

CHARACTER, TEMPERAMENT AND PERSONALITY

4/18/2012

Most Americans have a different perception of Character and Temperament than Europeans (or at least they use the words differently). For 20 years I was the Executive Director of the Dutch Warmblood registry in North and South America. During that time, along with 35 years of my own breeding program with 6 breeds, I gained some insight into what the Europeans mean by Character and Temperament, and came up with the concept of what I call "Personality."

What puts these things into perspective, and usability, is the balance between the two, AND something else, that I call PERSONALITY (a behaviorist would probably have a better appellation).

Part of the problem is, as usual, language. We say that somebody is 'quite a character.' By that we usually mean that he is very much an individual, very expressive in attitude or quirky. Character, when applied to horses, means something else.

Webster's says about Character: "Essential quality; nature; kind or sort" and "the pattern of behavior or personality found in an individual or group" and "a distinctive trait, quality, or attribute; characteristic."

And about Temperament: "A nature that is excitable, moody, capricious, volatile." To this I would add "phlegmatic" and "obstructive."

And about Personality: "Habitual patterns and qualities of behavior of any individual as expressed by physical and mental activities and attitudes; distinctive individual qualities..."

The quick and dirty:

CHARACTER is goodwill and kindness. It is a QUALITY.

TEMPERAMENT is such things as liveliness, self-motivation, enthusiasm, available energy, keenness, interest, slothfulness. It is a QUANTITY. There can be too much (a hysterical twitterer) or not enough (a plodding ox).

PERSONALITY includes such things as work ethic, attention verses distractibility, pushy or timid, shying, coping with pressure from the rider and the environment (sometimes both at once!), startle-ability, soothe-ability, inclination to experiment, recognition of 'reward,' defensiveness, different reactivity to tactile, visual, and auditory input (from the rider and from external sources), retrospection. It is a personal quirk. It is the sort of thing (along with background, previous experience and how we keep the horse – his lifestyle, of course) that makes different horses react to the same aid or cue or pattern of influence with "Duh," "Horrors!," "What is that again?," "I'm outa here!," "Yeah, yeah, yeah.....," "I can take it" or "Buzz off bitch!"

Another word for Character might, in English, be 'Disposition'. Other words for Temperament might be 'Self-motivation' or 'Enthusiasm' or 'Keen-ness.' Other words for personality might be 'individuality' or 'quirkiness.'

And then there is Chemistry. A horse can have a good character and enough temperament, but hormones sometimes take over and complicate things. Geldings (them, not me) are good for most amateurs, especially if the rider has had a bad experience with hormonal or bitchy mares or are not expert enough, or strong-willed enough to establish "the herd of two" with stallions.

Escape routes and experimentation..... This way of thinking – Empathy or Horse Think – is crucial to coping with the Character and Temperament and Personality of individual horses. Pressure without escape routes usually goes wrong. I spoke more about this in a previous Facebook musing. Horses that feel trapped (no escape route, experimentation has not been cultivated) will respond in different, and often negative, ways depending on Character, Temperament and Personality.

Patterning – the horse must see a light at the end of the tunnel. We have to remember that horses learn retrospectively and have no foreknowledge or agenda. Separating Cue (or Aid) from Correction (or Consequence), is essential. One should think of “Cue, Correction, Consequence and Consistency.” Depending on Character, Temperament and Personality, different horses may respond in different ways to different kinds of patterning – horses with little temperament usually get duller or sulky with maintenance prodding, horses with a lot of temperament sometimes get hysterical with maintenance prodding.

But the biggest problem is trainers who do not set up a consistent pattern and repeat it exactly the same with enough repetitions. Most riders cannot maintain a clear pattern of Cue, Correction and Consequence consistently for more than one 20-meter circle. I usually repeat a pattern at least 30 times before deciding that it is not working or the horse is getting the wrong end of the stick, and it is time to reassess and try a new pattern. Most riders drift off mentally, and try something else after 3 – 5 repetitions of a pattern, leaving the horse wondering what that was all about – there was Cue, and Correction/Consequence, but no clear outcome. One can almost hear them thinking, in retrospect, “Makes no sense, learned nothing, but at least it is over..... and best forgotten.” Riders with no sense of patterning often become bullies (men more often guilty) or nags (women more often guilty).

Riders with good empathy (Horse Think) and good patterning, who keep ‘escape route’ and ‘experimentation’ in mind, will have more success with horses of different Character, Temperament and Personality. They can wake the dead, and soothe the neurotic.

The Personality of the rider (extrapolate from the above – it all applies to humans too) should determine the selection of the horse and the training program. The horse with the right Character, Temperament and Personality, suited to the rider, makes the training and learning process much easier.

J. Moore April 2012