

The Fjords of Crown Jewel Resort Ranch

It all started with miniature donkeys...

by Nahman Korem

We were living in Connecticut on a 4-acre property in Glastonbury, a bedroom community east of Hartford. We already had three dogs, two cats and two llamas but my wife, Iris, felt that this was not enough. Her plan was to surprise me with a miniature donkey.

On one of my business trips in spring 2000, Iris drove to New Hampshire to visit a breeder of miniature donkeys. To her surprise, she saw a Fjord mare with a six-month-old filly at her side. It was love at first sight. The following weekend, I was told we were making a surprise trip to New Hampshire. I knew nothing about Fjords until that weekend when I saw my first ones. Trying to be more practical about the purchase of a horse, I started to learn about the breed. Everything I read supported what we felt about the breed and it did not take long before we purchased the filly. We were also told that, as novices, we had better get some "Fjord savvy" for ourselves. This advice came with contact information regarding a driving vacation in Nova Scotia.

In the summer of 2000, we visited Nova Scotia and learned a lot about Fjords. We were captivated by the beauty of Cape Breton Island. Upon returning to Connecticut, we purchased our second Fjord filly. The next summer, we purchased our third Fjord, a yearling gelding.

During the summer of 2002, as part of a family decision to change our lifestyle (and to have an early retirement) we moved to Cape Breton Island to establish an upscale eco-resort ranch. The plan for the resort was to include many of our hobbies and to be open year-round. We brought with us the three Fjords we purchased in North America plus six geldings imported from Norway.

Within two years, we ran from no horses at all to nine young, untrained Fjords. Nine Fjords and not a single miniature donkey at our ranch!

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Crown Jewel Fjord horses enjoy living in their natural surroundings year 'round.

The Fjords of Crown Jewel ...



A lovely trail ride in the warmer season.

Fjord horses transport vacationers on their driving adventures.

Where do Fjords fit in the Plan?

Establishing a resort ranch in Nova Scotia has unique benefits as well as constraints. Obviously, due to the geography, it is difficult to reproduce a western experience on the East Coast. Add to that the use of Fjord horses, and there is not much left of the "western experience." Yes, our ranch has 800 deeded acres but moving our Highland cattle from one pasture to the next does not really require horses.

Unlike many Fjord farms, we decided not to have a breeding program. Although we do have two mares, the other seven Fjords are geldings. We decided to specialize in training Fjord horses and use them for recreation and work.

The above brought us to a clear vision regarding our horse business. We wanted to:

1. Train all-purpose Fjords (riding and driving)
2. Use Fjords for daily farm/ranch chores
3. Use Fjords for recreational activities for the resort guests

Natural Horse Keeping

At Crown Jewel, we believe barns are meant for the convenience of people – not animals. Our horses live in the open even during the harsh winters we get here on Cape Breton Island. The shelter the horses use is natural. We have a wooded gully in the pasture and this is where they seek shelter whenever there is a winter storm. We do not use blankets and our horses grow healthy and fuzzy winter coats.

We have to admit that the above boarding method created a lot of controversy with neighbors; farmers and local horse people alike (including our first vet). To attest to the usefulness of this method we can say that we are already five winters in Nova Scotia and with nine horses, we have not had a single vet call due to an ill horse. (We guess this is why the local vet does not like us.)

Holistic Feeding

All our horses get grass in summer and good hay in winter. We do not supplement with any grains but we do provide them a mineral block. There is one natural exception though; one of the horses' pastures has many wild apple trees. Come October, it is very difficult to convince a Fjord horse to give up the apples and do some useful work!

As an organic farm, we cannot use wormers as these substances go back to the ground and eventually find their way to our food plate through the cattle and sheep that share the same pastures with the horses. We do not claim that our horses are clean of worms but the quantity is very low and the horses are in excellent shape year round. We can attribute it to the fact that we have very large pastures and we do rotate them at least four times a year.



Natural "Fjordmanship"

Being fascinated by the challenge of training animals, we searched for books, videos, DVDs, anything about horse training. Nothing really caught our fancy until a horsewoman friend told us about Monty Roberts, Pat Parelli and their training methods. Once we watched the Join Up video of Monty Roberts and we participated in a demonstration by Pat Parelli, the decision was made - we embraced both training methods for our horses.

One hiccup though. The Parelli system is ideal for horseback riding but it does not incorporate voice commands required for driving. In our case, versatility is the name of the game and our Fjords would be required to do both riding and driving. When we asked a Parelli instructor about driving and his answer was that it is introduced at higher levels. That just did not suit our needs.

The solution came shortly after we better understood the principles of the Parelli

system. Using this system, the horse learns to react with a certain behavior (that is desirable for us) to avoid discomfort. Via repetition of a set of "games," the horse learns to yield to subtle physical cues. All that is required, in order to prepare the horse for driving, is to teach the horse that a voice command precedes the physical cue. In our use of the Parelli system, the voice command is now "Phase 0," preceding the typical four phases.

Based on this concept, we started training our Fjord horses, but initially did not achieve good results. Most of the Fjords were too stubborn and did not respect the trainers. It is then that we decided to introduce Monty Roberts' "Join Up" system. Some of the horses joined within minutes while other (more dominant horses) took over an hour. Nevertheless, once we achieved "Join Up" and "Follow Up," the Parelli system started working and we got excellent results.

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A happy vacationer riding one of Crown Jewel's Fjord horses, "Parelli style" in a halter.

Fjord horses are used to cultivate the fields and gardens.



The Fjords of Crown Jewel ...

