

# THE PSYCHE OF THE HORSE

If we want to achieve good results with our riding and keep our horse psychologically healthy, we need to get inside the horse's head. It is probably this aspect of the horse that is most often misunderstood, due to our lack of understanding of how his mind works. We have to admit that we don't know everything about this topic, as none of us has ever tried to be a horse, but the following are some of my experiences.



As riders and trainers, we should have a thorough understanding of the psyche of the horse. This chapter will discuss some of the areas where the psyche of the horse is an essential factor in riding.

The horse is very good natured and trusting. He is also very sensitive and receptive to caresses and rewards. He has a fantastic memory and a tremendous sense of direction. He acquires habits easily, and stubbornly refuses to give them up. At the same time, he is not as smart as a dog and not as trainable—he loses his confidence easily, and quickly gets scared if he is handled roughly and punished too severely.

It is important for us as riders to understand and to really be able to evaluate the horse's qualities, which of course may vary from individual to individual. Most importantly, we must never forget that the horse is a living being and should never be treated like an inanimate machine.

All problems have a cause, but the same symptoms can stem from many different causes. It is important to understand this in order to avoid or solve the problem. When the horse becomes scared and feels frightened, he may not only react by spooking, resisting, kicking and rearing, but he may also tense and quicken his gait, toss his head, swish his tail and stiffen and hollow his back. All these are symptoms of anxiety.

These symptoms can also be blamed on pain or soreness. All too often the horse behaves

reluctantly because of soreness or pain, something the rider interprets as disobedience. The demands made on a dressage horse today are many. We work hard with our horses, often for days at a time. Not everybody is able to ride their horse in balance, which means that the horse often, and for long periods, works with tensions in his body that lead to sore muscles. In addition, far too many horses have incorrectly adjusted saddles, and shoes that are incorrectly applied, leading to angles that are not correct. Furthermore, the footing of many arenas is not always the best. So think twice when dealing with an act of disobedience by your horse.

We must approach the horse as educators and take his temperament and his limited ability to understand into consideration. We must be calm and treat the horse with patience, so that he will not be frightened by what he can't understand; that is, we should not punish what we may think is a resistance, but instead, first look for the fault in ourselves.

***Riding demands that we constantly identify with our horse's feelings and thoughts. It is only when we can see things from his point of view that we are able to determine if the horse can understand the aids with which we are trying to influence him.***

### INSTINCTS AND INTELLIGENCE

It cannot be said that the horse is intelligent in the sense that he can reason and arrive at a conclusion. Instead, the horse reacts to his natural instincts:

- The herd instinct
- The food gathering instinct
- The instinct to flee from danger
- The instinct to reproduce

When the horse wants to look, and is afraid to go toward or past something we consider to be ordinary—for example a jacket hanging on the arena fence—it can annoy us, but we must not forget that this watchfulness for anything that is not exactly as per usual is an important component of the horse's ability to survive in the wild. When he sees that something has changed, he becomes worried and wants to flee. The psyche of the horse has not changed, despite his domestication, for hundreds of years. This is something that we as riders must understand and respect.

**Example 1:** We are riding in the arena when someone opens the door and a spot of light falls on the footing. The horse tenses up, perhaps refuses to go near the spot, or jumps over it. The rider

thinks “Oh, come on, this is really too much! Just because Lisa has opened the door, and for once in a long while the sun is shining, my horse refuses to concentrate. He’s come by here a hundred times before. He’s using this as an excuse so he won’t have to work!”

The rider that thinks this way is expecting the horse to reason like a human, like he himself does, which of course the horse is unable to do. In reality, the horse’s instinct has instantly told him that something changed, and that it could be dangerous, so he must watch out!

A likely explanation of his reaction is that he knows he is big and heavy, and if he steps onto too soft an area he could sink down to his withers and not be able to get up again, thereby making him easy prey for other animals. This is his instinct, a matter of survival, and that is why he will do everything possible to avoid such a situation.

**Example 2:** Sometimes there may be some object that the horse refuses to pass, for example a blanket hanging on the fence. Usually it is not a good idea to try to force him past it. On the contrary, we should work the horse a distance away to let him have some time to become totally relaxed. One way to approach this is to work with the horse in a circle in shoulder-in, in order to give him a task that will keep his mind busy and create an environment that feels safe to him. This will also bring him between the aids, make him give to the inside and make his frame rounder and deeper. When he is listening and has accepted working between the aids in this round frame, praise him but keep him there. Still in shoulder-in, ride him closer to what he is afraid of—not necessarily all the way up to it. At the moment the horse starts to tense or spook, increase your inside leg aid to tell him that he’s not allowed to leave the space. He is supposed to concentrate on his work and give to the inside leg—to remain in his work place. When you are able to pass what he is afraid of while in shoulder-in, praise him, and then little by little pass closer to the object, keeping the horse straighter and straighter, until the problem is gone. Once we have successfully passed, we must not forget to reward and praise him.

