An introduction to Horsefulness
Liberty Training
The path to true connection & successful training
By Karine Vandenborre
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**ABOUT HORSEFULNESSTRAINING.COM**

http://www.horsefulnesstraining.com is for everyone with a passion for horses and who would like to train horses in a horse friendly and responsible manner. The aim of his website is to give free information about horses and Horsefulness Training.
On www.horsefulnesstraining.com you will find many valuable tips and advice about horses and training horses.

**Horsefulness Training**

My name is Karine Vandenborre (1977). I've been a full-time horse trainer and instructor since 1995. Since then, I've been helping people and their horses, or should I say: horses and their people ;-) 

My expertise lies in solving relational problems between horses and humans as well as training problems. I gained this expertise through my work with so-called “problem horses,” who are often severely traumatized as well.

I’ve also been specialising in bitless riding since 2005.

For years and years I've studied different methods and systems of training, both classic and more “natural” ones. Together with my own experience and insights from daily practice, the Horsefulness Training system grew.

It is now a very effective and dynamic way of training horses, but above all, it is very horse friendly. Horsefulness Training is an optimal way to make the connection between human and horse, resulting in more harmony both on the ground and in the saddle.

I believe that every person who deals with horses has the same goal: creating a team with his horse, a team where the foundation is formed by trust, partnership, communication and mutual respect.

**Why the name “Horsefulness Training”?**

I was after a name that was clearly about not only horses, but also awareness. I was after a name that would evoke the idea that working with horses is a way of life. The name had to express tranquility, but also strength. I finally decided on the name Horsefulness Training.
This name covers it perfectly! It combines “Horsemanship”, the art of dealing with horses, and “Mindfulness”, a life attitude in which you practice conscious and non-judgmental attention, both inwardly towards yourself as well as to everything around you.

**Treating your horse mindfully**

Horsefulness Training teaches you the importance of constantly being aware of how your horse thinks, reacts, learns, lives, ... But also how you position yourself and how you respond to your horse. It teaches you to handle your horse in a non-judgmental way and with full attention. You’ll learn to handle your horse in a “mindful” way. I believe that this is the basis for an honest relationship founded on trust and mutual respect.

**First intention, then technique**

The next step is to develop your “technical” skills. It is important to know how to do something, why you do it, which aids are right, what and when to reward. This way your horse will understand you better. However, this is accompanied by an important rule: “First intention, then technique”!

**The 4 dynamic training components**

Horsefulness Training didn’t arise in one day. It is the result of years and years of polishing until it finally emerged as a step by step guide that can be applied to every horse. It consists of four main training components:

- **Liberty Training** (being and communicating with the horse in freedom)
- **Groundwork** (being with, communicating with and training the horse on a rope)
- **Gymnastic Groundwork** (which includes work in hand and lunging)
- **Bitless Riding Art**
These training components will provide a foundation to which you can return in case something goes wrong. They complement each other. You can apply this system to every horse. Yes, to every horse! Although you can apply this system step by step, you can also just take away what is most appropriate at a given moment for a certain horse, or use a combination of components.

This is a very dynamic method. It takes the individual horse into account because no horse is the same!

The step by step guide can be very useful for people who recently started with their horses and would like to follow a logical way of training. I also like to address certain problems or “challenges” step by step to ensure a solid basis for future training.

However, if a solid foundation already exists, the system can be applied in a more dynamic way. You could for instance work on Liberty Training (first component) and simultaneously work on Bitless Riding (fourth component). In this e-book I will introduce you to the first training component, Liberty Training, along with its 8 connection exercises.
Horsefulness Liberty Training

During Horsefulness Liberty Training, you work with a horse that is set loose in a riding arena or large paddock.

You don’t hold the horse, but instead give it freedom to leave your side when it feels the need to do so. That is why it is called LIBERTY training.

The horse is free to choose when it wants to leave us. This ensures that the horse doesn’t experience any pressure or force. The main goal of Liberty Training is to build a strong bond and to create a true connection between you and your horse.

Often times, horses are trained too fast without sufficient opportunity to really get to know their trainer or build a strong bond. However, when you take the time to work with your horse at liberty and respond to your horse’s natural behavior in a kind and horse-friendly manner, you can truly start to feel a real connection and deep bond that will be the foundation for problem free, pleasant training sessions.