By the end of the training process, we had horses that responded well to voice command and we can ride and drive them without bridles, blinders or bits. The horses display a very high degree of willingness. They climb steep slopes and cross tall bush and grasses. They knowingly enter into deep mud holes or deep snow drifts. Every rider that has visited us has been taken by our Fjords and their work ethic.

Because our horses are being ridden and driven by guests, who are not as familiar with our training methods as our staff, we do find that the horses' discipline level deteriorates over time. The process is quite typical, and as can be expected, everyone falls in love with his or her Fjord. We start riding and the horse occasionally reaches for the tall grass or the young maple leaves to grab a bite. If allowed without a consequence, the frequency of the occasional bites increases and (in no time) the horse ignores the rider and starts feeding on whatever is available. There is never a safety issue involved with this process

but we have seen some horses gently bucking as if telling the rider, "Please get off my back, I want to fill my tummy." Fixing this problem is quite easy. All it takes is a reminder in the form of a "Join Up" drill and the horses are as obedient as prior to the deterioration process.

Trail Rides

We have two types of trails here at Crown Jewel, wide and narrow. There are about 10 miles of wide trails (8'-10' wide) that are used for pleasure horse driving, horseback riding, dogsledding and hiking. There are also 10 miles of narrow, unimproved trails (3'-6' wide) that are the highlight of our trail system (as well as a challenge for the rider).

These unimproved trails are deep in our woods where only minor clearing and cutting has been done. The terrain is rough with lots of obstacles, very steep sections, sharp turns, water crossings, corduroy bridges and mud holes. Here is where one can see the true character of the Fjord horse. The willingness and

surefootedness of the Fjords impress our guests, especially those who do not have prior experience with the breed. Although not common, we have had cases where the Fjords have sunk in mud holes all the way to their bellies and could not pull themselves out. They did not panic and waited until we dismounted. After resting for a minute or two, with new resolve, they pulled themselves out of the mud trap. Typically, this situation can be a horse killer, but the Fjord horse negotiated this dangerous situation with remarkable calm and confidence.

Driving with Fjords

The first dilemma we had, before even starting training for driving, was what kind of harness to use. We saw the traditional Norwegian harness with the one-point-hitch and we liked it very much. This system works very well for a single horse hitch but (to the best of our knowledge) it is not designed for multiple horse hitches. Nevertheless, we decided to take the risk and we ordered nine harnesses, one for each horse. As expected, the single horse hitch worked very well. We started experimenting with a pair hitch and ended up with two sets of shafts linked together by a chain link. As of yet, we have not gone beyond a team of two and we know that utilizing two pairs will require more "engineering" and testing.

With the equipment issue resolved, we started ground driving each one of our horses. Because voice commands were introduced while training for riding, all that was left was to get the horses used to the gear and to the fact that the "rider" is no longer sitting on their backs. Within two or three months, we had trained all nine horses to drive. Overall, it took us a year of training to get all the horses to a level that they can safely perform their riding and driving duties at our ranch.

We currently drive sleighs, carts, wagons, manure spreaders, ground driven sickle mowers and our snow roller. The latter is of a special interest and its story deserves to be told.

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Crown Jewel offers vacations in all seasons. Sleigh rides and dog sledding are available for the vacationer seeking fun in a winter climate.





Rolling a trail through the woods. Note that the horses are guided with rope halters. No bridles or bits.

snow piled up) there was not enough compaction and the sleighs got stuck in the deep snow.

This is where we started searching the Internet for horse drawn equipment used for snow grooming. The result was very pleasing. We found numerous photos of horse drawn wooden rollers for grooming roads. It clicked right away. Instead of plowing, people in the past just compacted the snow until it became hard enough, and sleighs with thin runners did not sink. Some of the photos showed “humongous” rollers with teams of over 10 horses! Big teams are good where you have wide roads and gentle turns. For us, narrow and steep trails with sharp turns are the norm. We knew that we could not use more than a team of two horses.

We took two old wooden wheels, plus a photo that we printed from the Internet, and went to the local blacksmith. We did not want to exceed 1000 pounds of weight, as we were not sure whether our Fjords would be able to handle heavier loads. Knowing that we could increase weight if necessary, we built the roller out of aluminum. It came in just under 1000 pounds without the driver.

So, here is our winter routine: after every new snowfall we go with the snow roller and within 3 hours our 10 miles of driving trails are ready for whatever winter activity we want to do. After grooming, we can ride and drive horse drawn sleighs, we can run our dog sledding adventures and we can hike in the woods without snowshoes.

The Snow Roller

In a good winter, Cape Breton Island may get between 10 to 15 feet of snow. If the trails are left un-groomed, horses are unable to work. As a step-back-in-time “Eco-Destination,” we do not want to use motorized equipment. Obviously, people in the old days had solutions for deep

snow; otherwise they would not have been able to drive sleighs. So how did people in the old days treat their roads?

We first tried to install plates under our sleighs, converting them to a “toboggan style” sleigh. This did work well for the first few weeks of the winter but as the winter progressed (and the



Historical photo of a snow roller in use on Main Street in Brattleboro, Vermont, circa 1920's, early 1930's. Photo Courtesy of Brattleboro Historical Society in Vermont.

A Unique Vacation Experience

The rugged terrain of Cape Breton and the cold climate of Atlantic Canada are quite similar to the habitat Fjord horses have experienced in Norway for thousands of years. Combined with our “eco-resort” and “step-back-in-time” organic farming, we believe we have created a unique showcase for Fjord horses in North America. Come join us for an adventure of a lifetime! For further information about Crown Jewel Resort Ranch, please visit <http://www.crown-jewelresort.com>. 🐾