So, never punish a horse for being afraid. Doing so is asking him not to be a horse. Instead, correct him for not answering the inside leg, for not staying in between the aids. This is something he can understand.

***Punishing the horse when he spooks out of fear often makes the problem much worse.***

The horse will not develop confidence for an object as a result of being punished as he approaches it. He will instead associate the object with the punishment. So the next time that he finds himself in the same situation, he will be twice as afraid.

It is not often that we can understand why a horse is frightened. If we don’t understand the

reason, we have a tendency to think that the horse is either stupid or disobedient. Sometimes we have to accept the fact that he is afraid and move on from there. We do not need to have an answer for everything in order to evaluate how we should deal with the situation.

It is impossible to describe all situations that deal with the psyche of the horse. Therefore, one should use common sense when responding to each individual situation.

### REPETITION

While the psyche of the horse is an extensive subject, the brain of the horse works in a rather simple way. Often, when we begin to teach the horse something new, we think that it will take a long time, and that the rider must have a lot of patience. But in this context, we must also keep in mind that once the horse has learned a movement, he will never forget it.

***The horse learns when we repeat...again, and again, and again.***

And at the same time, we are making use of his fantastic memory. In principle, we could let a horse stand un-ridden for 5 years, and then, when we start to ride him again, discover that he has not forgotten a single movement.

To reinforce his memory, it is a good idea to reward him when he responds correctly.

### VARIATION

We often say that work should be varied. There are several reasons for this:

- So that the horse will not be overexerted
- To keep the horse happy in his work and in a good mood
- To keep the horse's attention

At the same time, it is important that we don't vary so much that the horse gets confused. The work should be planned so that he has a chance to keep up - so that there is continuity in the work. The best approach is to organize the work with your horse so that you pick a starting point, and then try to consistently follow a logical order when adding to and building up the training, instead of randomly switching from one thing to another.

### CONFIDENCE

It is very important that the horse has confidence in the rider and in the work that we ask of him. Confidence depends on many things. For instance, it is important that the horse respects us. Ask yourself if you have confidence in someone that you don't respect. The answer is "No." The same applies to the horse. Respect is not created with the whip, but by taking an authoritative, consistent, and at the same time caring manner with the horse.

***If the horse is to let us control him without resistance, he must trust us not to trick him or force him into situations that he cannot handle.***

For example, if a rider is teaching the horse to do a canter pirouette, and forces him to make the turn smaller than he is ready to perform—based on his level of technical ability, strength and balance—he will become afraid of the movement and lose some of his confidence for the rider. Teaching a horse flying changes when he is not at all ready for it is another example, and there are many more.

We, as riders, must learn to develop a feeling for how far we can go and for how much we can demand of the horse. We need to learn how to perceive those small signals from the horse that tell us when the horse is ready to do a little more.

It is also important that, once we have prepared the horse for a movement, all problems are put behind us, and only the movement itself is ahead of us. This way, both horse and rider are able to concentrate solely on that movement, providing the best chance for success, making learning easier for the horse, and keeping the horse calm.

## TEMPERAMENT

The temperament of the horse has a lot to do with how we handle him. We have all, at one time or another tried to lead a nervous horse. In this situation, it is common to feel the need to lead the horse by taking a firm hold with short reins. But in this case, if something turns up that the horse is afraid of, he will tend to react by using all his power to turn and run away as fast as possible (the instinct to flee).

If, instead, we lead the same horse with a little bit longer and looser reins, his reaction is often to jump around a little bit in the same spot, rather than to feel such a need to run. It is very important for the horse to feel, "***I am free to move.***" He wants to feel that, if a tiger jumps out of the bush, he is free to escape.

This also applies when we ride the horse. If we make him loose and supple, honestly on the bit and on the rider's aids, he is a much calmer horse and it takes much more to make him spook and

bolt.

***Regardless of how collected the horse is, he must have a feeling that he is free.***

## INFLUENCE

Our attitude toward the horse has a strong effect on him. As soon as we step into the stable, he is aware of, and is influenced by our moods. If we are nervous or stressed, it affects the horse, and it is difficult for him to concentrate on this work.

