

LIFESTYLES

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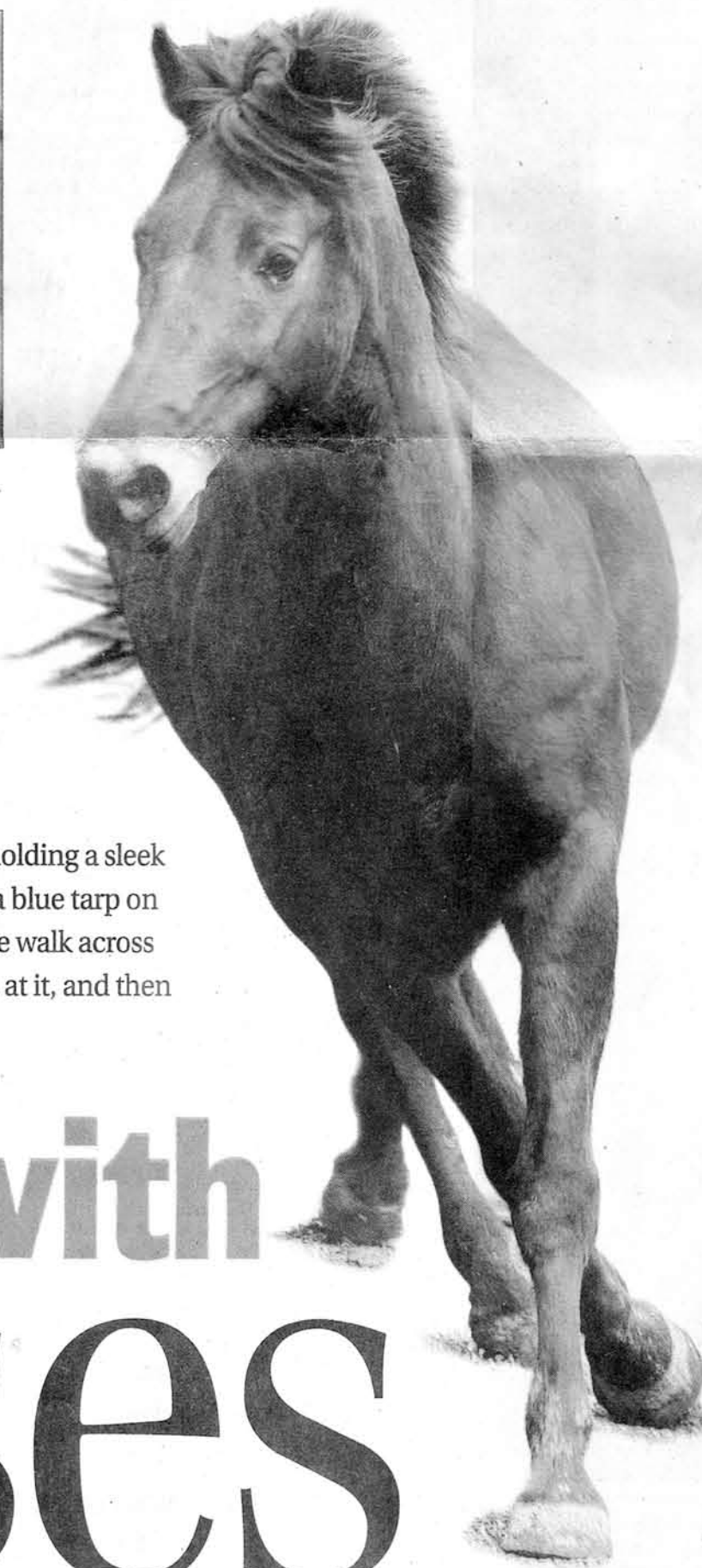
The horses at Horsehandling are allowed out of their pens to run on the property for "play time" to release pent-up energy. Chuck Kraft says this is vital to their mental health and well-being. Onlookers are treated to the majesty of the animals and the thunder of pounding hooves shaking the earth.



Chuck Kraft comforts "Son of Sarcoeama," an 18-year-old triple-registered Appaloosa, who was not allowed to run with the others because he is a stallion. His friend, a 10-year-old Holsteiner named "Galahad," visited his friend often between romps.

Chuck Kraft and the Sweetwater Corral serve up a dish of equine symbiosis

A young man stands in the middle of a corral holding a sleek seal bay Thoroughbred by the reins. He lays a blue tarp on the ground and gently tries to make the horse walk across it. The horse eyes the tarp suspiciously, paws at it, and then touches it with her nose.



