

## Thinking like a horse.

Everyday training made easier.

- You've been schooling your horse past the same jump storage corner of your arena all season, but when a new jump standard is added to the corner, he won't go near it. In fact, he makes a beeline to the gate.
- Your instructor says your horse "needs a lot of leg," but he feels so dull that you're sure it takes more exertion on your part than his to maintain a canter without falling into a trot.
- Whenever you take your horse to a new environment, he seems oblivious to you – whinnying and tetherballing around you as you try to lead him in a straight line.

Like playing a musical instrument, I feel there is nothing more satisfying than being "in tune" a horse – every signal understood and responded to in a subtle, conversational way. But when a horse isn't responding, riders tend to explain the situation from a human reference point: "He knows what I want - he's trying to get back at me." "She doesn't like men." "He's so stubborn." To communicate clearly to our horses, we need to understand how God has uniquely wired them – we need to think like a horse!

Following are some common traits I've observed in training hundreds of horses, confirmed by findings from researchers and professional horsemen alike. Time after time, I've had the satisfaction of seeing these principles understood and applied by riders, resulting in safer, more effective times with their equine partners.

**Horses are prey, not predators.** Unlike humans, or dogs, they are always on the lookout for danger and, in many ways, are more perceptive than we are. Horses detect a wider range of sound than we do, and with their mobile ears which swivel like radar, are able to localize these sounds from all directions. I have my riders glance periodically at their horses' ears to clue in on what's capturing their attention, and nipping most spooks in the bud!

With eyes set on the side of his head, the horse has a wide field of vision, monitoring scary threats, oblivious to his rider, from nearly 360 degrees.

The fright/flight instinct in a horse tells him to flee with lightning reaction time, without pausing to ask questions, and tells the rider to grab for leather!

Fortunately, horses can be desensitized to frightening stimuli. As horsemen, we do everything possible to teach without raising the adrenaline level, because fear inhibits learning. I make every request at the lowest end of a one to ten scale, dialling up the intensity, if necessary, only for reinforcement.

**Horses are herd animals.** They're most comfortable when they know where they fit into the social hierarchy. The alpha horse makes the decisions and defines her personal boundaries in no uncertain terms. When a human handles a horse, she must be alpha. She must make every decision– have a lesson plan. How fast will our steps be as we walk out to the paddock? What precise path, will we travel as we canter away from this jump? During grooming, where is the defined space in the barn aisle you will remain standing?

The alpha horse never lets the underdog rub on her, or step into her space uninvited, but rather confirms her position by causing him to retreat with her body language. I frequently ask a horse to step away and yield to pressure during a training session. It's an ongoing conversation between us, as horse's nature is to always ask "Where do I fit in to our pecking order?"

**Horses learn differently than humans.** Horses learn by repetition, or trial and error, not by reason and reflection. Successful trainers use a system of request (an aid) followed by immediate positive ("yes") or negative ("no") reinforcement. A good coach's job is to communicate and demonstrate the effective timing and intensity of the aids.

Are you getting through to your horse? Many beliefs about horse/human relationships are fostered by Hollywood and novels, rather than grounded in fact. The keys to your successful training program are found in seeing the world from his point of view – think like a horse.