There is a big difference between riding on a Sunday morning, when we are free and relaxed, and have lots of time to fuss with the horse, compared to finding ourselves in the unfortunate situation of having to hurry to find the time to ride (“There’s a competition Saturday, but I really don’t have the time.”). Any comment on the potential outcome of this scenario is unnecessary. The worst thing for the horse is nervous, stressed or hysterical people. This kind of influence can destroy any horse.

Then how should we act toward the horse? There is no question that the horse feels safer and more sure of himself when he is handled by a person that he can trust and respect. Let me give you an example. We have all gone to school. At some point the regular teacher was absent and a substitute came to teach the class. The substitute might have been a nice, young teacher that thought, “If I am nice to the students, they will be nice to me in return.” So, she was very nice to them, praised them a lot and set no limits on their behavior. How did this turn out? Not much time passed before the nice, kind teacher had to leave the classroom with tears in her eyes. The students definitely didn’t treat her nicely. You might ask yourself how they could treat this kind teacher so badly. Those shameless students! But what really happened? A leader showed herself to the herd and at the same time displayed many signs of weakness. For that reason, the students chased her away immediately. Humans are also the kind of animal that requires a strong leader in order to feel safe.

Then, there is the kind of teacher that is afraid that the students will lose respect for him. He behaves almost hysterically, yells and admonishes even when there is no reason for it. He is stressed about every little thing and has a hard time talking with the kids. It takes them only two minutes longer than with the first teacher to discover that this one can’t even control himself. So sooner or later he will have to leave the classroom just as the first one did.

The third kind of teacher only needs to open the door to the classroom, and there is something in the air. The students immediately know that now they had better behave properly. This teacher almost never yells and doesn’t praise unnecessarily either. At the same time there is something

special about being praised by this teacher, when it does happen. There is peace in the classroom and everyone is quiet and focused.

If you asked the students which of these three teachers they trusted the most, there is no question that it would be the last one who they would rather listen to and who they would respect the most.

As mentioned earlier, it is extremely important to ***think before you act, and to use common sense***. When you can produce a horse that is happy and proud to be working for you, then you have achieved a great deal.

When we work with our horses it is important that the horse is open to learning. The following criteria indicate that the horse will be receptive:

- He is physically and mentally relaxed.
- He knows that he has a leader.
- He knows where his limits lie.
- He respects humans.
- He trusts humans.
- He is accustomed to answering signals from humans.
- He is healthy and sound.

(This chapter also pertains to the first pyramid in the system. See the chapter in Section 4 (Setting Goals and Developing a System) called The Pyramids.

Don't expect a horse that does not have good ground manners (has not been well started) to be willing to cooperate with his rider, or to be honestly on the aids. Such a horse will never relax and there will be a continuous discussion between horse and rider. The education of the horse starts on the ground. Truly, every time we are together with a horse we are educating him in one way or another.

One thing that horses can do better than people is to read body language. The horse picks up on the least little motion that we make. We give the horse many more signals than most people realize. This is one of the reasons for the many misunderstandings between horses and humans.

The moment we approach a horse, he forms an opinion about what is going on and reacts

accordingly. First he decides whether he is in danger. Quick movements, tense muscles and an elevated pulse in the rider give an aggressive impression, and the horse immediately becomes suspicious. So try to be calm and relaxed.

Next, the horse has to determine who will be the leader, he or the human. The most important goal for any living thing is to survive. Since the horse is the kind of animal he is, he wants to have a strong leader. A strong leader is someone who:

- can be trusted
- is calm and relaxed
- can make decisions and set limits
- is fair
- leads the way
- makes realistic demands
- takes responsibility
- respects the horse for what he is

When I am going to start working with a new horse, I always begin by establishing a relationship that enables us to work in a relaxed and effective manner. I want to make sure that we will concentrate on the work at hand instead of discussing who is who.

Before you step up to the horse, it is important to have an opinion and to have made some decisions about what is going to happen. Many riders feel a little unsure, don't have a clear idea of what to do, and consequently let the horse take the first step. As a result, the horse can easily think that it is he who is the leader. How the horse deals with the role of leader can vary from horse to horse. Some horses will test a little. Others might paw at us. Some riders think this is cute, but most often it is a test. If the rider accepts this behavior two things happen:

1. The horse moves freely into the rider's space.
2. The horse does something that causes the rider to respond.

Now the horse merely has to take a stride into the rider's space to feel home free and take up position as the leader. At this point, the rider mistakenly thinks that the horse is coming closer because he likes him. From this point on it could easily become all misunderstandings and corrections. That is, the rider responds to the horse, instead of the reverse.

