

THE HORSE'S MENTAL FITNESS

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(Part 1)

The fifth lesson about How to be a Trainer is based on the horse's mentality - which is that of a typical herbivorous prey animal evolution during millions of years of his lifestyle. Like any animal, its main drives are survival and reproduction which together achieve nature's overall aim: the survival of the species. The six survival elements are food, water, shelter, company, space, and exercise.

THE HORSE'S DEVELOPMENT:

A horse is usually fully grown by the time it is four or five years old. At the age of three to three and a half, it can be backed over a period of a few weeks then turned away for several months to mature. Training can then recommence at three and a half to four years of age. In order to avoid harming the horse physically and mentally, the trainer and rider need to have, as well as the necessary riding skills, a basic understanding of animal psychology. Horses are easily upset by incorrect riding, and it can take months, or often even years, to rectify the damage. Bad training can also lead to premature wear and injury, especially to the limbs and mind!

PSYCHOLOGICAL GUIDELINES:

1. Physically and by nature, the horse is a highly specialised creature of flight; it is also a herd animal and feels safest when surrounded by its fellows.

2. The horse sees man as one of its fellows; and as the horse's teacher, man needs to take the place of a horse higher in the hierarchy or 'pecking order'. This is achieved through understanding, not forcing - when the horse makes mistakes, i.e. does not respond as required to the trainer's instructions, this is only because it has not understood correctly.

3. To be able to understand the trainer, the horse needs to **trust** him - understanding is based on trust.

4. Man, i.e. the trainer, communicates with the horse through the aids and the auxiliary aids, i.e. the voice, touch, weight and reward.

5. The horse will only understand the rider's instructions properly if it understands the aids; the horse's primitive, instinctive reaction is to run away from strange or unknown objects and situations and so the horse needs to be acquainted with them gradually and systematically. If fear or uncertainty arises, the trainer should go back and start again; he should also bear in mind that the horse has an excellent **memory**; it remembers the good

things and the bad things which happen to it, and it can take a long time for it to forget a bad experience.

6. The horse's ability to learn depends on it being sufficiently mature physically and mentally – making excessive physical or mental demands will cause setbacks in the horse's training.

7. The horse will achieve its full potential only if its needs are fulfilled and if it is in harmony with its environment - of which man is a part.

8. The horse must associate man with **security**, in every situation.

9. Remember that horses get bored sometimes; dressage horses need to jump, jumpers need to go out hacking while eventers need to swim!

HORSE SENSES AND BEHAVIOUR:

The trainer must understand the role of the horse's senses.

Smell is the most highly developed of the horse's senses although it is not of much help in training. It does, however, exercise a negative influence at times, for example, when the horse reacts to smell it does not like (e.g. a pig farm) or which brings back unpleasant memories (smoke or the smell of chemicals or drugs).

The horse's **hearing** is also highly developed. It is for this reason that unnecessary loud noises should be avoided in the stable and during training.

The horse's **sight** is not very well developed. However, owing to the position of the eyes on the side of the head, the horse has a much wider field of vision than man, i.e. than its rider.

The horse has an exceptional ability to perceive movement, particularly to the side and in the distance. It will see something moving sooner and more clearly than its rider does so that the rider often has no idea why the horse has suddenly shied. The horse's sense of **touch** and its sensitivity to touch are highly developed. It is this sensitivity which allows the rider to fine-tune his aids. Observing the horse's eyes, ears, tail and breathing, and watching the skin for signs of sweating, will give the trainer an insight into the horse's mental state. The eyes reflect the horse's state of mind. They can express attentiveness, confidence, mistrust or fear. The ear movements can also provide important information about the horse's emotional state. Laid-back or flattened ears always indicate that the horse is at ease and ready

HORSE MOODS



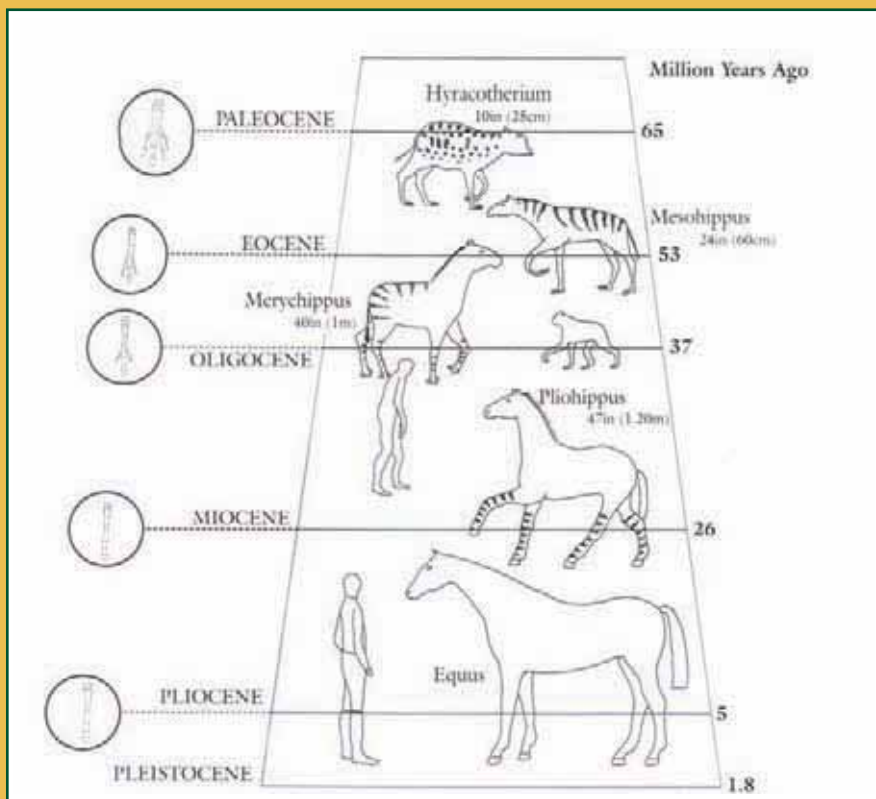
Fear



Boredom & Irritation



Happy



to defend itself. Mobile or pricked ears denote attentiveness and a willing attitude. **Snorting** or 'sneezing', in conjunction with a swinging, freely carried tail, indicate that the horse is free from tension, and is working or ready to work. A tail which is tensed, clamped down or carried high is a sign of fear, tension or excitement. Sweating can be caused not only by exertion but by excitement. It is usually accompanied by raised heart and respiration rates.

THE TRAINER'S PART:

The most important qualities required in a trainer are understanding, sensitivity, calmness and consistency. Nervous, highly strung people are usually impatient and do not have the necessary calm, objective approach. Conscientious repetition of practices necessary for safe handling of the horse, such as tying it up, lifting up

the feet, leading and making it stand, will help to establish a habit of obedience in the horse. Rewarding, scolding, and the appropriate punishment when necessary, should be related directly to what has happened, or what it is hoped to achieve. Constantly feeding the horse sugar, carrots or other titbits for no particular reason will spoil it and eventually lead it to try to place itself above the trainer in the 'pecking order'. Unreasonable or excessive punishment, on the other hand, will lead to resistance, and may ultimately make the horse vicious and dangerous. In training horses, it is a big mistake to expect the horse's reactions to be based on thought processes similar to those of a human. Horses, like all animals, will always act in accordance with primitive, inherited reflexes. HT