

THE HORSE'S MENTAL FITNESS

(Part 3)

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IT IS POSSIBLE TO TEACH A HORSE TO RESPOND TO QUITE SUBTLE SIGNALS, AND EVEN TO OVERCOME HIS NATURAL INSTINCTS SUCH AS FEAR OF AN UNFAMILIAR OBJECT OR SOUND.

INSTINCTIVE & LEARNED BEHAVIOUR:

It is undoubtedly easier to teach a horse to respond to a signal when the desired behaviour comes mentally. A horse will willingly move forward to a squeeze from the leg, but he will be reluctant to respond to a signal to move backward when he

cannot see what is behind him. By understanding the natural behaviour of the horse, we can use and develop his strengths, rather than work against him.

From learning through his own experience, he can be taught how to respond to particular signals. A **conditioned response** is one that is established by training to a stimulus that is not natural. When a young horse walk forwards on his own accord - perhaps following another horse - some trainers will make a clicking sound with their tongue. When this technique is repeated over a number of occasions, the horse will start to associate the clicking sound with going forwards. Soon, he will move forwards whenever he learns this sound.

The release of the reins is a **negative reinforcement** of the initial response of halting; the horse is encouraged to respond to the aids so that the pressure on his mouth will be released.

TRAINING THE HORSE:

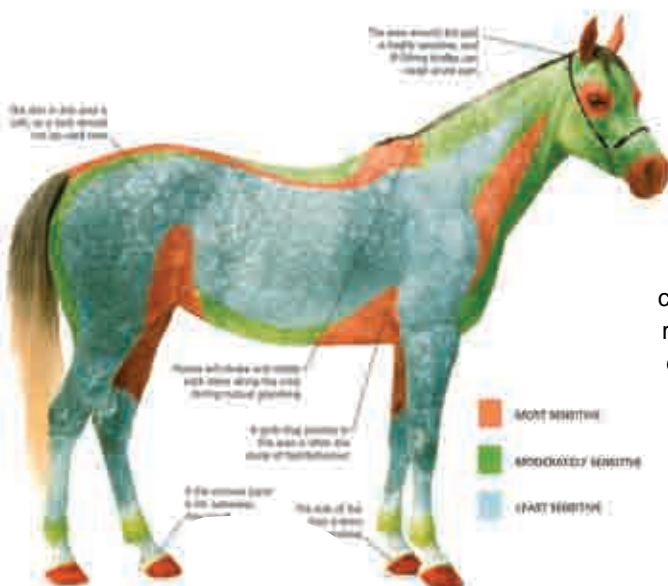
Most early horse training uses conditioning and negative reinforcement. Once basic communication is established between a trainer and a young horse, one signal can quickly be replaced by another. For example, using a voice aid for



young horses is substituted later on by leg and rein aids when the trainer is in the saddle. Negative reinforcement, such as the horse halting to the pressure of the reins, can immediately be followed by positive reinforcement, such as a pat to show the horse that he has responded well. Later on, as a reward of the halt, a pat would also do well.

Habituation: is the decrease in responsiveness produced by repeated stimulation. For example, a horse that has been frightened by traffic at an early age needs to be exposed progressively and regularly to cars so that he becomes used to them. A good example of unintended habituation is when a rider uses very strong leg aids, which results in a diminishing response from the horse.

Sensitisation: is the increase in responsiveness produced by a progressive increase in stimulation. A horse that has become unresponsive to a normal leg aid can be made more sensitive if the rider uses the leg with a spur or stick as the aid to go forwards and then reward the horse when he responds. As the horse becomes sensitised, one can begin to use leg aids only without spurs.



USING PUNISHMENT CAREFULLY:

A great deal can be accomplished in training simply by ignoring undesirable responses. A response that is neither rewarded nor punished tends to disappear. A positive punishment, such as kicking the sides of the horse after he has refused a fence, should be used carefully. If used too much, it can become associated with a type of work, which in turn can lead to unwilling behaviour. The threat of punishment is often enough, for instance by taking your legs away from the horse's sides but not kicking him. Not rewarding an unsatisfactory response can also work well with a trained horse.

HAPPY HORSES MAKE HAPPY RIDERS:

The more a rider thinks of the horse as a partner rather than a machine, the more the horse will give. With a suitable environment, sufficient exercise, and good training, a horse will accept his rider and thrive in the partnership that can exist between humans and horses. If your horse is not settled in his work, try to find the root of the problem so that you can resolve any behavioural issues and develop his true potential. When a horse is happy in his work, notice the relaxed position of the ear, the calmness in his eyes, his regular breathing, and the ease of his movement. These signs are all symptomatic of a contented horse that accepts his rider, enjoys his work, and uses his back. A horse must understand what is required of him, however, also understand his part of the bargain as well trained horses show real intelligence. In the state of captivity in which a horse is held, it is up to the rider or the trainer to assume the responsibility for developing a horse's mental ability and to influence the degree to which he can become independent and find more enjoyment in his work.

With good training, it is possible to improve a horse's state of mind and develop him mentally so that he can achieve his

highest potential. However, your expectation levels need to be relevant to the horse's age and level of training. The most that can be expected from a young horse is being steady and animated. Such a horse is likely to have a good temperament and to be a pleasure to train and ride.

MENTAL PROBLEMS DURING TRAINING:

Whatever the level of your horse's training, you may find your horse unsettled in his work. All horses that have a difficult temperament or show a sudden change in mental attitude should have a thorough veterinary examination. With a majority of difficult horses, pain is found to be at the root of the problem like a badly fitting tack, or sharp teeth, foot or back pain. If the vet and farrier give the all-clear signal, there are a number of ways you can resolve some of the typical problems. Generally, it helps to turn your horse out most of the time and let him have company. A horse walker can be used to supplement daily exercise without human/horse tension. Most horses can also benefit from regular grooming sessions and other close contact with their rider on regular basis. Lungeing work is particularly good for improving a horse's mental attitude and to help him become more relaxed and steady with a simple communication with the rider. When assessing your horse, do not forget to look at your own attitudes and behaviour as to see if they may be adversely affecting the horse. For example, some people associate ugliness in horses with stupidity and always treat

the horse under the impression of being stupid.

Solution Plans:

Once you have pinpointed a particular behavioural issue, plan a programme to help resolve the problem. In many cases, this will mean going back to the basics so that you can encourage and reinforce good behaviour. In all cases, follow sensible methods and structured routines. An **excitable** horse needs a structured approach, a calm environment, and long, slow work. He will work best if he is turned out all the time and is always ridden by the same patient rider. A **nervous** horse needs a sympathetic rider. He may also be happier in a more restricted environment. If a horse is **depressed**, it may be because of pain, sickness, boredom, or bullying from humans or other horses. A spirited and kind-hearted rider can motivate these types of horses. **Suspicious** horses might have suffered pain or discomfort in their early lessons or experiences. Taking these horses in controlled environments with lower level exercises will help to build trust. If an **aggressive** horse is not suffering pain, it may be that he has learnt aggression as a survival habit like stallions. Some steps should be taken backwards in the training process, so that an unthreatening, trusting relationship can be formed. HT

