

The Psychology of Handling Horses

It has become increasingly popular to use the horse's "natural instincts" to aid in the training process. Emphasize the need to teach, not force, horses to work. Trainers such as Monty Roberts, Tom Dorrance, John Lyons and others understand the importance of quiet handling and developing trust while training. Considering the age of the horses and the lack of human socialization, abuse, or even unnecessary roughness was not tolerated.

Briefly looking at the horse's evolution and development may help explain why horses respond as they do. More importantly, what can be done in handling horses that will improve response and decrease the risk of problems? The horse evolved as a socially oriented, continuous grazing, continually moving prey species. They possess good long-distance vision that is particularly adept at recognizing movement. Their close-up vision is not very good. Horses possess monocular vision or the ability to see with each eye independently. With their eyes placed on the side of their head, they have excellent peripheral vision being able to see what's going on all around them with only slight head movement. Their ability to see motion, i.e., a stalking predator, is one reason horses are often restless on windy days when EVERYTHING is moving. With everything moving, they cannot isolate the possible predatory movement.

Horses live in the present, drawing on past experience to determine how to respond to situations. Self-preservation is the horse's strongest instinct. Since horses do not have horns, sharp claws or teeth for defense, their primary defense is escape. In order to escape danger, the horse runs away in a straight line for a quarter mile before it stops to see what the danger is. This way if they need to keep going they have not yet reached exhaustion and can run again. As long as the perceived danger is outside of their personal space, the horse may show curiosity, wariness or even fear. If the horse does not feel threatened, he may be willing to stick around. Taking away the horse's ability to escape is a method frequently used in training. The Round Pen, a lunge line or a lead rope and halter all reduce the horse's ability to escape. Hobbles, snubbing posts, casting harnesses, blindfolds, twitches, and other forms of restraints, are all designed to restrict the horse's ability to escape. The horse is left with only two options; give up and submit or fight.

Using the horse's natural instincts in training places greater responsibility on the handler. This responsibility is primarily to become aware of how the horse *prepares to react*, and then causing the horse to react in a certain way. (to know what happens before there is action is the key) Once the reaction has occurred, it's too late. There is little value in having the horse back up if the judge has given up on waiting and is now four horses further down the line when it finally happens. The idea is to develop a horse that does what we ask, exactly when we ask, at the speed requested, and for the time period it's requested without resistance or resentment and to the best of the horse's ability. In order to attain this, there are four basic steps.

1. OBTAIN THE HORSES ATTENTION.
2. DIRECT THE HORSE'S ATTENTION.
3. OBTAIN A RESPONSE; THE HORSE MUST DO SOMETHING.
4. THE RESPONSE MUST OCCUR WITH RESPECT.
 - A. SPEED OR EFFORT.
 - B. DIRECTION--STEERING.
 - C. ATTITUDE--WILLING, RELAXED.

Step-wise requests are more clearly understood, and any try must be rewarded immediately to be understood. It has purpose, it's fair, and it's consistent, and it's simple. You **ask** - you **tell** - you **demand** a response. The key is to recognize the *slightest* try, and reward it **immediately**. This is the basic principle to natural training.

Horses primarily seek avoidance of pressure; this is why it is so important to immediately relieve pressure whenever the horse offers a correct response. Praise has little meaning in the beginning; especially, verbal praise. Feed is never effective as a reward even if they are hungry. Horses are basically non-competitive, so winning has no significance, except in hierarchy adjustment. Today's horses are higher strung emotionally, more sensitive and thinner skinned than in the past. Many are "overfed and under worked"

compared to previous times. Frequently, young horses raised for show are kept isolated in stalls from the time of weaning. This prevents them from maturing socially with other horses and fine-tuning their social skills as horses. As a result, training is sometimes traumatic for them, both physically and emotionally. By being aware of the reasons behind the horses' response, it becomes easier to get the response wanted.

The horse possesses excellent hearing, well-developed sense of smell and a tremendous sense of feel. They have the ability to rotate its ears individually. If the wind blows significantly, it's difficult to determine where a sound is coming from and the horse becomes apprehensive about its surrounding. The bottom line-- don't expect horses to train well out of doors on a windy day. Horses recognize and will relate scents with past experiences. Liquor, perfume, aftershave, cologne, medications, and especially, disinfectants often cause an unexpected response. If a prior experience was negative, the horse may suddenly explode for no apparent reason. In its own mind, the horse relates the odor to a previous unpleasant experience. Veterinarians and farriers most frequently experience this type of reaction. They feel a fly land on the surface of their body. As a result, it doesn't seem necessary to use the force sometimes seen to obtain a result. Often, training goals are not obtained because conflicting directions are being given. Pulling on the mouth to "set" the head while bumping with the legs to move forward. All that does is confuse the horse in his mind he is saying, "That HURTS! Make up your mind, am I supposed to go faster or slow down?!"

Becoming more aware, results in recognizing a try faster and rewarding it more effectively. This causes the horse to learn. Utilizing this approach requires much more responsibility on the part of the trainer or handler. If the timing is off, if they ask too much or too little, if they are in the wrong position, if they haven't got the horse in the proper position; each of these things effect the final outcome and are never the horses' responsibility. Awareness of the horse, accompanied by proper timing and adequate feel for what's happening, achieves the desired goal.

Techniques are best demonstrated on the live horse. Circumstances can change so rapidly as to be nearly impossible to describe. Seeing what can occur is much more effective. In order to make this system work the trainer has to be able to **anticipate** what is about to happen, **encourage** what's wanted and try to **prevent** what's not. How to do this depends on circumstances, the person's skill, the horse's attitude and what has happened before.

Handling horses is not a simple mechanical procedure; do this, get that. Horses think, feel, react, get hot, get sick, get cold, get sore, get tired, and recover. Everything is constantly changing. To be effective in handling, it's necessary to recognize these changes. Read the horse's gauges, its expression. Read the whole horse; eyes, ears, tail, position of the head, relaxation or rigidity, sighing, licking the lips, chewing, release of tension, the evident willingness to come to the handlers bubble, to accept the emotional pressure and to give to the physical pressure. Once a person begins to understand this, training becomes a game. Lead a horse through a gate, move its hips away, step the front end over, back four to five steps, move over the other direction. "Load" the horse through a stall door from either side. Teach it to lower its head on command before clipping it or bridling or unbridling. Play "horse soccer" with a giant rubber ball. It is a never-ending list of mental calisthenics to supple and strengthen the mind. How soft, how supple, how responsive can the horse become? That will be entirely up to you. Try it, you will like it!