It is important to convey positive intentions, to send out the right attitude, and to empathize with the horse and its perception. It is necessary to understand its natural characteristics and behaviour.

During Liberty Training, horses first need the opportunity to become curious about “their human”. Trust and friendship grows from there. At liberty, we also learn how to communicate with each other and develop our leadership skills. If the horse notices that you can lead in a grounded, calm and assertive way, his trust in you will grow.
Liberty Training is a first step to partnership and natural leadership*, and therefore the first part of Horsefulness Training.

By spending time and working with Ulysse at liberty in the field and paddock first, a strong connection was formed. She now even follows me on the street without any gear on, while previously it was hard to catch her in the paddock! I do not advise to go walking on the street with your horse without any gear, I just wanted to illustrate that there are a lot of possibilities when you treat your horse in the correct way.

* I use the term “natural leadership” to emphasize that we are responding to the nature of the horse and taking the natural needs of the horse into account. For this, it is necessary to understand the psychology of the horse and to view everything from the horse’s point of view. That’s what makes leadership natural. You show natural leadership when your horse follows you out of trust.
What do you need for Liberty Training?

Not a lot! You don’t even need a riding arena. You can also do it in the field. With some horses it is easier to work in a paddock without grass when you start out, because the horse will be less distracted, but with other horses it is actually better to work in a meadow since the grazing can make them calmer. Eventually, you will be able to do as much in the field as in an arena/paddock. You can also alternate between the paddock and the arena.

When working in an arena, try to work in one as big as possible. It is important that your horse has the space to distance himself from you. The horse needs this space to be able to communicate in a relaxed way.

In this way, the horse will also never get overstressed when you need to be a bit more assertive. It will just go to the other side of the arena.

When you drive a horse from his spot in a small arena (an arena of 10 by 10 or even 15 by 15), you risk that he will walk up and down along the wire and may even try to crawl under or walk through the wire, even if you are being calm.

The distance between the two of you is too small and that's the moment your horse starts to feel insecure. He wants to be able to move away from you (because that is what you are asking from him) and to be able to walk away from you and to create enough distance. 15 meters is not enough distance. Even 20 meters can be too close for certain horses.

Therefore, I advise you to work in an arena or field that is 20 by 40 meters at minimum.

Besides an arena or paddock, you also need a short driving whip. We use this whip as an extension of our body. When we drive with our body (move the horse) we can use the whip as a reinforcing aid.
The 8 connection exercises

Liberty Training consists of 8 exercises. I call these exercises “connection exercises” because they help to form a connection between human and horse.

These exercises are laid out as individual exercises, but the longer you do each of them, the more feeling you’ll get for them and the more they’ll start to flow into one another.

First and foremost we are working on trust and friendship, but we also want to develop mutual respect and leadership, as well as clear communication with the horse.

When all these aspects are present you can say with confidence that you have a strong foundation to build on!

Then you are ready to start the next training components with your horse if you wish.
Connection exercise 1: **BONDING TIME**

During this exercise, you simply take your time to be with your horse, wherever he is. You may either sit or stand. By just being together, you create a group feeling, a feeling of togetherness. This exercise is also about being here and now, without expectations. That’s hard for a lot of people!

By doing this exercise regularly, your horse will become curious about you and will eventually come to you on his own, if this is not yet the case. This is very powerful because the moment a horse decides to come to you on his own marks the moment the connection starts to grow. The horse is interested in you and wants to know what you are doing and how you react to him.

Doing nothing can seem like a very simple thing, but a lot of things can happen during Bonding Time.

Some horses are skeptical, others are intrusive, and others are distrustful or tense. Some horses will touch you and sniff you. There are horses that bite. Some horses will just look at you, or they may never look at you at all and stay as far away from you as possible.

It’s important that you know how to react to all these things in the right way, because if you begin this first exercise by making mistakes, everything that follows will be less successful too.

If Bonding Time is done correctly, it will allow your connection to start growing.
Connection exercise 2: **GREET & GO**

As the name suggests, you come together and meet but there are no obligations. You leave immediately after that. You only invite your horse to make contact.

So where you acted passively with the previous exercise, this time you act a bit more actively. You take the first step, but it is left up to the horse to determine what happens next.

