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Practical Horse Psychology

Many people think of their horse as having a problem, when in reality the horse may have a "people problem."

Every time a human being catches and uses a horse he uses psychology because his strength is no match to that of the horse. If he doesn't use superior psychology he may find the situation reversed and the horse actually using him to achieve objectives not consistent with the intended goal. Such a situation results in owner dissatisfaction and a spoiled horse whose value may dangerously approach those packed in cans for dog and cat food.

Modern horse psychology attempts to anticipate probable behavior of horses under different conditions, and establish those conditions that encourage responses consistent with goals of the horse handler.

Understanding The Horse

The study of expected horse behavior would be incomplete without an understanding of the evolution of horses. Tools developed for survival in the past greatly affect reactions to conditions in the present.

Geologists suggest that our modern horse began his history about 55 or 60 million years ago in the western United States. He was about the size of a terrier, had four padded toes in front and three behind. His teeth were adapted for coarse vegetation such as small stems and leaves; there was no grass. He was a small, insignificant vegetarian among large flesh-eating animals who made him their prey. Therefore, survival depended on hiding, running away, and adaptation to constantly changing conditions.

"Hard to catch" domestic horses result from one or both of two reasons: (1) They have not been handled sufficiently to overcome their initial fear of man. (2) They have experienced bad treatment after being caught.

Survival of some horses almost depends upon not being caught by their owners.

Make friends with your horse after catching him by grooming and/or feeding him. Catch and pet him occasionally without riding him.

Survival of the horse among his natural and environmental enemies is a success story in itself, not matched by many species. His tools of survival included: sight, reflexes, flight, memory, gregarious nature, feeling ground vibrations, hearing, and smell.

Horses Have Poor Vision

Generally speaking, horses see poorly. Their eyes have a "ramped retina." That is, it does not form a true arc; therefore, parts of the retina are closer to the lens than other parts. The horse adjusts his range of vision by lowering and raising his head, much as a human does with trifocal glasses.

Such a visual arrangement was most convenient for grazing and watching for enemies at the same time, but it is a real handicap in judging height and distance. As a horse approaches a strange jump he lowers his head then raises it to appraise the height of the jump.

Horses taken from a brightly lighted arena for loading into a trailer may lower their noses to the floor of the trailer, then raise their heads rather high for loading. In addition to smelling the trailer for identification, they may be trying to find the head position that gives them the best possible vision. Also, they may be biding time until their eyes adjust to the light change, a much slower adjustment than for humans.

Young horses that resist trailer loading are doing what saved the life of their ancestors, who would have regarded a trailer as a dark cave, probably full of "boogers," that gave way under pressure of weight and echoed loud noises from hoof contact.

Horse handlers should allow plenty of time for loading young horses, until they are well trained. A good system is to park a trailer in the horse lot and feed young horses in it.

Horses are color blind. They do not perceive blue streams running through green fields—framed in trees with fall-colored leaves. They see a drab mosaic landscape with different amounts of light reflecting from it.

Objects that remain still convey very little information to the brain. A sitting rabbit or bird may be seen readily by by the rider, but may remain obscure to the horse until it moves. Horses see movement instantly and react according to temperament, experience, and confidence in the rider.

Those who have romped in fields where rabbits and birds are common pay little attention to them whereas stall-raised horses may shy sharply at sudden movement.

Instill confidence in young horses by gently urging them toward objects they fear. If they are concentrating on the fearful object and are punished, they assume the object caused the pain and their suspicions are reinforced. If the rider prac-

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Figure 1. Instill confidence in young horses by gently urging them up to objects they fear. Don't punish them.

tices patience in early training, they realize the rider will not ask them to go into dangerous situations, and they will lose their fear of objects.

Size and position of the eyes and width of the head and body determine front and rear vision. Horses with large, wide-set eyes have more forward and rear vision than others. Even so, there are blind spots at both ends of the horse. This is why one should not approach a horse directly from the rear, and should speak to the horse when passing behind it.

