

Basic Horses for the Well-Intentioned Or I Don't Have a Clue Yet but I Would Like to

Part I: I don't know anything about horses except what I have seen in movies

Horses are much like Winnie the Pooh; they are animals of very little brain but great hearts. Unlike Winnie the Pooh, they tend to weigh around a half ton and are not easy to drag around. Most horses are not malign, but when one weighs a half ton and accidentally step on someone's toes, that someone will remember it for a very long time. With the weight issue in mind, horses deserve respect and need to be approached with care, but if you know what that entails, horses are magnificent animals.

The key to horses is to remember their place in evolution. They are (1) prey animals that (2) eat grass and (3) live in herds. Combining that with the concept that they are animals of very little brain, most horses have a mental repertoire of about three ideas that they mull around in varying permutations in their very pretty but not very swift heads. These ideas correspond to their niche in evolution:

- (1) Prey animal: "Oh, that is very scary, run away!"
- (2) Eat grass: "Where is the tasty food? Can I eat that?"
- (3) Live in herds: "Where is my herd? What is my place in my herd? Does the rest of the herd think this is tasty or scary?"

If you keep these notions firmly in your mind, most horse behavior becomes obvious. Unfortunately, it often becomes "obvious" as 20:20 hindsight.

HELPFUL TIPS

Photography 1: This falls under the category of prey animal. Most horses are not terribly fond of flashes. Then again, neither are most riders if you direct flashes into their eyes. Whereas a rider may just curse as you, horses tend to try to run away. Riders get grumpy and are apt to track you down later if you make their horse run away. Besides, it is against common courtesy. Please do not use flash photography around horses, at least not without both permission and warning of both an equestrian marshal and the rider.

Photography 2: Be sensitive about using any camera, particularly video cameras or cameras that have red blinky lights on them, around horses. Be extra sensitive about sticking your camera over the rail of the arena (which is against the rules without permission of the equestrian marshal in charge of that arena). You should also secure permission of the rider of the horse in question as a common courtesy. In either case, horses have been known to believe the camera is a predator eye, and therefore may try to run away or shy. Keep your camera on your side of the rail. And even if you do have your camera on your side of the rail, if a horse starts acting all weird when it is coming in your direction or is in your vicinity, please stop filming and hide your camera for the time

being. (Not all horses will assume you are a predator, and a slight change in the angle you are filming from may work wonders.)

Photography 3: Ditto Photography tip 2) above in terms of stepping in front of a horse in a procession to take a picture. It is against the rules to go on a roadway that is being used as a processional route. And in this case, “running away” may entail the horse running directly over you. Please don’t do it without permission and the supervision of an Equestrian Marshal (and preferably also the riders).

Miscellaneous “Predators:” This is part of the 20:20 hindsight. My horse had no problem with running at the quintain the first time around, but has been known to balk at something as simple as a rock or her own shadow or the horse exhaust she deposited in the arena the last time she went around. What any one horse considers a “predator” is extremely variable and subject to change without notice. One horse’s predator is another horse’s “ho-hum.” One horse’s predator on one day may be “ho-hum” the next and then a predator again the third day (or even five minutes later). Common “scary” things include: umbrellas, flapping tarps or banners or flags or ponchos or tabards, baby strollers, shiny things, and totally stupid objects that no other critter in its right mind (except a horse) would consider scary. If a horse owner asks you to move something or to not do something around their beast, please go along with the request and **do not take it personally**. Horses are capricious. It is just the way of any animal that has only three brain cells.

Smoking: **Don’t!!!** Horses are sensitive to smoke and not in a good way. Also, hay is very flammable. Do not smoke around horses or around their stalls!!!

Sides to a Horse: Horses have four sides.

1. The **Right** and the **Left** are the **good** sides. Horses do not move naturally laterally. Well trained horses can move laterally (and a well executed side-pass is a thing of beauty), but horses will not do so normally because it is too much like work. If you stand to the right or left of a horse, you do not have to worry too much.
2. The **Back** side of a horse is a **bad** side. This is the end of the horse that produces (from least to worst) noxious fumes, manure, and kicks. Imagine being hit by several real maces wielded by a half-dozen Western Dukes, and you with no armor. That is being kicked by a horse. Please do not walk behind a horse. A horse’s owner or other horsie-types may do so, but they do so at their own risk and only because they know the animal in question and you will note they usually have their hand on the horse’s butt and/or are talking to the horse the entire time to assure that the horse does not startle and/or give the back end wide berth. Do not try this trick at home! Leave this trick to the professionals! A horse that has a red ribbon or red tassel in its tail is a bad-natured horse that kicks intentionally! Stay away! Horses that do not kick intentionally may still kick you by mistake, either because they are startled, don’t notice you there, or think they are kicking at a fly or a predator or another horse. Stay away!
3. The **Front** end of a horse is also a **bad** side. This gets back to prey animal. A startled horse’s natural instinct is to run, and in fear it will run over anything in its way. The only time I stand in front of a horse (even my own) is when I am facing it and ready to jump