It's very important here that you respect any boundaries set by the horse, so the horse learns that you are friendly and respectful towards him.

Many horses have a certain distrust towards humans -- not always in humans themselves, but in their actions. These horses have learned from experience that when someone enters the paddock and approaches them, something is about to “happen”.

Either they are stroked (which most horses don’t want that since they have the need to smell the other first), or they are haltered and taken, or they are moved, or they are groomed, ...

This exercise ensures that the horse learns that you don’t always want something from him when you approach him. Thus, the name “Greet & Go”: you approach and greet, but then you leave immediately, without demanding anything.
Since every horse is different, it’s important for you to be aware of your body language during your approach. Some horses will look at you. Some will look away, turn away, or walk away.

Some will come up to you themselves. Some will become tense. Some will drive you or become intrusive, and others will simply keep grazing. Your reaction to this, the way you respond to what your horse is saying and showing you, is of major importance.

The Greet & Go exercise, when done correctly, will ensure that your horse becomes less cautious, more confident, and more open towards you.

Connection exercise 3: **GREET & GROOM**

When your horse allows you to approach him, see if you can pet or groom him. By grooming your horse, you deepen your bond, just like horses groom each other to calm each other down and to deepen their bonds.
Again, show respect for the horse’s boundaries. A horse that doesn't allow himself to be touched can either be scared or he just doesn’t feel like it. A horse isn’t a cuddly toy and doesn’t always feel like being stroked. Neither do you, right?

It is difficult to judge when a horse feels like grooming. Don't feel turned down when a horse refuses to be pet or groomed. It’s a matter of time, as well as building trust in your relationship.

But also (and this is very important): communication! This includes the way you approach your horse, your movements, your position, your energy, your timing...

Horses see and feel everything we do, and sometimes only a small mistake in how you touch your horse can make him feel tense or make him feel like leaving.

But when you start to become aware of these details, and you listen carefully to what your horse is saying, soon your horse will enjoy the grooming too!

**Connection exercise 4: YOUR SPOT, MY SPOT**

Within a group of horses, there exists a contextual (!) hierarchy. Horses can show themselves lower or higher in rank in respect to others in a given situation.

Some say that horses don’t view humans as having a lower or higher rank. I, however, believe that they do. There are many examples where horses live with other animals and where hierarchy is evidenced. Why would this be different with humans?

Because of the hierarchal mindset of horses, it is important that a horse is willing to give up his spot, and also move aside when we ask him to. Horses do this with each other as well.
If you have spent any time around horses, you have definitely seen this! It is important that a horse be willing to give his spot or move over for his trainer. It is safer to work with a horse that moves away from you when you ask and yields for subtle driving aids, instead of going against your cues.

It can be dangerous to work with a horse that you can’t send away when you want to. The risk is that the horse will show less and less respect for your personal space and become increasingly intrusive. For example, they may begin to push against you or even bite.

“Your spot, my spot” is an excellent exercise to do when horses are intrusive. You can act very assertively but still there is no pressure because you give the horse space to walk away. You leave him free.

It is important to be very aware of how you do this, as some horses are very sensitive to driving aids, but with other horses you need to use a lot of energy. Depending on the horse you are working with, you will need to use different body language.

Connection exercise 5: EASY HERDING

The interesting part of this exercise is that while you do this, you are sparking an even stronger herd feeling because you respond to the natural behaviour of your horse. They interpret that whoever herds them in a friendly way is part of the group.

From birth on, a foal is accustomed to being driven by his mother and other members of the group. The foal is taught from an early age that it should stay in between the “aids of the herd” if it wants to feel safe and secure.
A horse remembers and recognizes this throughout his entire life. And we can use this to easily create an even stronger herd feeling.

By driving the horse in a calm and assertive but friendly and relaxed manner during easy herding, a stronger herd feeling will be created.

Easy Herding consists of a few steps, which are all very important to be able to herd your horse in a way that is comfortable for him. There is “following”, “search for me”, “active herding” and “passive herding” and when you are able to combine all those, you will also be able to ask your horse to slow down, to halt, to go faster, to turn to the left, to the right, to make loops, all while you stay behind your horse and your horse walks in front.

The fact that the horse is always able to walk away when it feels the need to do so will make sure that the horse still has free will and will not feel pressured.