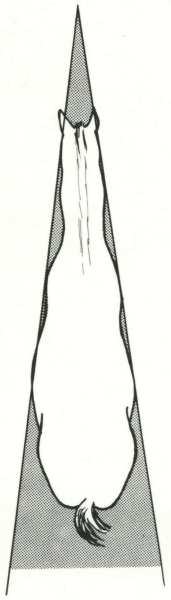

Figure 2. A horse can't see directly in front and to the rear. Don't approach a horse directly from the rear, and speak when crossing behind.

Frontal vision is affected by width of forehead and how the eyes set in the head. Most horses probably do not see objects nearer than 3 feet directly in front of their faces without moving their head. They do not see the feed they eat nor the ground they step on with their heads in normal position.

"Pig-eyed" horses, or those with sunken eyes, see less in front and behind than others. They have often been classified in song and verse as being "mean." Many pig-eyed horses are normal and useful, but one researcher suggests that those growing up in groups of foals may be "picked on" more than others and develop disposition problems. Most horsemen discriminate against them.

Allow your horse free rein in negotiating obstacles so he has good vision. Allow him to concentrate while traversing rough terrain, because he must remember it under his feet since he doesn't see it. Undoubtedly some stumbling results from the horse's not watching the area over which he travels and not remembering where the obstacles are.

Allow A Horse Thought Time

Do not correct constantly or interrupt the thought train of a horse doing a job that requires deep concentration. He can think of but one thing at a time. The rider who continually punishes or "corrects" his horse detracts attention from the task at hand and the horse loses respect for the rider.

Quick reflexes and panic characterized prehistoric horse. Indeed, his life depended on them. Horses are endowed with an extensive system of ligaments which permit them to sleep while standing. They will panic into flight without much consideration of need for or consequences of such a decision. Young horses fleeing with or without riders may sustain severe injury from running into objects or from total exhaustion.

The runaway horse of today is simply carrying out the kind of behavior that allowed his ancestors to survive. As they get older they tend to learn better, although some do not.

Speed, quickness, and willingness to serve, even at great sacrifice, have made horses most useful to man. This also poses some dangers and problems.

"Flighty" horses should be handled with strong equipment and must not be hurried into new and strange situations. Even though they are under control at home, they may not be in strange surroundings. The object is to impose the handler's will without provoking an unmanageable confrontation with the horse.

Figure 3. A sign of anger and fear.

Unmanageable situations can often be avoided by reading the emotions of your horse. Ears pinned backward indicate anger or faked anger. They warn the handler that he may be bitten or kicked. Old horses sometimes fake anger in an attempt to bluff anyone near that might ask a favor. An exception is horses performing with great resolve, such as a hard trotting, pacing, or running race where the ears are held in a backward position during extreme effort.

Mares with newborn foals are probably not bluffing when their ears are "pinned back," and should be left alone.

Ears forward show interest or suspicion. Some horses show interest in everything they see in new surroundings on rides without seeing anything fearful to be avoided. Such

horses maintain a good attitude and seem to enjoy their work. Others keep their ears forward and eyes open, looking for something to shy from.

Eyes and nostrils show emotion and reflect temperament. Dilated nostrils reflect interest, curiosity, or apprehension. When the eyes flash, nostrils dilate, and muscles tense, the horse is likely to react. It might be only a slight start, a reverse in direction, or both. If the cause of fright intensifies, the horse may bolt, rear, or buck. The rider who reads his horse's emotions accurately can often steady the horse with reassuring words or control through the reins.

Inexperienced riders need deep-seated saddles with wide pommels (fronts) and suede seats to help maintain balance on shying horses. Suede chaps are also helpful and some type of boot should always be worn around horses to prevent hanging in the stirrup. Slick clothing and smooth carefully waxed saddles are easy to slide out of when a horse shies or bucks.