out of the way and preferably when it is in “cross-ties” (a rope to either side keeping the horse in place). I have seen what happens to people who have been run over by horses, including experienced horsemen by their own horses who should have known better, and it is not pretty. Some horses also bite. A red ribbon or tassel in a horse’s forelock or on its “headstall” (the top part of the horse’s bridle that goes just over its forehead below its ears) means it bites. Stay away!

Holding horses: Don’t volunteer until you have been taught how to do this. If for some bizarre reason you do find yourself holding a rope attached to a horse, do *not* loop it around your hand (for extra security?). A loop or two of rope around your tiny little hand versus a half ton of horse is not really extra security. If the horse seriously spooks or runs away, you need to be able to drop the rope instantly without breaking or loosing your hand or dislocating your shoulder in the process. So don’t loop!

Runaway Horse: Unless you are trained to handle horses, please do not try to help. You are only apt to get in the way, scare the horse, and hurt yourself. Move out of the way quickly and quietly. Screaming “help!” or other such things, running frantically, or flapping your arms about hysterically is only apt to panic the horse even more.

Feeding Horses: Just like in the zoo, do not feed the animals without permission. In nature, horses nibble a little grass, run away from a predator (real or imagined), and then nibble a little more grass. Living with people, horses are fed a more complex diet to assure that they do not get fat or get colic and have enough energy to work. Horses have extraordinarily delicate digestive systems for all that they eat all the time given the choice. Colic is pretty much like twisting the horse’s guts into a very tight knot, literally! Colic can kill a horse very dead even if recognized promptly and treated immediately. Please ask permission before you feed a horse. Even a “small treat” may be deadly to a horse that has just worked or has a particularly finicky digestive system.

Watering Horses: Please do not water horses without permission. Hot horses cannot drink water until they are cooled or they are apt to colic (and can die, see above regarding eating). If you notice a horse in a stall without water, don’t assume the worst but you may bring it to the attention of the owner or an Equestrian Marshal if it makes you feel better. She/He will determine if the horse is being neglected or being protected from colic. (Generally speaking, if the horse was just put back in its stall after working and the bucket is full and outside the stall door; the owner/rider put it there until the horse cools down enough not to colic, but even the most-well intentioned horse owner may forget to put the bucket back into the stall, particularly after a long, hard, hot day.)

“Disciplining” Horses: In a herd, horses kick and bite to establish hierarchy (and are pretty vicious in the process despite it being characterized as “play”). People are not as physically strong as horses or as massive, so we use crops/whips (some of us like to refer to these as “brain annexes”) and spurs to play fairly to and try to establish our station in the herd. People need to be “bigger” than horses in a horsie world to get them to cooperate. “Bigness” is a function of hierarchy, not actual size. My horse is a mere 14 hands 3, a whole one inch bigger than a pony; nonetheless she is the alpha mare in our

barn, however, as far as she is concerned, I am “bigger” than she is (despite weighing some 800 lbs more than I do). I do use spurs on my horse; they are blunt and measure 1/4” and are pretty anemic compared to being kicked by another horse. She actually gets annoyed when I do not use my spurs because then she is not sure I am being sincere with her. If I had rawled spurs (the kind with the pointy ends on a wheel) or pointed spurs, and if the sharp parts were not blunted or covered, and if I drew blood when I spurred her, that would be not a good of a fair thing. That would be cruelty. As it is, spurs (that are not sharp enough to draw blood) simply signal a horse that the rider is more alpha than the horse is and it is the horse’s job to obey. (I do not use spurs on my daughter’s horse because he uses them as an excuse to act up.) When my horse is being exceptionally dense, I also carry a crop (whip, a.k.a. brain annex). Mostly I just show it to her and carry it (or sometimes I just show it to her and then drop it so she thinks I am carrying it). Occasionally I even whack her with it. Again, when used in moderation (and **never** hard enough to draw blood), compared to being bit or kicked by another horse, a crop is not harsh and simply signals the hierarchy (i.e., the rider is the alpha member of the herd). Please do not automatically think “oh poor little horsie” when a rider is using spurs and/or a crop. In moderation, these aids level the playing field between horse and rider (after all, the average horse is going to have several hundred pounds of mass as advantage over the rider). The equestrian marshal will determine if such aids are being used in a cruel manner or in excess.