

Equine Science

Lesson 2: Psychology and Handling

Horses are much stronger than people, so it is much better to get a horse to do something because it wants to do it. Generally, one person cannot force a horse to do something it does not want to do. This makes it important to understand how horses think and how they will react under certain circumstances.

When working with any horse, it is important to reinforce actions that are desirable with praise. When undesirable actions happen, they should immediately be met with some sort of punishment. Using positive and negative reinforcement is an important part of any horse's training.

Reaction to People

Like people, horses have their own personalities. Some are very jumpy, easily spooked, or aggressive, while others are calm and docile. Some horses show a great deal of loyalty and affection to their owners, while others are very independent.

Signs of Danger

When the horse appears nervous or agitated, there's something wrong. Observing these signs will help a handler avoid injury. A horse's handler should be aware of danger signs and react accordingly. One of the best indicators is the horse's ears because they show which way the horse is looking. (See Figure 2.1.)

If the ears and eyes are relaxed with the ears dropped back, the horse is resting or asleep. If both ears are perked up and forward, it is interested in something. A horse can look and listen in two directions at once. If one ear points forward while the other is pointing to the rear, the horse is watching both directions. When a horse pins its ears back, it is angry and there is a danger of being kicked.

How a horse holds its tail can also communicate. If the horse switches its tail, something is bothering it—flies or something the rider is doing.

Pawing the ground is another sign that a horse is not pleased. This can mean that it doesn't like something, or it might be because the horse has been tied up and is bored. Whatever the signs, the handler should get to know the animal and never ignore what it is trying to "say" so that an injury can be prevented.

Horse Manners

As mentioned earlier, each horse has its own personality and can develop good or bad manners. There are several bad manners (vices) that horses sometimes pick up; some of them can affect the horse's health.

Barn sour – With this vice, the horse doesn't want to leave the barn. This can be the result of not wanting to leave a companion or the safety of the barn. A preventive measure is to work the horse after returning to the barn area.

Biting – Biting can be caused by innocently giving the horse treats or by rubbing its nose while petting.

Bolting feed – It is not known for certain why some horses gulp (or bolt) their food, but they can be slowed down by spreading the food out or placing a large, baseball-sized rock in the feed.

Cribbing – This is when a horse hooks its upper teeth on a solid object, extends its neck, and sucks in air. This bad habit can cause bloating, and horses that crib often are more prone to get colic.

Pawing – Here, a horse stands and digs at the ground with its front feet. Many times, this is a sign of boredom and releasing them into a paddock or field will help prevent it. Occasionally, pawing the ground means the horse is sick.

Shying – Some horses seem to be easily spooked by unfamiliar items. The only things that can be done are to develop trust and use good training methods and patience.

Weaving, stall walking, and wood chewing – These vices are usually brought on by boredom and can be corrected by allowing the horse to get outside and exercise.

Equine Senses

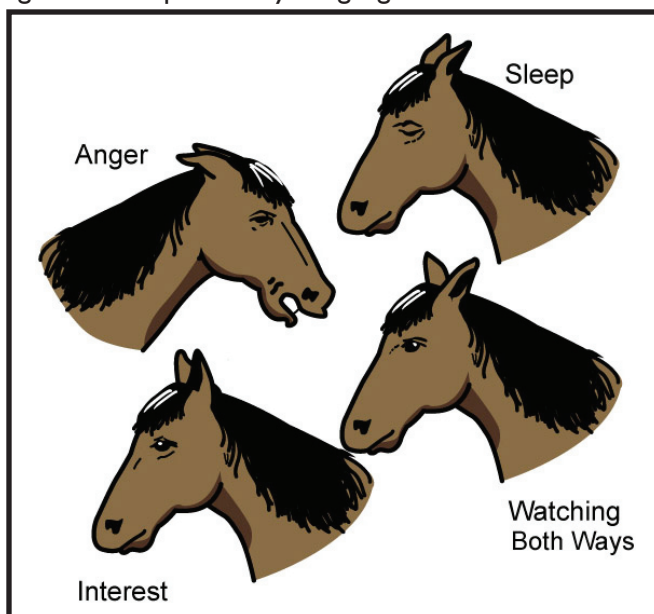
The horse has monocular vision, which gives it the ability to use each eye independently and see different pictures at the same time. When a horse wants a good look at something, it looks straight at it and uses both eyes in a binocular manner. The horse does have two blind spots—directly in front of its nose and directly in back of the horse. This is why a horse should always be approached from the side or at an angle, never from the rear or from straight ahead. Horses have very good night vision. It is a good idea to talk to horses so they also hear you coming.

The horse is much better at detecting something approaching it than most animals. With its monocular vision and excellent hearing, it can watch a greater area than a cow or most other animals. This is why horse warriors always paid close attention to horse signs.

Foal Handling

The newborn foal should be worked with as soon as possible. Rubbing the foal's body with a towel or gunny sack (sacking) helps get it used to handling. Start the foal on a regular routine of a short lesson, such as putting on a halter, at about 1-2 weeks of age. After the foal is used to the halter, tie it to the stall near the mare and groom it, working with the legs and hoofs. Well-disciplined horses result from early training.

Figure 2.1 - Equine Body Language



Training Methods

Trainers have their own style of training; however, certain things should remain constant. When teaching a horse a new lesson, patience is a must. Repeating what the horse is to learn is a must. It might take several days, weeks, or even months of practice before the horse has learned it thoroughly. Positive reinforcement should always be used, either by verbal praise or by giving it some kind of treat. Don't overdo the treats, however; give them only when deserved.

Discipline is a means of communicating to the horse that it is doing something wrong. It is not being mean, nor is it mistreatment—unless it becomes excessive or inflicts injury to the animal. Mistreatment will be avoided if one never punishes out of anger.

Discipline should always be prompt and never administered out of anger. The whip and spurs are the most common devices used to discipline a horse. If a horse fails to carry out a command and discipline has been given, promptly make the horse follow through with the original command and follow that by positive reinforcement.

Summary

Horses are like people in that each has its own personality and can form vices. Handlers should become well acquainted with their horses and know how each horse reacts to handling. Training the horse at an early age will help eliminate problems with temperament and result in an animal that is easy to work. Routine, frequent handling is the key to a steady horse. Training styles differ, but the basics are the same—repetition, reinforcement, and discipline.

Credits

Fraser, A. *The Behavior of the Horse*. Melksham, U.K.: Redwood Press Ltd., 1992.

Hawcroft, Tim. *The Complete Book of Horse Care*. New York: Howell Book House, Inc., 1994.