Horses Have A Good Memory

Horses are usually considered to have memories second only to elephants.

In the wild state if an attack came at a certain place the herd avoided that spot in the future. This caution is still practiced by wild horses in the United States. If it were not for the horse's good memory, he would be considerably less useful to man. A well-trained young horse never forgets his training. Neither does the poorly trained one. For this reason bad habits should be recognized and corrected before they become fixed.

Horses have not been outstanding on limited intelligence tests although they do very complex things routinely when trained.

You may have known an old horse to be considered highly intelligent because he could open most gates and doors on the farm. Idle horses tend to seek activity, some of which may involve gate latches. Once they succeed, their good memory keeps them trying to open doors. When they get the grain bin open, they remember only the joy of eating. They can't associate overeating with the ensuing bellyache from colic, or loss of hooves from founder.

Horses Are Gregarious

Horses are gregarious in nature—that is, they band together. This tendency has practical implications. Wild horses in the center of the herd were safer from attack. This can be seen today with zebras in Africa. Wise old ranch horses learned they were more likely to be roped from the remuda for the day's work if they were near the edge; therefore, they sought the center of the circle.

The gregarious tendency can be taken advantage of in training young horses. Most Western horses walk too slowly and jog too fast until well trained. A good training method is to jog them away from the barn and walk them toward it. Barn-sour horses result from allowing them to run back to the barn where they are promptly unsaddled and fed. The routine should be changed so this is not expected by the horse.

Try to avoid situations that produce barn-sour horses.

Figure 4. This barn-sour horse "tries" a new rider when asked to leave the barn on a ride. She wins some and loses some.

Young horses should be sufficiently trained to be obedient before they are asked to leave the premises with a rider. Ground driving helps. If they show anxiety to get back to the barn, change the routine. A good method is to turn away from the barn each time they try to go to it. A useful technique may be to head the horse away from the barn when you bring him to a stop at the end of the training session. Then dismount and lead him back to the barn. This method is useful in ring riding.

Group riding brings out the "herd obedience" tendency in horses. That is, they all tend to do what others do. For example, if one enters a stream the others tend to follow.

In the wild state, obedience to leadership meant survival. If the stallion called for silence, every horse stood still; if he commanded flight, they ran at the heels of the lead mare. The stallion ran at the back of the herd to nip those who needed more speed.

Horses today are dependent on man for leadership and, therefore, survival.

Feeling ground vibrations is a hangover from prehistoric horse. Being alerted to an approaching animal by vibrations was another tool of survival. It is a "headache" to modern horse owners, as some horses show concern about horses that are running, though out of sight and hearing.

Other horses are extremely cautious about footing. They negotiate soft ground slowly, with apprehension, if at all. Such horses are not very good on cross-country trail rides.

The hearing of most horses is quite good, although some are almost deaf. Rotating ears on movable heads and long necks are advantages for hearing. Even so, horses hear high tones not perceptible to human ears, for instance the blowing of horns in foxhunting. This may cause highstrung thoroughbred hunters to show anxiety and break out in a sweat.

Fear of parade bands, loud machines and gunshot noises may result from actual pain to the horse's ears. U.S. cavalry mounts used on pistol ranges would lose their hearing after a few years target practice.

Most animals in the wild state have a good sense of

smell. Domestic stallions can identify mares in heat for great distances downwind. Horses in research in England, frustrated by circling in closed trailers, were able to head directly homeward from a downwind distance of five miles.

Colts being saddled for the first few times should be allowed to smell the saddle and the blanket before saddling. This reassures them that they are not dangerous and that they have been used by other horses.

Figure 5. Let a colt smell the saddle and blanket before he is saddled the first few times.

Smell probably dictates grazing habits of horses, although it does not always keep them from eating poisonous plants when forage is abundant.

