

[THE LEARNING PROCESS OF THE HORSE \(2001\)](#)

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The Learning Process of the Horse (2001)

[February 6, 2014 at 11:34am](#) this is the third of three articles featured in 2001 on [todayshorse.com](#). I am reposting them here, but you can access the original at <http://todayshorse.com/the-learning-process-of-the-horse/>.

Understanding the horses' learning processes is of paramount importance in our ability to deal with horses. The better our understanding, the less likelihood for loss of patience, brutality, frustration, confusion, and failure.

The three biggest mistakes that people make in dealing with horses are:

- "He wants to please me"
- Anthropomorphization (attributing human qualities or characteristics to an animal)
- Assuming that they have any idea what is wanted

"He wants to please me"

Horses have no interest in pleasing their owners. Whatever is going on, they would rather be eating, scratching, fighting, breeding or dozing. If that kind of relationship is wanted, get a poodle or cocker spaniel. They will adore you unequivocally and prostrate themselves for a kind word or a pat.

Anthropomorphization - attribution of human qualities to horses

We easily and often make the mistake of attributing human characteristics to our horses. If they shy, do we say, "How dare you" or do we say "Oh, poor baby, are we frightened," or do we say "Oh well, that is the nature of horses - how shall we get around it?" If they buck, do we say "You are trying to hurt me" or do we say, "You seem to be feeling frolicsome today," or do we say "It's normal, but forbidden."

He understands what is wanted - an anthropomorphic fantasy

Horses have no idea what we want. We cannot send them a prospectus, a textbook or an outline. Their only way of determining what is wanted is by experimenting and subsequently discovering what works and what does not.

What qualities make horses trainable then?

- A social structure that is hardwired to make horses understand and accept their place in the herd (in this context - the herd of two - trainer and horse).
- A sense of the inevitable (bear with fortitude)
- Flight response (cultivated and adjusted according to OUR needs and wishes)
- A tendency to experiment
- A pragmatic attitude about what works and what does not work

What makes horses less trainable?

- Fight response (stallions particularly)
- Sex (overwhelmed by hormones, can't help it - mares and stallions)
- Previous experience with people which doesn't fit in with horses' view of their world (unreasonable, brutal, muddled)

In an effort to influence horses to do what we want, we often make wrong choices. These wrong choices will be fewer if we understand the Nature of the Horse and the Learning Process of the Horse.

Horses, unlike people, are extremely straight forward. They have their individual traits and characteristics, but there are issues which are ubiquitous.

Individual traits and characteristics are often bred in by generations of human intervention.

It is useful to know a few generalities about various breeds. Often the character of the people who have bred the breed determines what they create.

- Trakehners are sometimes short-fused under pressure.
- Other German horses are sometimes dull unless shouted at.
- Spanish horses take abuse well, but are quick reacting (the slow ones got gored by bulls)
- Hungarian horses are tough and sometimes recalcitrant.
- Thoroughbreds have the flight (speed) response and the "will to win" (even applied to the horse-trainer relationship) bred in. They often react reflexively before any thought process occurs.
- Draft horses operate (mentally) slowly.
- Irish horses are sometimes hardheaded (a melding of draft and thoroughbred often produces this).

It is useful to know a few generalities about the sexes. Horses who are gelded late sometimes maintain some stallion patterns of behavior for a long time. Stallions are more likely to rear and to slow down and to bite. Mares are more likely to kick and whip up in the hindquarters and go fast.

These are generalities that can be helpful, but assessing the characteristics of individual horses is more important.

In order to teach the horse, taking into account its learning process, we must be aware of three issues:

Mechanical Mode

This means the horse's physical situation and capability in reference to the task being asked. For example, a horse standing still with its tail pointing toward a jump is not in a good mechanical mode to jump the jump. A horse with its head in the air and leaning inward and going full speed at trot is not in a good mechanical mode to take the correct lead in a balanced canter.

