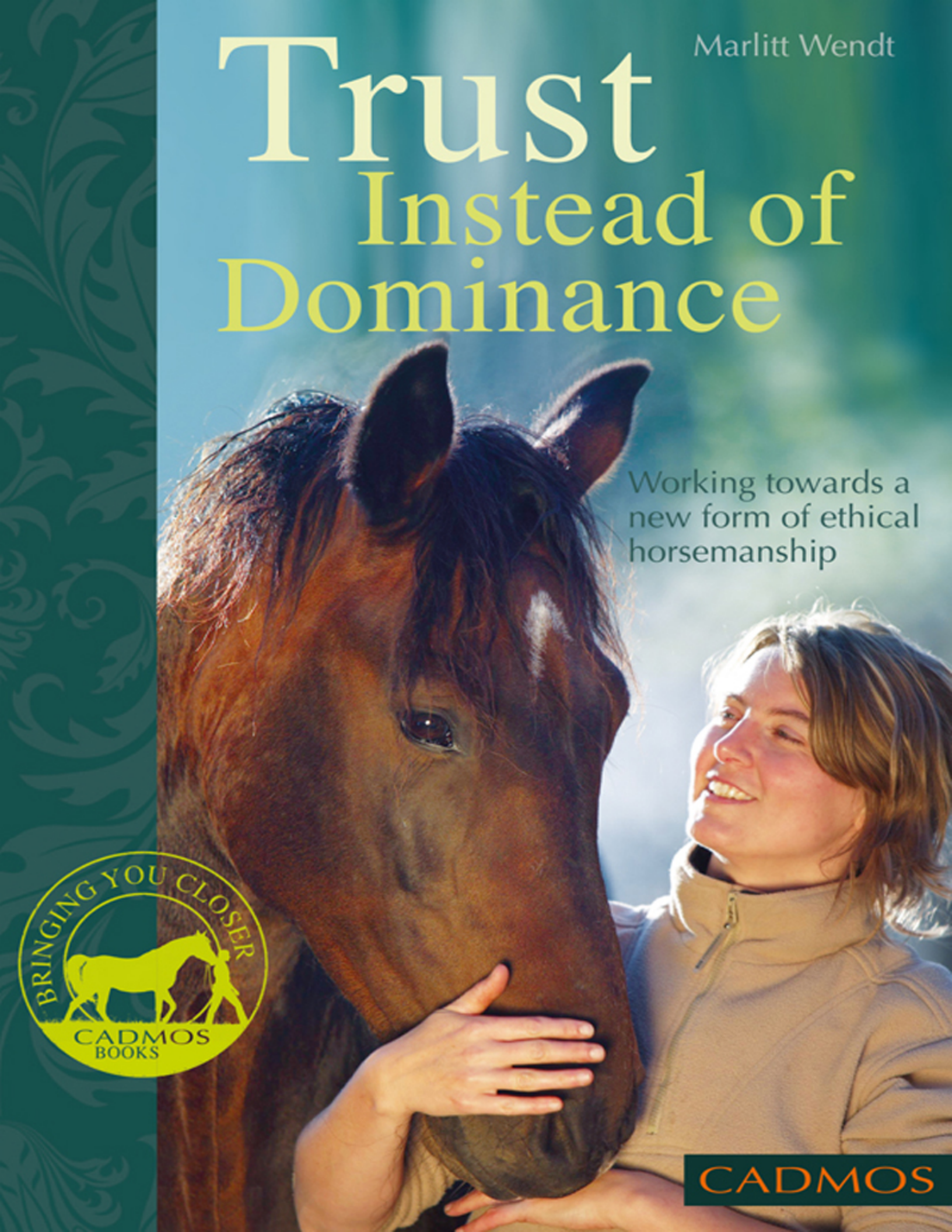
Marlitt Wendt

Trust Instead of Dominance

Working towards a new form of ethical horsemanship



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So tell me, riders, how do you feel about domination?

In recent years dominance seems to have become one of the key focuses of discussion and debate. Terms such as domination, control, dominance problems, hierarchy and dominance training seem to be on the lips of so many riders and trainers. Entire training methods rely on these terms and the models used to explain them. But do we really always have to dominate our horses? Are dominance and hierarchy really as significant in a horse's day to day life as we are led to believe? And in many cases doesn't a training system based on dominance do more harm than good?

Much of the terminology used by dominance-based trainers when explaining their systems comes originally from equine behavioural science. In spite of the advances within this branch of science some of the earlier ideas have been integrated into training methods, often without a full understanding of them. The typical behaviour of a herd, which has its own social structure and hierarchy, isn't as obvious and one-dimensional as has been taught for decades. Meanwhile the scientific world is also seriously questioning the existence of a purely dominance-based hierarchy, both within a herd and in relation to humans. The stallions and mares of legend that take over leadership of their herds, and about whom much has been written, exist only in fairy tales. In addition, the question has to be asked whether training methods that rely for their basis on the principles of so-called 'Dominance-based training' really work in the way you are led to believe, or whether in fact

the learning process behind them has nothing at all to do with establishing a new pecking order. The alleged absence of force in so many of these methods has to be strongly questioned.