The skin of the horse is a very highly specialized sense organ. It tells the animal whether something is hot or cold, hard or soft, or whether it causes pain. Some horses will learn to check an electric fence daily with the hairs on their upper lip, and will promptly tear it down when the battery fails.

Sensitive Areas Of Horses

Nerve endings in man are more abundant in the mouth, feet, and hands. Spots of most sensitivity in horses seem to be the mouth, feet, flanks, neck, and shoulders. The mouth is sensitive to pain rather than light pressure. Bitting should be done with care and reins handled with light hands, else sensitivity in the mouth is lost and a hard mouth is the result.

Some horses are so sensitive to contact in the flank that they promptly buck when heels are applied there.

Application of the whip requires great reserve and good judgment if the learning situation is to be constructive for the horse. Using the whip on the shoulders of a running horse will tighten the shoulder muscles and shorten his stride. Application near the flank or directly along the ribs may cause a move sideways. Many horses "hump up" and consequently slow down under heavy use of the whip when they are running.

Probably the most pain horses have to bear is from ill-fitting saddles. There are about as many shapes of saddle trees as of shoes; and like feet, the backs of all horses are not the same. We can't have a saddle for each horse or one for different conditions in which he is used, but most of us can do a better job than we do of fitting saddles to horses.

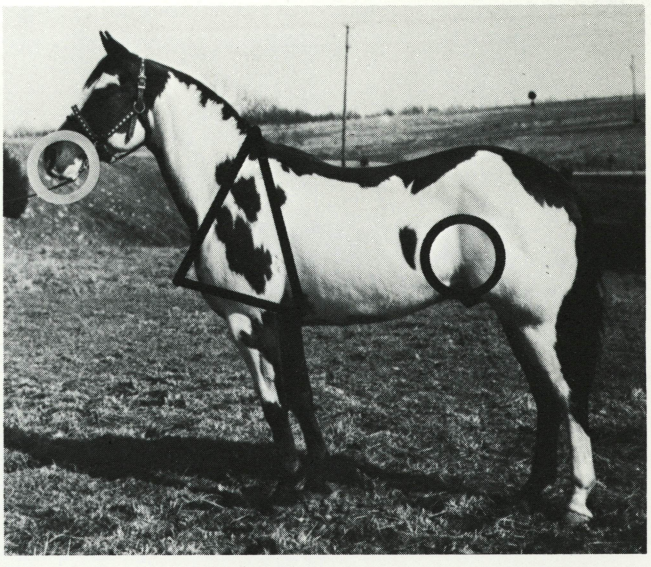

Figure 6. Most sensitive areas of a horse are mouth, shoulders, and flank.

Horses vary greatly in skin sensitivity. Horses love to be groomed and have their back scratched. Selecting mild grooming equipment is necessary for some thin-skinned horses. Currycombs and "shedding" blades should have fine teeth.

Saddling is a bruising experience for some horses, whereas others seem immune to any feeling when a saddle is thrown on them. If your horse humps up and tries to avoid the saddle, see if he is being hit by flapping cinches and stirrup. Turn these items back over the seat and place the saddle on gently, with both hands.

Communication of rider to horse is accomplished through voice, hands, and legs—in this order of importance. Voice cues for starting and stopping are easy to give and easily understood by the horse. Rein cues are more complex for both rider and horse, and signify a more complicated maneuver than simple starts and stops. Leg cues are needed for most complex responses, such as rollbacks. Because of the sensitivity of a horse's skin he can react to light pressure of the leg.

Horses are equally sensitive to insecurity or confidence in their riders, and respond accordingly. If the rider lacks assurance, the horse will feel insecure and perform below his capability.

The horse is a strong, sensitive creature, capable of great speed and quick reactions. He has great ability to adapt to unfamiliar situations. This is why we like him. Many of the things we ask him to do are strange to his nature, so try to understand his reaction to these new situations. Coexistence of man and horse on a grand scale has been achieved, so there are seven and one half million horses serving man in the United States, and most of them doing it well.

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