Technique

This refers to the trainer's way of operating on a physical level. For example, a rider who hangs his weight to the outside and twists the frontal plane to the inside is unlikely to operate in a positive fashion to get the correct lead in canter. His mechanical influence is negative. A ground handler who bends forward at the waist is unlikely to impress the horse with his higher level on the pecking order.

Tactic

This refers to the mental side of training, as opposed to the physical aspects referred to in "mechanical mode" and in "technique". For example: in general, because of the nature of horses and the importance of Mechanical Mode, the Tactic is dependent on the rider's Technique. Bad riding (Technique), no matter how intellectually functional (Tactic) is probably going to be limited in its success.

Analysis

In an effort to make an intelligent and minimum-stress process out of horse training, there are some questions we should ask ourselves BEFORE we make a request of the horse.

- "Is he in a suitable mental state to be able to process this demand"?
- "Is he in a physical or mechanical mode to be able to process this demand"?

A horse in a hysterical mental state is in no frame of mind to be further stimulated. The lesson of the moment should be about attention and calmness and "slowing time down."

A horse that is in the wrong physical posture or muscular condition for the task at hand will react negatively (e.g.- hollow back and head in the air guarantees a poor side pass or leg-yield; a horse with sagging belly and inverted neck will not make a smooth transition from walk to canter).

There are questions we should ask ourselves AFTER we have had an interaction with the horse, to determine if we have created a positive learning environment or if we have added to confusion or negativity.

- "Is the request a reasonable one, given the mental state and mechanical mode"?
- "Did he feel confident to experiment"?
- "Is he being disagreeable"?
- "Is he bewildered"?
- "Is he frightened"?
- "Is he having flashbacks to previous negative experiences"?
- "Is he processing any of this information, or is he out to lunch"?
- "Did he understand the request"?
- "What did he learn from that"?

Probably the most important of those questions is "What did he learn from that"?

Here are some hypotheticals:

Situation: Galloping down to a jump, the horse puts on the brakes and refuses

Treatment: Wallop the hell out of him while standing in front of the jump

Rider's assumption: "That'll teach him not to stop at a jump"

Horse-think: "Proximity to jump equals pain".

Situation: Loading in the trailer, the horse gets halfway in, then rushes back out.

Treatment: Wallop the hell out of him

Rider's assumption: That will teach him to back out when I'm saying 'Git in there'

Horse-think: "Not only is it a terrible horrifying cavernous echoing claustrophobic place, but the further in I get the more I get walloped - it must be horrible in there"

Situation: Horse does not want to step into a puddle to get from point A to point B. It twirls around and faces away from the puddle.

Treatment: The rider pats him and makes soothing, reassuring noises

Rider's assumption: He needs confidence. I must keep him calm.

Horse-think: "Ah-Ha. If I do not like something, just twirl away and my person will go along with it and make like a weakling. This one is low on the pecking order of this herd."

There are no pat answers about how to deal with every situation, because the horse's responses are based on a number of variables. Our job is to weigh the variables and come up with a useful idea about the why and wherefore of the horse's responses.

A few things to keep in mind:

Horses operate by Trial and Error

If they do something and it works, it is a good response, so far as they are concerned. If they do something and it doesn't work (negative reinforcement) it is a poor response.

Slow time down

We need to understand the issue of "time frame." If we don't get the response we want as soon as we want it, is it because the horse doesn't get it, or doesn't want to play, OR is it something that requires 50 repetitions (no matter how well done) in order for it to sink in and make sense to the horse. So we may need to slow things down to the speed of the horse's thought process (e.g. learn to step sideways) or we may need to speed things up (e.g., GET those feet moving before you have a chance to think of rearing!).

Encourage experimentation

We need to be very clear about the difference between "wrong response" and "no response," because the treatments are very different. In general, we need to respond to "wrong response" by saying to the horse "No. Slowdown. Do it again." We need to respond to no response by saying to the horse "Hey! At least try something. Wrong will do, but at least experiment."

It is a never-ending source of amazement that horses learn as much as they do when we don't share a common language, do not share a common intent, and do not share a common form of communication.