Talking with horses

Chuck Kraft leans on the railing outside the corral, wearing a cowboy hat to shield his eyes from the afternoon sun. "Horses take in information through their noses," he says. "She's sniffing the tarp, trying to figure out if it's OK to walk on." The horse rears her head up and steps back. The handler, Dave Sherratt, continues to gently coax her until, finally, she sets both hooves on the tarp. Kraft strolls into the ring and takes hold of the horse. He leaves the corral gate open and casually speaks over his shoulder, "I'm going to make this horse walk out of that gate — backwards." Kraft knows horses like most people know their own children. His business, Horsehandling, at the Sweetwater Corral in Vaughn, specializes in training difficult horses. "Chuck rehabilitates horses with behavioral problems," says his wife, Ruth Kraft. "A lot of the horses that come here were scheduled to be killed because they were dangerous." Char Bantula, who works at Sweetwater, says Kraft often is a horse's last ray of hope — their last stop before being put down. "No one does this," she says. "Chuck has seen horses that have worked with world-famous trainers who were not willing to put their

reputation on the line." Bantula says the horse in the ring is one of those horses: A racehorse whose owner decided to give her one final chance. Kraft uses the Parelli method of horse training, based on the concept that most horses' behavioral problems stem from their owner's inability to understand them. Kraft walks the horse in a series of tight circles, lightly tapping her flank with a stick to steer her in the direction he wants her to go. "Last week, this horse was rearing up, bucking and kicking at everyone in sight," Kraft says. He repeats the same routine with the horse over and over, with fluid motions and skilled hand movements designed to create a comfortable, controlled atmosphere. "The horse has to be calm before we can ask it to do anything," Kraft says. "Once she realizes I'm not going to hurt her, she can become calm. Right now, I'm asking her to move over in this direction." Kraft speaks in a steady, calm voice and demonstrates the quality that is

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Gateway photo/Lee Giles III

"Kasha," a 12-year-old female, at left, nuzzles with "Warion," a 13-year-old male.

Horses: Animals have 'horse-anality'

from page 1D

paramount to his profession — oodles of patience. He points out Horsehandling's motto, which is stitched into his shirt: "festina lente."

It means, "make haste slowly."

He continues to back the horse toward the gate, constantly stroking her head and mane when she does something right.

"You have to rub them as if your heart is in your hand," he says. "This one needs a lot of rubbing."

"The point is to reward the desired response and keep repeating it until we get the desired response," he added. "It's not about being mean and cruel. We simply make the desired thing easy and the undesired thing hard. The horse will naturally want to do the easy thing."

As Kraft gives his step-by-step commentary, drawing onlookers into his equine world, the horse steps backward through the gate.

For good measure, Kraft has the horse do it again — and she does.

"We are predators, and they are prey," Kraft continues. "We are motivated by different things. Horses want survival and comfort. We hunt, kill, eat what we kill, and sleep in caves all night. To a horse, a trailer is nothing but a metal cave."

Kraft leads the horse through a makeshift obstacle course. By the end of the training, the horse has walked through pipes hanging from trees, bounded over cut logs placed on the ground and put her front feet up on a see-saw-type structure made out of wood.

"You have to read the horse's body language," Kraft says. "If they're blinking, they're thinking — if they're not, they're hot. A horse is incapable of deductive logic and reasoning. It's not in their nature to question and wonder. They're just trying to be a horse."

"You have to have a passion for this kind of work," Ruth Kraft



Gateway photo/Lee Giles III

"Ivory Black," a 12-year-old female, enjoys a roll in the gravel during playtime outside of her pen.

says. "Horses are just like humans: They each have their own 'horse-anality.' Some people try to teach horses with sheer brute force, and that just doesn't work. Then we have to come in and perform a 'macho-ectomy.'"

"The horse is always right," Chuck Kraft says. "If you break their spirit, then what do you have?"

Chuck Kraft was born and raised on a ranch in North Dakota.

"As a young man, we used horses for everything," he says.

The Krafts built their business over two years on their 5-acre parcel of land. They have 22 horses — many of them "rescue" horses obtained when their owners simply gave up on them.

Each of them has a name, their own "horse-anality" and a story behind them, and too often those stories are heartbreaking.

The land is dotted with trees, because the Krafts wanted to keep the "woody" feeling intact.

The main attraction at Sweetwater is a huge covered corral surrounded by horse stalls centering a ring. A second-floor balcony offers visitors a bird's-eye view of what's going on in the ring. A separate indoor room

located off to the side has a more comfortable setting with a coffee-shop-style bar and stools seated at a window overlooking the ring.

The seating areas are for client audits. For \$25, people can bring their horses to the ring from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., have lunch and watch Kraft work his magic. He also offers clinics for \$50 during which he works with the owner and the horse.

Kraft touches upon how serious it is for people to know what horses are all about before becoming horse owners.

"Humans usually cause a horse to do what it does," he says. "If you were to scuba dive, you'd take scuba lessons. Before driving a race car, you would want to learn how to drive one. But so many people go out and buy a horse without knowing anything about them. Humans have to be educated on what a horse's problem is."

Kraft's ultimate goal is to create a mutually beneficial relationship for the horse and the owner.

Equine symbiosis — that's what Chuck Kraft is all about.

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