



# THE HORSE'S MENTAL FITNESS (Part 2)

By Dr. Mohamed Elsherbini

## RECOGNISING YOUR HORSE'S MOODS:

Regular observation of a horse, as described in the previous issue of Horse Times, will soon give you much input about his moods and body language. This is essential if you aim to work with, rather than against the horse – in fact, the latter approach is doomed to failure. There are some obvious signs that will tell you how he is feeling. For example, the ears tell us much, as discussed before. Sometimes when a rider is in the saddle, the horse moves his ears back and forth which may mean he is “listening” to the rider’s signals.

Horses also have a way of looking dejected when they are not well or are unhappy. Their ears and eyes seem to droop and the head is held lower than usual. A horse in pain may have his ears back but may also have them forward. His eyes will have a staring look that could be confused with fright. Unlike pain, this fright eye staring will pass off as soon as fear is gone.

## BAD BEHAVIOUR:

Behavioural problems fall into 2 groups;

those of handling and riding, such as refusal to be caught or rearing – and other behaviours, known as equine stereotype behaviours, that usually develop in reaction to stresses that their owners place on them. These behaviours include cribbing, wind-sucking, box-walking, and weaving.

**Difficult to catch:** if a horse suddenly starts refusing to be caught and grass is not the obvious attraction, think about what you have been doing with him during the past few weeks. Have you been asking too much of him? Make sure that the cause of upset, whether rough handling or exposure to some frightening stimulus is not repeated.

**Refusing to load:** entering a trailer or a horse van is a totally unnatural activity for a horse. If your horse starts to refuse to load when previously he has been reasonably willing, then you should think back to the last journey. Feeding him in the van or trailer, loading him with a willing horse and driving carefully may give him confidence again.

**Biting & kicking:** these form the horse’s natural way of defending himself against other horses. Sometimes a horse will aim

to bite when being tacked up or when having a blanket put on as a result of a previous rough handling. Some horses are just aggressive. When approaching an aggressive horse, you should always use a non-threatening posture with your eyes downcast, and your shoulders rounded with no sudden movements in order to gain his trust.

**Spooking & shying:** “run away first and ask questions later!” is the self-protective instinct of the horse against predators. He has to trust his rider not to lead him into danger. Horses learn confidence, while they were young from following their mothers or other more experienced horses. If a horse reaches a frightening object, the rider should talk to him confidently and soothingly. The rider should not slacken the reins and pat the horse on the neck as he would be removing the supportive contact of the reins and also losing a control he may need.

**Rearing:** it is always an attempt to evade the rider’s control. It can occur when the horse is being asked to do something that he is unwilling to do or something he is physically incapable of doing. Trainers should tell the rider what to do when a





▲ A bucking horse

horse rears with him by taking a protective position and driving the horse forward when he anticipates rearing. A good trainer should work out what a horse is trying to avoid but in a patient way.

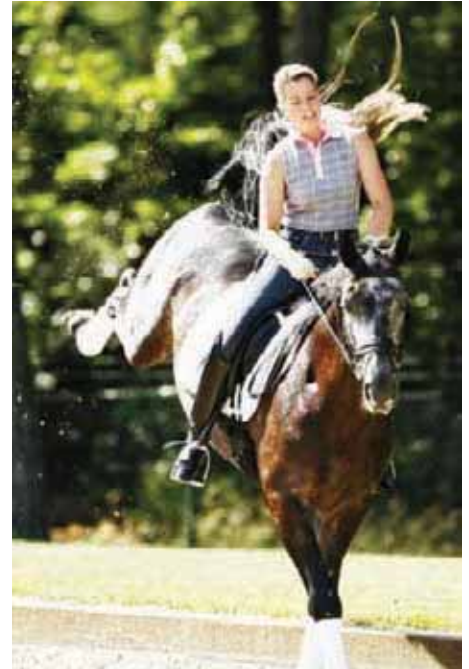
**Bucking & balking:** bucking is an instinctive response designed to dislodge a predator that has leaped on a horse's back. Some schooled horses buck because they have a "cold back", which is excessive sensitivity of the back to the weight of the saddle and/or rider when first saddled or mounted. Some other causes include joy, excitement, pain or trying to dislodge the rider. Bucking could be combined with balking "napping" which is stopping in one place and refusing to go forward. Causes may include tiredness, boredom, illness, pain or sensing a weak rider. A good trainer must evaluate the cause, try to solve it and/or ask for vet advice.

**Equine stereotype behaviour:** these behaviours are classed as vices (discussed in details in HT previous issue), and some actually cause harm to the

horse. There has been much research into these problems. The original view seems to be that highly strung horses that are kept stabled for long periods of time are at a special risk of developing these behaviours. They may arise from the physical and psychological effects of boredom, frustration, and inability to exercise their natural foraging instincts. To avoid such stereotype behaviour from being established, all young horses should be kept outside whenever possible.

## GETTING PROFESSIONAL HELP:

Horses don't usually behave badly without reason. Keep in mind that the horse's behaviour is a product of every aspect of care and handling. A behaviour problem noticed when a horse is ridden may have its origins in some other aspect of the relationship. Besides the professional way of solving obvious medical and technical causes a trainer may ask for an expert's help. These experts are known as "horse whisperers" who work with the horse's



▲ A rearing horse

natural instincts to resolve behavioural problems. Sometimes an alternative therapist is needed. Herbal therapy or homeopathy can also produce dramatic response.

## RECOGNISING A MISMATCH:

Sometimes, when you have tried every strategy for remedying a persistent behavioural problem, you have to admit that there is just no possibility of a good relationship ever evolving between a particular rider and that horse. Both will be better off with different partners. There are many examples of great horse/human partnerships where the horse has been a problem to every other handler, and who just needed to find the right rider for him.

## HORSE PSYCHOLOGY AND MOVEMENTS:

A malfunction in the horse's nervous system can cause badly coordinated movements. Just as in human beings, all actions of the horse are controlled by the brain relaying messages to the nervous system (brain, spinal cord, and nerve). A nervous state of mind can cause loss of normal control over muscle actions. In motion, the horse will show stumbling in front, knuckling over with the hind fetlock, longer or shorter strides, higher or dragged steppage, lacking of quarter control (wobbler), and even lameness in extreme cases. One must realise that it's rough and unskilful handling that upsets the horse's nervous system. In order to improve and to prevent such problems, the trainer has to understand and master the horse's mind. **HT**