

Getting Inside the Horse's Head

Why do horses behave the way they do? What's the best way to figure out what they're thinking and what they're going to do? And what does this have to do with equine performance and feeding management? Some of the answers lie in the instincts and reactions that are essential to a horse's basic makeup.

Horses are prey animals. Built into every modern horse's mind is the ancient fear of being attacked by a predator. This fact colors the way equines see their world. To a horse, any strange or unexpected sight, sound, smell, or sensation may initially be interpreted as a warning of an approaching predator. This instinct has a profound effect on equine behavior.

- The horse's immediate reaction to real or perceived danger is to get away as fast as possible. Distancing himself from danger might involve anything from a quick jump sideways or backwards to an all-out panicky gallop.
- A horse gets used to his stall, pasture, and other things that make up his daily environment. Anything that changes even slightly in appearance is seen as a possible threat. A wheelbarrow parked in a different place, a fallen tree limb in the pasture, a barrel that's tipped over instead of standing up, or a jacket draped over the fence must be approached slowly and then thoroughly investigated before the horse will disregard the "monster."
- Things that seem all right at home (tractors, bicycles, banners, flower boxes) might be extra-scary at a horse show or trail ride where the surroundings are unfamiliar.
- Young horses are especially prone to spooking at sights or actions that the owner thinks of as simply part of the daily routine. To someone grooming a horse, ducking under the horse's neck seems to be a quick way to get to the other side, but the horse knows only that a shape suddenly disappeared from its left eye and then instantly materialized beside its right eye. Translation: something frightening just happened! Likewise, while older horses don't mind having a blanket flipped over their backs, the same motion might send a young horse into a frenzy.
- Trainers working with young or inexperienced horses must try to determine whether a misbehaving animal is reacting to a threatening situation or being truly disobedient. Punishing a frightened horse links the person to the scary stimulus, destroying trust.

What does this have to do with feeding management?

- Horses relax when their schedules and surroundings are familiar. Therefore, owners should establish a feeding routine and stick with it as much as possible. This includes time of feeding, amount and type of feed offered, and location of hay piles in the stall or field.
- Changes should be made gradually over a period of several days.
- Horses should be allowed to eat with minimal disturbance.

For a horse, there's safety in numbers; being alone is uncomfortable. In a herd of horses, many eyes and ears are alert to danger. A lone horse is under a certain amount of stress because it does not have the safety provided by its herd mates. Management strategies must be planned to accommodate this need for security.

- Although they can eventually adjust to being alone, most horses don't like to be out of sight of at least one other equine. Both in the pasture and in the stall, horses are calmer if they can see, hear, or smell a familiar animal.
- Horses kept in a herd may be reluctant to leave their group. A horse that is easy to ride in a ring with other horses is likely to resist leaving the ring to go out on the trail by himself. Because he's uneasy by himself, he may be jumpy, inattentive, and even dangerous to ride.
- Stalled horses that are cut off from the group may react by stall walking, kicking, or frequent vocalizations.
- Solitary horses may benefit from having a companion animal in the field or stall. If another horse or pony is out of the question, goats are traditional favorites, and many horses get along well with llamas.
- As young horses become more experienced in their work, most learn to relax and perform well, both on their own and in a group.

What does this have to do with feeding management?

- Horses that feel isolated may be too nervous to eat. If possible, house horses so they can see each other.
- In barns where hay nets are hung just outside the stall doors, horses can easily keep track of their neighbors.

The herd defines the status of an individual horse. Within a wild band or a group of pasture mates, each horse occupies a specific place in the hierarchy, dominating animals of lesser status and acting submissive to those with greater status.

- Horses can bite, kick, or use other obviously aggressive gestures, but much of their interaction is through subtle body language. A flick of an ear, swing of a head, or shift in weight means, "Stay out of my space."
- Humans influence horses by assuming a position of high status within the power structure. Horses learn "ground manners"—not moving into a handler's space, moving away when asked to do so—by reacting to vocal and physical cues from the people who work with them.
- Horses develop a trusting relationship with their riders, eventually gaining security from humans as well as from other horses.

What does this have to do with feeding management?

- When groups of horses are fed grain in ground or fence feeders, the feeders should be spread far enough apart to allow access by timid horses.
- Hay should be fed in several locations in the field so that a dominant horse can't guard the entire supply.
- Access to water can also be blocked by a high-status horse.
- Horses that are old or unsound often lose status within the herd and therefore may not have access to feed, hay, water, and shelter. Older horses that begin to lose weight may be in this situation. Feeding these horses separately or moving them to another herd or field may be necessary.