

THE NATURE OF THE HORSE (2001)

1/23/2014

[January 23, 2014 at 2:31pm](#) This is the second 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-nature-of-the-horse/>.

The Nature of the Horse

By: J. Ashton Moore

Of special importance in dealing with the nature of the horse is to understand that "Nature" is really "Natures."

The psychological, emotional nature of the horse

The herding nature

The flight nature (timidity)

The fight nature (if it doesn't flee, kill it or breed it)

The physical nature of the horse

Mechanics

Reflexes (including unconscious defense mechanisms)

I previously spoke about the issue of the Nature of the Sport, and its potential effect on the training approach.

This, of course, varies from discipline to discipline, or expectation to expectation. Some disciplines require utter subjugation of the horse's will and/or attention, as well as great athletic demand (dressage, reining, vaulting, driving), while others require more guidance and less subjugation (racing, endurance riding, steeplechase, pleasure riding).

In order to get to the ultimate subject -The Learning Process of the Horse - we must understand the general Nature of Horses, the nature of the different kinds and breeds of horses, the sexual nature of horses, and the nature of each individual horse.

The horse, by nature, is a nomadic, social and socially organized prey animal. Therefore we have to deal with the nature of horses in two different ways:

- In terms of their actions and interactions with other horses
- In terms of their reactions to external influences

We, as owners, handlers, riders, and trainers, are in an odd position - we have to deal with our horses sometimes as herd-members, and sometimes as external influences (predators, etc.). It therefore behooves us to know as much as possible about the "natures" with which we are dealing.

Many riders have no previous experience of animals with a horse-like nature - BIG, grazing, wandering, flighty prey animals. We tend to do one, or both, of two things:

- Deal with it like another human being (anthropomorphize)
- Deal with it like another animal with which we are familiar

Horses do not function like poodles ("say something nice and I'll do anything for you"), nor like cats ("provide the right conditions and I might let you have the pleasure of my company, if it suits me"), nor like humans ("We need to talk," "Let me make this perfectly clear").

If we are to train the horse effectively and with a minimum of confrontation and force, we have to "get into his mind." Initially that is collective mind, and eventually that is individual mind.

The Emotional, Psychological, Mental Nature of The Horse "The Herd of Two"

The horse is hardwired as a herd animal and is a social animal. Each has its social position within the herd. When we deal with horses, we can make use of this to win our point and to reduce stress. If we are good at it, we are well on our way to a successful relationship with the horse. If we are not good at it, we may create a rebellious bully, or a hysterical twit, or a broken spirit.

The 3 F's:

(Actually there are four, but I'll get to the other one under "The sex issues in dealing with horses.")

Flight, Fight, or Freeze:

- Flight is usually foremost, depending upon age, sex, previous experience, relationship with the handler or rider, and confidence.
- Fight may be an issue of sex, previous experience, and the herd-of-two syndrome.
- Freeze may be an issue of being down trodden, of anxiety, or of recalcitrance.

Body Language and Stimulation

- Horses are to some degree, hard-wired to respond to body language or position.
- In riding, we do not deal much with body language, but rather with cues, signals, or aids. However, in the early ground training and in the daily handling, it is body language which sets the tone for the herd-of-two relationship which permeates the entire relationship.

Reactivity

Horses quickly learn, by our actions and reactions, whether to react to us as:

- Higher on the Pecking/Social Order (or, God forbid- lower)
- Not to react to us - as a non-issue (a cattle egret or tick bird or butterfly)

Sex

The sex of the horse and issues related to it, has an enormous effect on how the horse acts and reacts to us, and to external influences. Stallions often operate differently under different conditions that may not occur to the rider/handler. A gelding standing still may elicit more sexually motivated excitement than a mare on the move (it signals acceptance to the stallion). A high-necked horse may elicit more aggression in a stallion than a low-necked horse (body language for non-threat). A stallion who is the ONLY stallion on the place may be easier to deal with than when there are several stallions on the premises, herd ownership, etc.)

Stallions and mares may react differently at different seasons of the year (breeding season)

Mechanical

If our way of dealing with the horse does not register in a recognizable way in its brain, we may elicit inappropriate, but perfectly natural, reactions that have an unfortunate mechanical effect, as well as a psychological one.

- Scrambling mindless flight.
- Paralyzed inactivity (paralysis).
- Belligerence.

The most obvious way to consider this issue is to think in terms of stallions and mares, and their hard-wired reactions.

Typically (but not always) stallions react in terms of their own role in the herd - fight or breed, both of which require that both hind legs stay on the ground - the better to stand up on the hind legs (for both purposes) and often striking in front, or inclined to rear. This often leads to

slowness or stickiness in the forward reaction of stallions, and then to harshness on the part of the rider.

Typically (but not always) mares react by stabilizing the front legs, and getting active with the hind legs - inclined to pitch and bitch and kick. Geldings, as eunuchs, tend to wander through life somewhere in between, depending on the hormone levels.

But there are other mechanical issues.

A horse in a state of anxiety or if it expects pain, may reflexively freeze its musculature and be unable to operate as we would like - lightly, responsively, immediately, agreeably.

A horse with its nose high in the air is physically less capable of supple movement - especially laterally.

A horse which is afraid of, or uncomfortable with the bit, may demonstrate behaviors which we easily misinterpret ("The SOB is defying me), when he is really reacting NATURALLY to an anxiety, or a physical-level defensiveness.

Our task is to understand the physical, mechanical, emotional, and mental nature of the horse and to take it all into account as we deal with the effect of our influences on and requests of the horse.

In training, there are a few questions we should ask ourselves constantly as we go through the process of trying to make the horse do what we want.

- "Is he in a suitable physical/mechanical mode to be able to do what I ask?"
- "Is he in a suitable mental state to be able to do what I ask?"
- "What aspect of his nature makes him respond the way he does?"
 - Disinterested
 - Unwilling
 - Anxious
- "What aspect of his background has affected his nature adversely?"
 - He was abused as a child.
 - He was raised permissively (and thus de-socialized) as a child.
 - He is a nitwit.

In order to train the horse with the minimum of confrontation and stress, we must be in a position to distinguish between issues and reactions that are:

- Normal for his basic nature.
- A normal result of defensiveness or discomfort (automatic reaction).
- His preparatory training (there is almost no part of the training which does not have a preparatory exercise which will ease the transition to the next demand with the minimum of resistance and anxiety).
- His previous experience with humans.

If we are to train the horse with the minimum of confrontation, we must first understand his nature and how we can and must adapt to it and manipulate it. Horses are not capable of great adjustment in the mental process. We are supposed to be smarter. It is our task to adjust to, understand, and adapt to, the horse's nature and capabilities - mental, emotional, and physical.

Then we must understand the effect of his NATURE upon his LEARNING PROCESS.

- "What did he learn from that"?
- "Is he being disagreeable, or bewildered"?
- "Is he in a mental state to be able to process this demand"?

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