

Commonsense with horses

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Blind spots for a horse. When a horse has its head down grazing, it cannot see directly in front of or behind itself.

Source: *Horse safety guidelines*, DD Hubbard, US Department of Agriculture.

Introduction

People working with and around horses need to have an understanding of horse psychology to ensure they obtain the best from the horse, with the least risk of injury.

Every time humans catch a horse they use psychology, because a person's strength is no match for that of the horse. If humans do not use superior psychology, they may find the situation reversed, where the horse actually uses the human to achieve **its own** objectives.

Understanding the horse

From the earliest times the horse has been 'the hunted' rather than 'the hunter'. The horse has survived by developing instincts based on hiding, running away and adaptation to constantly changing conditions. The development of sight, reflex for flight, memory, gregarious nature, ability to feel ground vibrations, hearing, smell, and skin sensitivity have equipped the horse well to escape from its predators, and often its owners!

Sight

Generally, horses see poorly. The size and position of the eyes and the width of the head and body determine the horse's field of vision. The range of vision is adjusted by raising and lowering the head, and most horses cannot see objects closer than a metre directly in front of them without moving their head. When its head is in the grazing position, a horse's vision is about 340°, with blind spots both in front and behind it.

Horses have limited colour vision and may have difficulty in clearly distinguishing small objects such as a bird or rabbit. However, horses perceive movement instantly and will react according to their temperament.

Memory

Horses are considered to have memories second only to elephants — a well-trained horse never forgets its training, nor does a badly trained one! Bad habits need to be recognised and corrected early if later problems are to be avoided. Horses learn through repetition, and while a horse's intelligence in solving problems may not be very high, its learning ability is.

Hearing

The senses of hearing and smell are both well developed, enabling the horse to be aware of subtle differences in stimuli. This is why some horses become unsettled in windy weather — they are receiving conflicting stimuli. Some loud noises may even be painful to the horse, and continual exposure can result in deafness.

Skin sensitivity is also highly developed, enabling the horse to detect whether something is hot or cold, or whether it causes pain. The most sensitive areas are the mouth, feet, legs, flank, neck and shoulders. Therefore, when grooming these parts, humans must take care.

Bearing these points in mind, the following guidelines will help you to achieve the best performance from your horse, with the least risk injury.



In the paddock

Obstacles which may cause injury to the horse should never be left lying around in the paddock. Where obstacles are unavoidable, be sure that the horse can see them at all times. Sighter wires on fences can help prevent injuries to horses that have been turned out into unfamiliar paddocks.

Headstalls and halters should not be left on horses in the paddocks. Some halter materials will shrink and there is always a possibility that the horse may catch a foot in the halter or become caught on posts or other objects.

Catching

Because of a horse's restricted vision, always approach at an angle, never directly from the front or the rear. Speak to the horse as you approach so as not to startle it.

Your first contact with the horse should be on the shoulder or neck, rubbing rather than patting.

Handling

Your actions around a horse reflect your ability and confidence, which will dictate your horse's reactions. Keep close while working around the horse, as the greatest impact from a kick is at its extremity. However, stay out of kicking range wherever possible — there is no such thing as a 'horse that never kicks'.

Understand your horse, its temperament and how it reacts. 'Horse sense' is knowing what the horse is about to do before it actually does anything. Always let the horse know what you intend to do rather than make sudden moves.

Never lose your temper with your horse, but let it know that you require respect by being firm. If punishment is required, do it at the instance of disobedience — if you wait even a minute, it is too late. Punish without anger and never strike a horse about the head.

Leading

Your horse should walk beside you when being led. Lead from a position level with the horse's head or halfway between its head and shoulder. Do not walk in front of the horse or try to drag it.

It is customary to lead from the left or near side, using the right hand to hold the lead near the halter. Horses, though, should be trained to be workable from both sides.

Use a long lead strap, with the excess strap folded in a 'figure 8' style in your left hand. Never wrap the lead strap around your hands, wrist or body. A knot in the end of the lead can help maintain a secure grip.

Your horse is larger and stronger than you. If it resists, do not get in front and try to pull.

Be especially cautious when leading a horse through narrow openings such as a gate or door. If there is not enough room for you and the horse, so step quickly through first and get to one side to avoid being crowded.

Tying up

The horse should always be tied up in a place that is safe for it and for you, and at a safe distance from other horses and from tree limbs or scrub. Be certain to tie your horse to something strong and secure, to avoid the danger of breaking or coming loose if the horse pulls back.

Tie at a level above the horse's withers using a quick-release knot so that the horse can be released quickly in an emergency. Do not tie up with the bridle reins. Use a halter and rope, and always untie the horse before removing the halter.

Saddling and bridling

Check all equipment to ensure that it is in good repair before tacking up. Also check that the saddle blanket and other equipment are free of foreign objects and that the horse's back and girth areas are clean.

Stirrups should be run up and not thrown over the saddle. Lift the saddle and place it into position gently. Check the offside to ensure that the blanket and flaps are not turned under.

Pull up slowly to tighten the girth, and then pull up the surcingle. Check the girth three times:

1. after saddling;
2. after walking a few steps; and
3. after mounting and riding a short distance.

Before unsaddling, run the stirrups up the inside leathers and drape the girth across the saddle.

Before bridling the horse, check that the bit is clean and that the straps are not twisted. If it is very cold, hold the bit in your hand for a few minutes to warm it up.

Many halters have a buckled cavesson or noseband. When bridling, release the cavesson and slide the halter slightly down the horse's neck. If you are not ready to ride immediately, redo the noseband so that the horse is tied up by the halter, not the bridle.

Riding

Safe riding means keeping your horse under control and maintaining a secure seat at all times. If you lack confidence on a strong horse,

ride in an enclosed area until you become familiar with the horse and feel confident.

Beginners should have at least some initial instruction on how to ride correctly. There are numerous schools, pony clubs and private instructors that are proficient in teaching riding skills. Prospective horse riders and owners should first learn the skills required before venturing out on their own.

If riding in a group, never ride off before all riders in the group are mounted and ready. Ride abreast or stay a full horse length behind the horse in front to avoid you or your horse being kicked. Never rush past riders who are proceeding at a slower gait, as this can startle both horse and rider and is often the cause of accidents. Instead, approach slowly and proceed past cautiously.

Wear protective head gear at all times. Appropriate footwear is sturdy and has soles that will slide easily from the stirrups but with enough heel to keep your foot from slipping through the stirrup. Sandshoes and thongs belong on the beach, not near horses.

Do not fool around — horseplay is dangerous to all concerned. Be cautious when going up or down a hill, and always allow the horse to pick its way at a walk when negotiating rough ground such as rocks, sand, mud and where there is danger of slipping or falling.

When returning from the ride, have the horse walk the last kilometre or two home. Never let the horse run to and from the stables. Make sure the horse has cooled down before being put away.

Further information

For further information contact your nearest [NSW Department of Primary Industries office](#).

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