

Horse Think

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Horse people too often treat their horses like pets. And they behave like pets – bad pets. A “lap horse” is a disaster waiting to happen, aside from the fact there is little “good learning” going on.

But worse, the trainers and owners often have no idea how the horse’s brain is working.

I like to think in terms of "Horse Think” or “Empathy,” “Herd of Two” (relationship - “I’m alpha”) and “Escape Route” (I’m not trapping you – there IS a way out).

No matter what we do, or how oblivious we are, horses are learning – about their relationship with us and about what behaviors work for them. They learn as much by our “errors of omission” as by our “errors of commission.” The horses are learning all the time whether we like it or not, whether we are aware of it or not.

Most of the injuries and problems I see on the ground happen with basically nice horses that have become de-socialized and/or desensitized. Iniquitous horses (few) are usually treated with more care, attention and caution.

Most of the harsh riding and unproductive riding I see in competent riders has its basis in ‘lack of Horse think’ and consequently ‘lack of escape routes’ (in incompetent riders, it is usually poor rider biomechanics).

Controlling natural impulses is key. Redirecting natural impulses is method.

Victoria Stilwell (“It’s Me or the Dog” on Animal Planet) has a good expression - “Harnessing the inner instinct.” Riders, especially dressage riders, are usually guilty of “Manage, control, hold” instead.

A principle that usually works on horses of all ilks (anxious, slothful, etc.) is to break it down into:

1. Set up a situation and encourage experimentation (within reason!)
2. Preplan ‘escape routes’ – be obvious and be forgiving of wrong experiment
3. When the horse experiments reward the experiments “in the right direction”

It can be tricky for us to determine the best way to deal with the responses (or lack of) that we may get. Break it down into:

1. No response calls for perseverance on our part, but not hectic/hurried
2. Wrong response, i.e., moves against leg or whip - requires dreary perseverance, but probably not greater stimulation

3. Right direction of response, but barely a glimmer, we should react with: "Good. Now just stop and reflect and try again, perhaps a bit more"
4. Right direction of response but too much of a good thing – over reaction by the horse, instead of a correction, a "Gooooood boy. Now just stop and reflect, and let's try to do it slower, less and easier"

The determination of what is the best way to react to the horse's reaction can't be taught in print - it requires help from an expert, quiet experimentation and understanding of the personality of the individual horse.

What are "Escape Routes"?

Things the horse tries in order to take the pressure off – physically, emotionally, or psychologically. Often misinterpreted as bad responses, but may be best treated as experiments that can be positively directed:

1. Flight forward
2. Head up
3. Go sideways or crooked
4. Stop
5. Step backward (if experimenting, not balking)
6. Over bend the neck
7. Usually considered bad..... and usually bad
8. Shut down, rear, buck, bolt, chin-to-chest, etc.

The reason I say "usually bad" is because a horse may be driven to one of these escape behaviors by unreasonable treatment (being beaten at a jump, or trying to force him thru a puddle (which he likely conceives as a bottomless sinkhole) – poor Horse Think on our part that pushes horses to more extreme/desperate Escape Routes.

Our task as riders/trainers? To cultivate in ourselves enough good "Horse Think" to know how to harness and direct the horses' natural escape routes to our advantage. And if possible, to offer more than one escape route to overcome such things as anxieties or shut down and guide the horse to our own ends.

The alternatives? "Push and Resist", "Hold and drive," "Spank and Crank," "Use force," "Management," "Grinding," "Maintenance beating" and "Gadgeteering."

We want to trick the horse by setting up situations that will make him experiment. We respond to 'good' experiments that lead in the direction we want with some reward (even if only voice or cessation of influence). We treat inappropriate experiments in two ways:

Always ask yourself

"What does he make of that?"

"How can I help him experiment in the right direction?"