Life as experienced in a herd, and the relationships that horses have with each other and with the people around them, leave a mark on other natural laws of behaviour. In this book I would like to try to dispel some of this confusion and give you an insight into a horse's social life from a behavioural science perspective. In addition I will analyse horses' natural associations and the tangle of their herd relationships as well as observing their relationship to humankind and our training methods. In doing this we will be able to paint a new picture of a horse's social life and investigate an alternative method of training, which involves a more ethical type of interaction between horse and human.

This book should help you to assess different types of training methods for their understanding of equine behaviour and their freedom from force. I also hope to be able to give my readers the ability to differentiate between positive and negative training methods – whether at shows, competitions, or when choosing a trainer for your own horse. In being able to do this we are also contributing towards a more peaceful coexistence between humankind and the horse.

Marlitt Wendt, August 2010

Horses – more than a herd animal

An introduction to the world of the horse

All horses are not the same. Although any casual observer can see clear and marked differences between individual representatives of the species with the melodic sounding scientific name *Equus ferus caballus*, most books on horses and riders speak with one voice about ‘the horse’. However, there is as much a typical horse as there is a typical human. There are clear differences to be found, both behaviourally and physically, between Arabs and Exmoor ponies, Belgian Draught horses and Mongolian horses, or between Hanoverians and Quarter Horses. In addition, representatives from within individual breeds can also differ greatly in their behaviour and characteristics. It is precisely this individuality that characterises horses and which provides so many of the challenges that we find when dealing with them. No one horse is exactly like any other, so we are faced continuously with new surprises when involved with them. In what follows, I will cover where our leisure partners of today come from and highlight some of their evolutionary qualities, so that we are prepared for our later discussion of some of their characteristic features.

Where does the horse come from and where is it going?

In the course of the millions of years that form its developmental history, the horse has learned to adapt to different living conditions and circumstances. In the course of its evolution, and as a result of certain inherited traits being passed down from generation to generation, the species we now know as the horse underwent significant anatomical and physical changes. What started as an antelope-like forest-dwelling animal became a plains-living animal that could gallop – the horse. Distinguishing characteristics of an individual are coded in the form of genes, which are copied and passed on to the following generations. Many species don’t exist in just a single form, but have a number of different variations. The hereditary differences among individuals, in other words the genetic variability, are created by these different forms and the recombination or reordering of their genes.

Today’s breeds are a colourful mix, originating from very different types. They unite a wide range of behavioural characteristics inherited from their ancestors.

Even in the case of the ancestors of our domesticated horses, there has always been a wide variety of subspecies or types that have adapted to the climatic and ecological conditions of different regions around the world. Today, in order to trace the ancestry of horses and their domestication, researchers make use of the genetic information contained within the so-called mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), which is passed on exclusively from mother to daughter. Normally the order of the genes changes in every generation owing to the merging of the female and male elements at conception; however, when considering mtDNA, you are dealing with a recognisable component of the genes that remains consistent over many generations, and through which it is possible to follow the maternal line and the degree of relationship between different species of equines. The origins of the maternal line of the modern domesticated horse, and thus the ancestress of all of the various different types of horse, can be traced back between 320,000 and 630,000 years. Using mitochondrial DNA, the domestication of the horse by humankind can be traced back to the period between 9400 and 2000 BC. For a long period, researchers hypothesised that the horse of today originated from a single ancestor, a theory that is now strongly doubted. They imagined that the domestication of the horse was a single and relatively simple process, which caused the domesticated horse we ride today to be created from the interbreeding and natural selection of only a few individuals, which were then spread around the world by humankind. Modern research now assumes that the domestication of the horse took place in a number of different locations around the world, and at varying times. Each group of people took the horses that were living in

their region at that time and in effect created their own ‘ancestral’ horse through breeding. This theory is supported by the fact that, when examining the current range of horses that exist today, we can find 17 different types with varying maternal lines.

The origins of today’s breeds

The different subspecies mentioned above are the ancestors of today’s domesticated horses and thus the foundation for the modern breeds of today. Their initial development occurred without the influence of humankind, and was a result only of exposure to the environment in which they lived in different parts of the world. They therefore developed great differences not only in their physical characteristics but also in their behaviour. Probably the oldest domesticated type of horse, with a maternal line that stretches back 47,000 to 166,000 years, originated on the steppes of Asia and was characterised by a short-backed, slight body, a short head with wide nostrils and a tendency to move fast in its dry, warm habitat. These horses formed very close family groups and found it easier than the other types of horses to become used to humans.

The maternal lines of the northern draught breeds (sometimes inaccurately referred to as cold-blooded horses) can be traced back 29,000 to 100,000 years. With their thickset and chunky bodies and powerful jaws adapted to chewing hardier grasses, they were perfectly suited to cold climates. This was a horse that went everywhere at a steady walk and formed loose groups. The maternal line of the more roman-nosed warmblood type, which is 6000 to 21,000 years old, was well suited to the vast, cold steppes of the northern hemisphere. They had a relatively long back and long limbs that were ideally suited for long journeys. They probably lived a solitary life, with herd life virtually unknown, with the exception of groups of older mares who