**Connection exercise 6: LIBERTY LEADING**

Liberty leading can result spontaneously from all of the previous exercises. When it happens spontaneously, it is up to you to accept it and freely guide the horse as long as he feels like it.

In the beginning we don’t ask “stay with me”. We let the horse go when he decides to leave.

From the moment the connection is strong enough and he allows you to direct him without holding him, the horse is ready to be led by you. You
ask the horse to follow next to you. The horse follows your speed and direction.

You can lead your horse in the lead position or in the partner position, depending on the horse and the situation you choose the best position on that moment.

It is wise to take your time during your training session and work slowly towards Liberty Leading. Even if it only lasts for 5 minutes, when your horse lets himself be led by you in a large arena it is really saying: “Yes, I want to be with you”.

I like to start with my horse wanting to be with me. If the horse doesn’t follow me spontaneously or doesn’t want to follow me when I invite him to, then I’ll spend a few more minutes on connecting. I do this by going through all 8 connection exercises, or only 1 or some, depending on the situation and on the individual horse.
Connection exercise 7: **SPONTANEOUS CIRCLING**

Spontaneous circling requires a strong connection and excellent communication with your horse, so it can only happen when you have already taken your time for the previous 6 exercises.

I call it “spontaneous circling” because if you work according to the Horsefulness liberty method, you don’t teach this with pressure. If you took your time for the previous exercises, then it will happen very spontaneously. The horse will start to walk or trot (or even canter) around you in a circle while you remain more or less in the same spot (you walk around in a very small circle).

What’s basically happening is that you ask the horse to move faster than you, but to also think about how he is able to stay with you. The horse is focusing on you when he does this.

We don’t teach the horse in a compulsive way to continue circling around us. By “compulsive,” I mean that when the horse walks away it is driven to return. The horse will then think: “If I don’t want to tire myself out and want to keep the person in the middle calm, I better stay with that person”.

It is important that you show natural leadership during Liberty Training and during everything else you do with your horse. By refusing a horse freedom when it walks away you give a totally different message. Your message is: “You have to do what I say, or else!” That’s creating a false connection.
But what we all strive for is a true heart connection! So it is always better to give the message: “You can choose” and to make the circumstances favourable so that the horse really likes and loves to be with you and makes the choice of wanting to be with you by himself.

Within a natural group of horses (wild or semi-wild horses) the horses stay together voluntarily, they’re not being forced to do so. Sometimes horses change groups by own decision. The other horses don’t drive these horses so they return. That is not how it works with them.

A group of horses can only work together, have a strong herd feeling and operate as 1 when the animals have a strong bond and when they choose completely voluntarily to stay in that group.

“Controlling pressure” or chasing horses can result in that some horses disconnect with their trainer. They eventually do what the trainer wants (staying with him), but they don’t do this from free will.

They only do this because otherwise it means consequences that give them a bad feeling or even pain. Controlling pressure or chasing horses makes them scared, and they will suffer from it.

When you have enough patience, you know how to motivate your horse in the right way, and you use your body language correctly and clearly, you can basically let every horse circle around you.

But, it needs to be said that this is not your most important goal. It is a bonus and very fun to do, but don’t be disappointed when it doesn’t work immediately. Liberty Training in the way I teach isn’t a quick-fix method, it asks a lot of empathy and feeling, and above all: letting go of control.
Connection-exercise 8: **THE BOOMERANG**

By now your connection has become so strong that you could ask your horse in a playful manner to trot or to canter. However, we won’t let the horse to run endlessly around in circles. We are going to ask the horse to walk away and quickly invite it back to us.

So we ask the horse to move away trotting or cantering only to invite him back quickly. It’s a bit like you would throw a boomerang. If thrown correctly, a boomerang will return. This is also true with horses.

When you send your horse away in the correct and playful way, he will want to return under his own volition! However, the connection has to be strong, your intentions have to be right, and your body language has to correspond with what the horse needs. Everything needs to be dosed correctly.

And also, if you try this exercise too soon (before there is a 100% trust), you will discourage the horse to come back to you. The horse can develop a fear and flinch to make contact. The reason is that when a horse doubts your good intentions and you ask it to trot or canter in the wrong moment, it can be interpreted by the horse as aggressive behaviour.
It can think that you are “attacking” him and that you want to banish him from your “herd of two”. If the horse interprets this as your intention, that is exactly what it will do: leave your herd of 2.