Sometimes the rider gets so involved correcting the horse that he has no time left to give the horse clear signals about what he is supposed to do. The end result is that the poor horse becomes seriously confused. Letting the horse take the initiative and make the decisions, is to give him a responsibility that he is unable to handle in his situation. This makes him feel stressed, for which he is then punished.

A horse that tests is not directly disobedient. For him, it is a natural way to get answers. He does exactly the same when he is part of a herd moving freely. People who are not used to being around horses often find themselves in this situation. They don't really know how to behave, and as a result, they let the horse take the initiative. They think that by doing nothing, they will avoid doing anything wrong.

Always make a decision about what you are going to do before you approach a horse. The same applies to your riding. Don't let things happen. Make them happen instead. To do anything else is to set up a trap for the horse. This doesn't mean that you can't be good friends with your horse, or that everything has to be so serious all the time. But it must be the rider who decides when it is time to play and when it is time to work.

### HOW TO START WORKING WITH A NEW HORSE

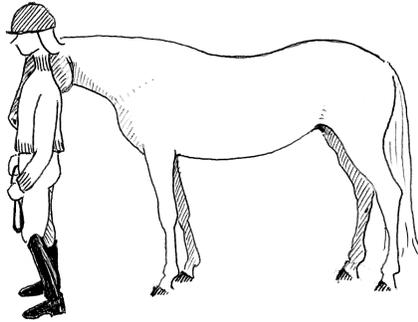
The following is my approach to working with a new horse. Let us imagine that the horse is in the arena and I am about to go up to him and establish a relationship between us that will make it possible to work effectively.

I walk up to the horse's head, calmly and with a straight back. While keeping a light hold of the reins I give him a solid pat on the neck. This is not to punish him, but to get his attention. At this point the horse should be paying attention to me and no one else. It is a waste of time talking to someone who isn't listening, and this applies to horses too.

I have a dressage whip in my right hand. While holding the whip in front of me and holding the reins very lightly, I ask the horse to take one step back. He should willingly take one or more steps back, and preferably also lower his head and neck. This way I send him out of my space. When he moves out of my space this is a signal that he accepts me as his leader. If the horse starts walking around me, I will continue until he steps straight backwards. Only then will I know that he accepts me as his leader. It is important not to use the reins to make the horse step back. Usually at this point, it is clear who the leader is.

Now I can start the work, which begins with teaching the horse to accept signals from the rider.

The horse should remain attentive to me and wait for the next signal. I stand with my back to the horse, in a position so that he stands a little to the side of and behind me. The horse should be



standing straight and outside of my space.

From now on the horse should do the same as I do. I'll walk a few steps forward and stop. The horse should do the same. When I lean forward a little and begin walking, the horse should also walk on. When I stretch up and stop, the horse should too. This is the horse's first task and I will repeat it until he responds correctly.

It is very important that the horse at no time steps into the rider's space or in front of the rider. If this happens, stand still and ask him to step back until he is in his place again. Now he can be rewarded for the first time. The horse was given a task and figured out how to respond correctly and now he begins to understand. After this, everything will be easier. I will repeat the same exercise several times more so the horse will feel successful.

At this point, I stop and turn toward the horse. I show him the whip which I should be able to touch him with all over his body without making him nervous. If this is possible, I know that the horse trusts me.

Now I turn away from the horse again, (I look forward and turn my back to the horse). Next I walk forward with short steps and a fairly upright body. The horse should do the same by walking forward with short steps. Then I take longer strides and the horse should again do the same as I do. I will continue to alternate between long and short strides and expect the horse to do the same without using the reins as a brake. It is best to start this work while on the track. Don't forget to reward the horse every time he answers correctly.

The next goal is to get the horse to follow me when I change direction by turning. The horse should follow me all over the arena without my having to pull on the reins. It is a good idea to turn to the left first as this is usually easier. Next, turn to the right. I do this by turning right rather sharply myself, moving towards his left shoulder. The horse should react by moving his

forehand around, and basically giving way to me. He may not touch me. So the horse, more or less, makes a turn on the haunches and learns to give way to my signals rather than to push back.

After a few minutes of this I have a horse that is attentive to me, is relaxed and has learned to work under the aids. The horse understands that he is the one that should respond to the signals from the rider. He has learned to follow the rider, which will be of great use when I begin to ride him.

This is the beginning of work in hand. There are many other exercises that can be done from the ground. The only limit is your imagination.

Of course, horses respond differently to this kind of work, as no two horses are exactly the same. But these are the basic principles and my starting point.

Always remember to use common sense!