines, at times offering perspective and guidance. For example, says Strachan, “when someone shows up claiming to be grounded, but the horses are behaving anxiously, the herd is pointing out that the guest has masked their real state.” Equus, which has attracted artists, fashion designers and CEOs, also partners with Santa Fe’s Four Seasons Rancho Encantado to offer hotel guests multihour or multiday, custom-curated sessions.

“In most [human] negotiations, it’s about winning or losing, success or failure,” Strachan notes. In the horse herd, though, the leader isn’t necessarily aggressive, often positioning itself behind those horses it wants to guide—allowing less-confident horses to find their footing. Horses, which have existed for 55 million years, are prey animals with almost 360 degrees of vision; their fear of being attacked makes them

attuned to body language. “When horses feel they can trust their environment and their leader, they’re more willing to comply,” Strachan explains.

Miraval’s Webb, who has also worked with Nike and Microsoft brass, believes that a few hours with these animals can shatter management models rooted in fear and intimidation. “Horses can help us look at everything we’ve learned,” says Webb. David Robinson, basketball Hall of Famer and co-founder of Admiral Capital Group, has worked with Webb on several occasions. “I’m more mindful about the spirit I’m emanating,” Robinson says. “People will remember how you made them feel more than the words, just like those horses did.”

In January, Miraval’s new resort in Austin, Texas, debuts an equine program offering a trio of new courses that focus on herd observation, in which facilitators point out the subtle cues of horse interaction and guide teams to move a horse without using a rope or halter. For Webb, it’s all about authenticity. “You must have that or you can’t connect.”