

# **Equine risk management a sensible approach to horse handling.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper involves understanding the relationship between horse and human. It begins to clarify the evolution of this relationship and how it can be influenced to create a safer working environment for people who rely on the horse for both work and recreation. An effective communication system between horse and human must be based on respect and trust as opposed to fear and intimidation. This respect system should be understood by humans, from the horse's perspective.

It is more effective for the human to become more horse than the horse to become more human. Humans often incorrectly, relate their own emotions to a horse's actions. A common example of this is a horse robbing its head vigorously on its handler. From a human perspective this may be seen as a friendly gesture but in reality, the horse is simply exerting its dominance over another one of its herd

Many of the horses' in-built survival mechanisms such as flight from fear and running through pressure can be overridden through sensible handling methodologies. These same methodologies should be utilized when handling other prey animals such as cattle, sheep and goats although the same level of communication is generally not required.

The "Hierarchy of Control" established that administrative and training practices are to be given a higher priority than Personal Protective Equipment. It is therefore the authors' intentions to document a system of communication and training techniques, effective in decreasing the degree of risk associated with handling and riding horses.

## **Case Report**

The art of riding and horse handling is not a new concept. The earliest domesticated uses for horses were for hunting, travel and warfare. Before this, humans used horses as a food source and this prey/predator relationship is still well entrenched in the horses' genetic make up. The fact is that horses view humans as predators until the human, through a system of trust and respect, builds a relationship.

The ancient usage of horses for warfare and hunting, meant that horse handling was developed to a very high degree out of the handlers necessity to stay alive. Highly trained animals used in hand to hand combat became unnecessary with the advent of gunpowder (as bullets travel faster than horses). Modern day use of the horse centres on stockwork and recreation. The usage of horses in rural industry is

recognised as a high-risk practice, with many deaths and permanent disabilities resulting from the misunderstanding or mishandling of the horse by humans.

### **Establishing Trust And Respect**

Horses are driven by herd instinct. Even when interacting with humans, these instincts dictate their behaviour. We need to appreciate the differences between predators and prey animals. Humans, being predators respond to praise, recognition or money, whereas prey animals respond to comfort. Comfort to a horse is to do nothing and stay alive in the process.

The herd structure is a matriarchal system, consisting of a lead mare, other subordinate mares and their offspring. Horses dominate each other through controlling each other's movement. This behaviour becomes apparent when two or more horses are introduced. They will immediately begin to establish a hierarchy, starting with subtle gestures which increase in severity through to violent unrelenting attacks until one animal is "driven" by the other. Thus, establishing respect! Trust is established between two horses by way of justice shown by the dominant horse, toward the subordinate horse. When the desired effect has been achieved, there is an instant release of the pressure from the dominant horse.

Being isolated from the herd is one of the most severe forms of discipline that can be imposed upon a gregarious animal. The lead mare is often the best at utilising this form of discipline. This isolation technique is used to establish respect through the system of comfort and discomfort. Discomfort in this instance is isolation from the herd, which exposes the individual to a potential attack from predators. When the isolated horse shows the required submissive behaviour, like turning front on and lowering its head, it is then allowed to rejoin the herd.

Humans can utilize this isolation technique when starting to develop a relationship with an unknown horse. Given the chance, the horse will show the handler both its temperament and tractability through being worked at liberty in a round yard. The yard should be fourteen to eighteen metres in diameter to allow the horse to put the handler at what it feels as a safe distance. If this size yard is still too small for the horse, which is often the case when handling unbroken or unstarted horses, they will simply keep moving round the perimeter.

Instead of trying to catch or trap the horse, it is preferable to have them want to come into the handler and be allowed to feel safe, stand still and catch their breath. This is a big deal for a horse, which has been running round the yard with its instincts telling it to rejoin the herd for safety. When the handler allows the horse to join them as their herd member, the horse simply substitutes human for horse and looks at the handler in a whole new light. At this stage the human really needs to know how to give direction to a horse as a herd leader. Having the horse as a willing companion at liberty results in less likelihood of the horse inflicting harm on its handler whether intentional or not.

Through understanding the trust and respect system of the horse and learning techniques to implement this system, humans can develop themselves into the position of herd leader, thereby greatly reducing the potential for injury, whilst handling and riding horses. This reduction in potential injury comes about by the horses' instinctive reactions to follow the herd leaders (the human) suggestions, rather than their own often dangerous, reactionary responses.

## **Communication And Control**

Once trust and respect has been developed from the ground it is time to move onto the horses back. Severe injury is often the outcome for riders unable to control a horse's instinctive reaction (shying, bolting or bucking) when the horse is faced with a perceived life-threatening situation. Sound safety procedures and handling techniques need to be developed in both horse and rider. Through these techniques the potential risk will be reduced when these "instinctive reaction" situations arise. To have a horse respond to the human, rather than react from them allows the horse to do tasks for you, rather than because of you.

The preliminary safety check is referred to as "lateral flexion" in which the rider uses one rein to bend the horse's head and neck, until its nose is adjacent to its shoulder. This must be achieved initially with the human on the ground and can be used as a calming position when the horse becomes agitated. To be used as such, the movement must be developed by the handler into a soft, non-threatening reaction to any hazardous situation. The amount of pressure required for this procedure will determine how effective the bend will be in a reactive situation. A horse that comes off pressure respectfully is a far safer prospect when tied up, tangled up, handled and ridden.

