

Temperament is one of the most important traits for buyers and users of horses. Environmental factors contribute to the shaping of behavior and temperament, and this information is important for horse owners and breeders establishing horse selection criteria for different activities and uses.

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Temperament is one of the most important traits for buyers and users of horses but is not included in many breeding programs so far. To do so requires knowledge of the environmental factors i.e. experiences shaping the behaviour and temperament of horses. It also requires a systematic approach and measures of several behavioural traits in more situations to get an idea of the more complex trait temperament.

Temperament is here defined as a set of individual differences in behavioural tendencies, called “traits” or “dimensions,” that are relatively stable across various kinds of situations and over the course of time. The focus of much research in Europe has been on behaviours fulfilling this definition. Mostly, behaviour has been observed in test situations which have been repeated with intervals of months or years. It has been found that e.g. fearfulness, patience, willingness to perform, gregariousness, activity, sensory sensitivity and reactivity to humans may be characterised as dimensions of temperament.

How these behaviours relate to the horses’ suitability for riding or other uses have only been scarcely studied so far. One problem is that what is considered good temperament by one rider may not be considered good temperament by another rider. However, there is no doubt that a very fearful or a very aggressive horse is an unwanted horse no matter what it has to be used

for.

That temperament is subject to genetic selection is indicated by several studies showing an effect of breed and sire on various behavioural traits. An effect of breed and sire has been shown on emotional reactions like fear of novelty and isolation, learning capacity and the predisposition to develop abnormal behaviour. However, most of the variation in temperament is probably due to environmental factors rather than genetic factors. Therefore selection for temperament may require correction for numerous environmental factors like feeding, housing and social environment. Another aspect to be aware of is the age at which temperament is measured. Early experiences like exposure to humans, social environment and handling has been shown to have an impact on the behavioural reactions of horses. Besides, the mother will have an influence both genetically and via maternal behaviour. Recent research indicate that horses' temperament and suitability for riding activity can be predicted from 8 months of age but not before that.

The actual selection procedure when selecting for any trait including temperament is a continuous process and it has to be developed in cooperation between breeders and scientist in order to do the job. Breeders have to define the purpose of the test while determining the content and how to standardize it may be a cooperative task. Validation of the test is a job for scientists but afterwards the test may have to be changed and again the breeders will be involved in deciding on the content and standardization. A temperament test may serve several purposes besides selection e.g. matching the horses to the right job or to the right person.