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Developing The Bond Between Man And Horse

By John Foley

The relationship between man and horse is an enduring one. But dealing with animals is always

easier and more enjoyable when you have empathy and understanding. To be able to relate to horses, you need to understand their psychology, in order to anticipate horses' reactions you have to understand how they think and why they behave in certain ways. A good understanding also builds confidence on both sides—human and equine.

When faced with a threatening situation, the horse's nature is one of flight, and therefore its perspective on life is one of vulnerability rather than attack. As humans, how we react and feel in certain situations depends on our upbringing and experience. It is the same with horses, which is why careful early handling and training are so important.

We can never expect a horse to go against its natural instincts, that is, never to be frightened or wary – but with good training we can control these instincts and show the horse, in a positive way, that a particular situation or object need not be feared.

Horses are gregarious herd animals, welcoming the company of other horses, as well as other creature companions and humans. Even domesticated stable horses establish their own 'pecking order'.

Either the stallion at the end of the row calls loudest when feed time is due or, as many top riders report, their retired star kicks the stable door demanding attention first when what it considers as 'it' rider walks into the stableyard in the morning.

It is widely known the horse responds best to praise and encouragement from its trainer or rider to overcome its natural flight instincts and not be dominated. 'Breakin-in', the term formerly associated with a young horse's first conditioning to carry a rider, has now commonly been replaced with terms such as 'starting', which infer much less the idea of domination.

From the disabled child fearlessly enjoying the company of ponies as part of therapy to the most successful of international competitive combinations, a common bond – that of trust and empathy between rider and horse – is being developed.

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The horse looks at its human contacts as part of its 'herd' in the herd hierarchy, the human rider and trainer's intellectual capacities give him or her the upper hand. This is why the man/horse relationship has worked so well for several thousand years, and humans can control an animal with many times their own strengths and power.

Riders in their early lessons will often be told 'Don't be nervous'. Although at this stage the rider should be learning from an experienced horse and therefore should be able to relax, the fact that horses need reassurance and security is something to bear in mind and cultivate from the start of a riding career.

Article Written By J. Foley

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Horse Training Voice Commands

By Andy Curry

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To the uninitiated, voice commands for the horse are nothing more than words. But to the horse they are only sounds.

Obviously, horses cannot speak our language. Since they cannot speak our language we should think through what we say to them when we want certain responses from them.

Take the word "whoa" for instance. I have no doubt this is the most abused word in the human/horse language. When the rider says "whoa" then the horse should know to stop.

But the problem is this. Often the word "whoa" is said when the rider wants the horse to slow down...not stop. Before you know it, the rider has conditioned the horse to slow down at the word "whoa" instead of stopping. Then the rider can't understand why the "stupid" horse won't stop when he says "whoa!".

Telling your horse a command when you mean for it to do something else is lying to your horse. You never lie to your horse because the results you get will not be what you want. Jesse Beery, a famous horse trainer from the 1800's, knew this well and was the first to say "don't lie to your horse".

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Thus, when you say "whoa" to your horse, you must only say it because you want to stop...not slow down.

Also, when using voice commands be sure to use simple words with as few syllables as possible.

Thus, if you want a horse to back up then say "back". If you want him to walk then say "walk". If you want him to trot then say "trot".

Next, when using voice commands be sure to associate an action with the command. For instance, let's say you're teaching your horse to gallop at the command "gallop". So while in the round pen you use one of your aids to teach him to gallop. So first you say "gallop" then bring in the aid to motivate his movement to a higher speed.

If you want to teach your horse to walk then start your horse around the pen in the opposite direction from which you taught him to gallop. When he's gone around several times, stop him, and pet him. If he goes too fast use the word "walk" and have him go slower by making a slight move to the front of him.

Lastly, I'm a big advocate of being careful how you talk to your horse.

If you use commands that sound threatening (by yelling a command), you can actually increase your horse's heart rate, frighten and confuse him, and he may take longer to learn.

For instance, a popular command to teach a horse is the word "step". When driving a horse, using this command means for the horse to move forward...take a step. When teaching it, be careful not to yell the command because it may be perceived by the horse as a punishment.

But if you calmly say "step" you will get better results than if you yell it. Often times, when a horse isn't "getting what you want", there's a tendency to get frustrated and thus, mad – and your voice volume can escalate. Then you're back to sounding threatening and perhaps your horse will take even longer to understand what you want.

I've seen where horses were being taught to drive where the owner taught the word "step". When teaching it, he would loudly say "STEP!". It wasn't long before the horse was actually balking. Then the owner was getting frustrated and kept repeating his command even louder...as if the horse couldn't hear him.

It reminds me of a show I once saw on television. One english speaking man was talking with a spanish speaking man. The spanish speaking man knew no english. The english speaking man was trying to communicate with the spanish speaking man. After a minute of obvious noncommunication, the english speaking man spoke slower and louder. Unfortunately, the spanish speaking man didn't understand english whether or not it was spoke loud, soft, fast, or slow.

In summary, use short words. Use the word when you want a certain action – only say the word when you want that particular action. If you want your horse to slow down then say something like "easy".

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(Don't say "slow" because he may take it for "whoa".)

Next, associate actions with commands and calmly talk to your horse. Horses can hear very well and yelling command will not make the command any more clear – if anything, it will frighten and confuse him.

Andy Curry is a nationally known horse trainer and author of several best selling horse training and horse care books. For information visit his website at www.horsetrainingandtips.com. He is also the leading expert on Jesse Beery's horse training methods which can be seen at www.horsetrainingandtips.com/Jesse_Beerya.htm



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