

The Nature of the Horse

1. The very things about the horse that **cause us so much trouble** are the very characteristics that have kept the horse in **existence for thousands of years**. His instincts protected his ancestors and kept them from being eaten, so they could live long enough to reproduce offspring, *including the horse you will be riding*.
2. No matter how **good the instructor or rider is**, *we cannot teach the horse not to be a horse*. The instincts are imbedded genetically and are always there.
3. When the horse is under **mental or physical pressure**, his **instincts** take over and the training goes out the window.
4. What are those **instincts**? They are characteristics that have kept the horse from being eaten by predators. The short answer is to **fight or flee**, but that is too simplistic.
5. **Man** – the **supreme predator** – must separate himself somehow from the lions, tigers and bears when dealing with horses.
6. Predators must bring a horse down quickly if they are to have dinner. They can go to the neck and slice the jugular vein and carotid artery; they can cut the hamstring about the hock; they can cut the band on the top of the neck that holds the neck up; and if it's a group of predators, one can grab the nose and the rest can bring the horse down.
7. So, we **don't approach a horse from behind, or the neck or the nose (head)**. The wolf that tried to bring a horse down by biting his shoulder would be squashed. **We approach the shoulder**, which tells the horse we mean **no harm**.
8. Predators must **sneak up on a horse to be successful**, *so we must announce our arrival*. We speak to the horse and wait until he acknowledges us by looking at us or turning his ears to us. Then we walk normally to his shoulder and stroke him.

9. The horse's keen sense of hearing has protected him for thousands of years. His eyes on the side of his head allow him to see almost all the way around himself. He **cannot see directly behind or immediately in front** of himself. So we want to stay where he can see us. We whistle when coming through a door or around a corner in the barn area to announce to all horses that we are approaching.

10. All animals with skulls protecting their brains are **protective of their heads**. We don't like to have someone come up and put their hands on our faces without permission, and **neither does a horse**. How often do we see someone reach out and touch a horse first on the face? **Not a good idea**.

11. Horses have stayed alive for many generations by **reacting quickly to surprised** – run or get away to a safe distance, then turn and look. Don't look first or you might not have time to run. Suppose your horse falls asleep during grooming, you step away to visit, and then go back to grooming. That touch to a dozing horse may trigger the instinct. Keep the horse awake. If you step away, talk to him and **announce your presence before touching him again**.

12. The horse has his **own space**. It is a **circle about 12 to 15 feet around him**. This is the area he can either defend or still have time to get away if there is an opening. Consider the wise old ranch horse in the pasture; you get to within 15 feet of him with your halter, he takes a step you take a step. He knows you aren't going to catch him if he can maintain his distance from you. He will not allow a predator within that space. So, don't act like a predator.

13. **Not acting like a predator is easy**. Just make sure the **horse knows *who* you are, *where* you are and *what* you are going to do**. To the horse, this means you approach him talking to him, you stay where he can see you and you make it clear that you aren't going to hurt or eat him by making no sudden moves. Example: we run a hand down the leg of the hoof we wish to clean, we don't just grab the foot.

14. It is important to know where not to be when the **instincts kick in**. If we go under the lead rope, the horse can smash a face while stomping a fly. Or worse, if he spooks forward, we will be stomped. If he is tied to a solid wall, we may be squashed. When leading, whether you turn the horse toward you or away, the main thing (**and this is really important with small children**) is to stay out from in front of the horse's front feet.

15. When you are **behind the horse, closer is better**. When going behind a horse, if you are up close and he kicks, you won't get the full force – farther back you may get **kicked with the power that can move the horse forward at 30 miles per hour**. So keep your hand on the horse, let your arm pass to the other side before your body does. We like to have our shoulder touching the tail as we go by. If he is going to kick, he will probably do it when only your arm is touching his rump; he won't wait for your body. The fact that you have touched him all the way from his shoulder to his rump is good insurance that he probably won't kick. He knows **who you are, certainly where you are, and you don't seem to have plans to eat him**.
16. If riders understand that it is quite **a miracle** that a horse lets the **supreme predator ride on his back**, they will have **more respect for the horse**. Horses can identify predators - they know wolves are dangerous and cows are not even if they have not had experience with either. Our vegetarian friends say this is due to meat odor on the body. Meat eaters smell different. The equine ancestor who reacted quickly to the smell of a meat eater lived longer and it is **their descendants we ride today**.

Hope you find this information useful!
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