It can take quite a lot of time to restore trust after this happens, so you have to have your horse convinced of your good intentions and that you won’t treat him disrespectfully in any way before attempting this exercise. You should feel confident in all the other exercises first before doing this one.

The Boomerang is a game that fuels the fire in your horse, makes it more open, and lets it focus more on you.

Your intention is very important. It must always be: “let’s play together” and not “you need to run away now and then return”. Then you will be able to play the boomerang and it will be fun for both!

Natural leadership: What and how?

You have to be able to show natural leadership when necessary to work safely and effectively with horses.

A natural leading figure is someone who is followed without putting in too much effort. He is being followed because others notice that he can be trusted 100%. He is a friend, is calm and centered, knows what he is talking about, is an example, has respect for his followers, and does not use force.
He is, however, assertive enough not to be played and to announce his own opinion without condemning others. It works this way with humans and horses alike! Horses like to follow a horse or a human with these qualities. This makes them feel safe and relaxed. It is clear what is expected from them and they like that.

By doing the exercises in a large arena or paddock, you give the horse the possibility to walk away from you when it feels the need to do so. At the same time it also ensures that you can act in an assertive way without seeming aggressive. You are “friendly-assertive”.

When he needs leadership, the horse likes to follow those in the group that can offer security, clarity, and stability since it has a natural desire for these things.

Experience in leadership is something that grows; it doesn’t arise on day 1. During Liberty Training you develop the right skills which you can then also use during Groundwork, Gymnastic Groundwork and Bitless Riding Art.

**Some important tips**

- Do the first connection exercise, Bonding Time, as often as possible! Every day, if you can. If that is not possible, do it as much as time allows.

- When you face emotions like anger or frustration (because something isn’t working, for instance), stop immediately with what you are doing at that moment.

  Do some breathing exercises or something else that calms you down. Don’t take it out on your horse. This could mean a major setback for your horse’s trust in you. Learn to let go!

  And probably the most important tip:

- Go every day to your horse with the attitude of a beginner: no expectations and with open mind. Never compare today with yesterday. Every day is different. You feel differently, your horse
feels differently, the situation is different. Every day is a new experience.

This is certainly important when you sense that you are easily disappointed when something isn’t working well. By making comparisons with yesterday, when “everything was working very well”, today can make you dissatisfied when things don’t seem to be going as well. But I want you to always remember: it’s not about performance.

Afterword

Liberty Training is all about creating trust and friendship, clear communication, togetherness and openness! The goal is to develop a deep bond with your horse.

By doing Liberty Training, you create the strongest foundation possible. Further training will be easier and more enjoyable and your horse will be motivated to work as a team and learn from you. Horsefulness Liberty Training is not only the path to true connection, but also the path to successful training!
Testimonials

Below you can read what others think of Horsefulness Liberty Training.

Karen Van Damme, show jumper and member of the Dutch Horsefulness Liberty Training Program

“What I like about Horsefulness Liberty Training is that it is all about respect towards the horse. The horse is being respected in his reactions which creates a real connection that rests on his natural way of being and trust instead of on pressure or threats.

Since I learned Horsefulness Liberty Training my horse has a lot more trust in me and my leadership.

He has a lot less fear and when he is scared of something, then he has the courage to pick up a lot sooner and stays calm when I ask him to continue. He is also a lot more affectionate than before. Before he never wanted to be hugged and always remained distant. But now he doesn’t walk away anymore when I approach him to hug him and he allows a lot more. I believe that everyone who works with horses should learn Horsefulness Liberty Training. It’s the basic of everything you do with your horse!”

Marjan van Loo, recreational dressage rider and member of the Dutch Horsefulness Liberty Training Program

“Thanks to Horsefulness Liberty Training the connection with my horse and my pony has improved a lot. I understand them better and I have gained much more respect for them. They come to me spontaneously and like to stay close to me.

However, the most important thing that I learned is that I can let go of my expectations and that takes away a lot of frustrations. It is now so much more
fun to work with my horse and my pony. They also have become much more receptive of what I ask them. It also clearly has an influence on the other things that I do with them. Out on the street they are much calmer because they have much more trust in me. They respect me and curiously come to me when I take care of them or when I am working in the paddock and spontaneously offer exercises...

