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# Horse Directory

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# The Nature of Horses

By Tim Hayes

**T**he most important factor to remember when interacting with horses is the radical difference in their evolutionary nature. The horse is a prey animal and for millions of years, a prominent food source for predator animals. Historically the natural enemies of the horse have been the cat family (mountain lions, bobcats etc.), the dog family (wild dogs, wolves etc.) and the human family (you, me and everyone else).

The human is a predator animal. We kill prey animals and eat them: cows, sheep, deer and yes, horse. Horsemeat although "officially" outlawed as a food source in the U.S. is readily eaten and served today in many other countries including France and Australia. American horses, unfortunately, don't know this. When a horse is afraid and acts "spooky," he's not afraid of being hurt, he's afraid of being eaten!

When it comes to predatory attributes i.e.; speed, sharp teeth, claws and acute sense of smell and hearing, humans have always been fatally inferior. For the past two hundred thousand years, we have survived and become top of the food chain primarily by utilizing our superior intelligence (*i.e. we created the gun*).

This has enabled us to not only kill and eat all prey animals but every other predator as well. Horses have survived for about 55 million years by using their ability to out run (unless cornered) all of their predator

In addition to their speed, horses have powerfully acute super-human senses. They hear and smell potential enemies from great distances with far greater ability than humans. They not only can see 340 degrees while standing still they can detect the flutter of a bird's wing across a river 300 feet wide. If cornered with no possible escape, a horse can and will fight. They possess the fastest reaction time of any animal...the time it takes between a horse deciding to kick and the instant its hoof makes contact. If a horse decides to kick you and you are within his kicking range, it is physically impossible to avoid getting kicked.

And finally their cunning hard-wired ability to outsmart predators is consistently demonstrated by their lightning fast evasive maneuvers whenever they don't want to be caught. Have you ever tried to catch a horse that doesn't want to be caught?

What seems to be a horse' unreasonable fear and over reaction to something it doesn't recognize is a classic human misunderstanding of the horses nature. Horses aren't "Spooky" because they're stupid. They know they can be eaten and unless they are 100 per cent certain there are no predators around, it's their genetically built-in survival nature to run first and ask questions later. A horse would

rather be wrong and alive about mistaking a blowing plastic bag for a mountain lion than curious and dead.

Once we recognize that our horse might be reacting to a situation motivated by self-preservation and not because he's "being difficult", we have the opportunity to change our response to his behavior. This will help him build a more positive attitude about us and by so doing strengthen our relationship.

We can't change our horse's nature. But if we know and understand that our human nature can be counterproductive, we can change the way we respond to him. We can think like a human but behave like a horse. We can help him work through his survival fears instead of reprimanding him, which usually turns into an unpleasant and often dangerous situation. We can acquire new knowledge and new tools that will help our horses become more confident and trusting in the human world we have asked them to live in.

Being good with horses actually requires the same qualities that it takes to be a good parent. In the same way we must understand how a child sees the world we must also see the world from the horse's point of view. When a child tells us he doesn't want to go to bed because he's afraid of going into a dark room, it's not unlike a horse that's afraid to go into a horse trailer.

A good parent, like a good horseperson, knows that there are no monsters in the bedroom as he also knows there are no bears in the horse trailer, which to a horse looks like a metal cave on wheels. Instead of becoming annoyed, impatient, frustrated and showing the horse or the child that we think they're being stupid and silly, we must acknowledge their fears and know that for them the "danger" is quite real.



*Horses are food for predators. Photo courtesy Tim Hayes 1994*

With the child we must then reassure him by picking him up, holding him, walking into the room together, turning on the lights and staying with him until he feels safe and let's us know it's okay if we leave. With our horse we must not force him to go into the trailer. We must give him all the time he needs to inspect, investigate, go on and off and become 100% confident that he will be safe if he gets into and stays in the trailer.

As a parent not only does this positively resolve the immediate issue of going to bed, but it is how we create a relationship that has our child look to us as a source of comfort, safety, understanding, trustworthiness and leadership. Are not these the qualities that we also want from our horses?

The most important needs for a horse, those that motivate all of his behavior, are the same today as they were millions of years ago - SAFETY (survival), FOOD (and water), COMFORT (emotional as well as physical) and LEADERSHIP. Horses always feel safer with a leader and are happy to follow one who is fair, trustworthy and has earned respect.

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The important needs for most humans in today's modern world are PRAISE (you're a terrific rider, you made no mistakes), RECOGNITION (you won the blue ribbon for being in first place) and MATERIALISM (you also get \$50,000 for being first).

When we look at the horse/human relationship, which has these radically different needs but lacks a common language to communicate these differences; is it any wonder that the single largest problem people have with horses is not the horse's physical ability but his mental and emotional attitude, which then impacts on his physical behavior. Without a language that the horse understands (English is not one) achieving leadership through force with the threat of pain (“getting after him”) will never create the type of partnership we all so desperately desire with our horses.

Natural Horsemanship teaches us how to communicate our wishes in a language our horse understands. It teaches us how to become our horse's leader with love, trust and respect. It teaches us how to control every muscle, thought and emotion of our horse and ourselves at every moment. It is then that we can ride and guide. It is the then that we achieve harmony. It is then that we understand and combine our unique natures so that becoming one together becomes something natural for both horse and human. Natural Horsemanship simply means knowing and honoring the nature of horses.