The progression from lateral flexion is to "take the power out of the horse". This is referred to as disengaging the hindquarter. The horse obtains its momentum through its hindquarter whether the movement is forward or backward. Therefore when a horse is in an instinctive reactionary situation, it is imperative to be able to reduce the power from the hindquarters as quickly as possible. In this framework, the horse has little opportunity to put power to any instinctive reactionary behaviour.

The safest and most effective method of gaining control of the horse's hindquarter is by the rider again starting from the ground. The procedure is put in place by the handler applying pressure to one rein across the horse's back, toward its opposite hind leg. This pressure should be maintained until the hind leg closest to the handler shifts under the animal. The quicker the pressure is released after the horse has given the correct response, the softer the horse will become to the handler's requests (horse justice).

Building on this hindquarter control, literally one step at a time and being in time with the horse's feet, will enable the rider to keep the forequarter of the horse stationary

and allow the hindquarters to move around it, there by effectively disengaging the hindquarter. Whilst mounted, the same procedure can be used by the rider taking one rein towards their opposite hip. This will cause the horses outside hind leg to step away. To continue this movement, the rider applies leg pressure to the same side on which the pressure is coming from. This will cause the horse's other hind leg to step under its body with the same effect of disengaging the hindquarters.

To ensure maximum response, the horse must be willing to yield and be equally soft and supple on both sides. This will allow the rider to communicate a request quickly and safely with no brace being set up by the horse. The lines of communication from start to finish mn from the human's mind, to the horse's feet and these always takes several different channels including riders body position, leg position, rein position and even facial expression's. Humans' may not always comprehend what they are communicating through these channels but never the less horses, with prey animal awareness pick up every signal the human sends out, consciously or not. The horses feet can do only seven things, they can move forwards, backwards, right, left, up, down and do nothing by standing still. Humans need to be aware of this movement and understand that controlling movement is how horses control each other. Therefore it is the safest most effective way for humans to control them.

## **Direction**

Once trust, respect, communication and control have been developed, the human must be able to direct the horse effectively and safely. Most sensible people would not try and drive a V 8 sports car with out a steering wheel but they continually ride horses that have had no grounding in the principals of giving to and coming off pressure.

Again, by starting from the ground to establish leadership, the human can direct their horse's head, neck and two front feet. This is achieved by simply pushing the horses nose away with one hand and its shoulder with the other hand. This causes the horse's front end to move in a circle, either to the right or left, allowing the horse to develop an understanding between human pressure and direction. When the horse becomes soft and supple with this "ground skill", a greater understanding and acceptance of direction from the rein and rider's legs to go left and right is achieved. Similar movements away from pressure should be achieved for the hindquarter. This groundwork will ensure leg pressure will be understood when the person is on the horse.

When the hindquarter and forequarter have been isolated in to separate movements, it is time to move onto forward and backward movement. The horse must move freely to and from pressure. This pressure can be slight, such as a hand or body gesture from the human or firm, such as the human, aided by another horse and a rope, holding constant pressure and meeting the resistance of a more defensive or poorly handled horse. The desired outcome of this forward, backward movement is to have a swift smooth transition with the minimum of stimulation from the human. Whether this transition be from stop to go, from go to go faster or from go to stop and back up,

the less needed to be done by the handler to encourage the horse's feet to go in the direction and at the speed required, the safer the outcome.

When "asking" the horse to move, the fastest results are going to be achieved by quitting this "ask" at the slightest try on the part of the horse. Don't quit when the horse gives you what you want, quit when he tries to give it to you. This subtle difference in response will occur a split second sooner! Developing timing takes practice and a constant study of animal behaviour. Looking for the tilt of the head or the flick of an ear to indicate the intent of the animal to do something, will enable a human to start "reading" horses and other stock the way other prey animals do. When people talk about someone being "good with stock", they are actually talking about someone who is practiced at "reading" the slight gestures animals make when they are preparing to do something or go some where.

So, the horse that is safer to handle, should give it's heads softly, disengage it's hindquarters on request and feel comfortable about standing quietly doing nothing, when no commands have been given. When being handled, they should step backward and lead forward off pressure. Whether the pressure is being exerted through the weight of the lead rope and halter, reins and bridle or the rider's legs.

## **Conclusion**

Safer co-existence between human and horse, means humans as the alpha animal, have the responsibility for developing their understanding of animal behaviour to compensate for the disparity of the leader/follower relationship that exists.

The principals of this horse handling method are not new or mysterious and it is not the authors' intention to clam to have developed these concepts. It requires people to work on themselves and not blame the horse for their lack of understanding on why horses do what they do.

This paper is made up of the authors' interpretations of a combined study of some 20 years of a variety of horsemen, living and dead, in Australia and Overseas. There are a growing number of clinics, books, articles and videos available by master horsemen like Tom Dorance, Ray Hunt, Buck Brennaman, Kel. B. Jeffery, Pat Parelli and Maurice Wright all following similar principals of horse handling based on the understanding of horses. From a safety perspective producers and people handling horses regularly, can not afford to over look the results that are being achieved world wide through the use of this sensible approach to horse handling.

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