It also is just very fun that I am able to lead my horse and my pony, that they follow me without me holding them, that I can sit in the paddock while they hang around me... Long story short, they consider me much more as one of them!

Stefanie Lampens, recreational rider and member of the Dutch Horsefulness Liberty Training Program

“What I find so appealing to Horsefulness is the Liberty Training, you only start to really train your horse (groundwork, gymnastic groundwork, riding) after you first established a connection with your horse, when your horse really wants to be with you. This is much different compared to other horsemanship scopes where you start with groundwork and liberty Training follows as a result.

The fact that you can get your horse to come to you in a friendly way, without pressuring it is also something that I find very appealing to Horsefulness Liberty Training. This is a very calm and friendly way of working. I already was working with natural horsemanship for a few years but I got the feeling that only after I started training my horse the Horsefulness way, she really likes to be with me. Working at liberty is going so much better now than before. She now starts to circle spontaneously around me, while this was almost impossible a few months...
earlier because she constantly walked away. By doing the Horsefulness Liberty Training it worked on its own…”

Evelyn de Schryver, recreational rider and member of the Dutch Horsefulness Liberty Training Program

I rode several years on the classical way. I had a foal that I was fighting with from the first day I rode her. And I have to admit: all these years, I didn’t even question this, it was something I accepted as being normal...

She was just a “difficult horse” with a “nasty” personality... But then I discovered Karine Vandenborre and her Horsefulness Training.

In that period I bought another foal and I was determined to do it correctly this time, so he didn’t have to go through what my other horse had to go through... So I took lessons with him and now he’s easy to trailerload, he adores to play in liberty, and what is great: he trusts me completely, a feeling I never had with my other horse before we started Horsefulness Training.

I don’t ride my 2 oldest horses anymore, but the Horsefulness Training system did help me enormously to develop a very strong bond with them. My mare now comes very joyful too me for contact when I arrive, while she used to run to the other side of the field and I had to run after her for half an hour before I could halter her...

For no money in the world I would go back to the traditional way of training horses. Now I realize you can just as good ride a bicycle if you don’t have a good connection with your horse.
Therefore, the freedom in this approach appeals to me very much, combined with respect and calmness. But also the clarity and but above all: the patience! Patience is sometimes difficult for me. I didn’t always trust on my intuition because I let myself be influenced by other people who had other ideas on horse training. Since Jonas, a 5 year old PRE gelding, came into my life, I am forced to be more myself again and to listen better to myself. Listen to what is good for both of us. Jonas is born in Spain. At first he was quite distrustful, but soon I could change that and he was no longer afraid. But, he remained introverted, passive, not really happy. But since I started Horsefulness Liberty Training we are both more and more in our element. He is now playful and focussed, our bond is stronger.

Because I am an emotional person and like to go into depth immediately, I found it challenging sometimes to follow the step-by-step approach of the online program. But now I realise that this structure is really essential, especially for a horse like Jonas. So that’s why I am very thankful I can follow the Horsefulness Liberty Training Program. It taught me very important lessons.

And the most enjoyable is of course that Jonas now comes running up to me full of fire during the Boomerang, that he follows me in liberty in walk and
sometimes already in trot too, that I “feel” him much better, that we are building a real solid foundation for a life full of friendship and freedom!

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**Sarah Bievelz, member of the Dutch Horsefulness Liberty Training Program**

I always had a very good bond with my horse Jo’we but at one point things were getting difficult. I didn’t understand him anymore, he was afraid of everything. I always knew him as a shy and anxious type of horse but never that much. So I contacted Karine for a lesson and she explained to me what to do if Jo’we was fearful. She gave us several exercises and tips and soon after I had a totally different horse! In the past he was afraid of every change in the environment around him, so afraid that he didn’t even want to try anymore to overcome his fears. I also misunderstood him totally. Only 3 weeks after our first Horsefulness Training lesson he came running up to me when I came into his field, he almost begs me to put on his halter to do things with me. I really advice these lessons, they literally do wonders!

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For more testimonials, check out the special page about the Horsefulness Liberty Training Program.

[https://programs.horsefulnesstraining.com/liberty-training/join-now/](https://programs.horsefulnesstraining.com/liberty-training/join-now/)