

How “natural horsemanship” concepts make training the show horse simpler, no matter what your discipline. Thinking like a horse, Lindsay gives a step-by-step plan to teach show ring skills.

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Natural Horsemanship

The main concepts are:

- Understanding the horse’s natural behavior
- Avoiding training by force
- Considering the horse’s point of view

In short, thinking like a horse!

The goal of training for the show ring is to communicate to the horse so that he “plays” like a musical instrument:

- I ask
- The horse understands
- And he responds

The jumper must respond instantly to the rider's decision. The reiner must guide with softness and lightness. The equitation rider's aids must be imperceptible.

So what gets in the way of this concert between horse and human?

Anthropomorphization: attributing human qualities to our horses.

There are three significant ways in which horses think differently than humans:

- They are prey, not predators
- They have a strong herd/hierarchy mentality
- They learn differently - significantly through repetition, not reason or logic.

Horses are Prey Animals and Have a Strong Fright/Flight Instinct

Horses perceive the world differently than humans. The situation of their eyes allows them to see dangers around them that humans miss. Their ears maneuver like radar, picking up sounds and tones unnoticed by their riders.

They prefer minimal risk. They are apt to startle and flee danger rather than face the danger to investigate. Horses are claustrophobic - they will continue to "flee" when trapped. The training process involves risk, and when we take the show on the road, we enter an even riskier situation, according to the horse. We need to use risk in the training program – stretch ourselves and our horses without over facing them.

In what ways do we "trap" our horses? Conflicting aids, incorrectly adjusted equipment, abrupt timing, to name a few. We must gradually introduce restraint as a training tool and combine aids in ways that are understood by the horse and produce higher level skills.

Horses are Social Animals and Are Comfortable Within a System of Hierarchy

The trainer must be the alpha. The rider must be readable and decisive. We make numerous decisions when showing a horse – how deep into this corner? What length of stride do I expect here? In what frame do I want my horse to perform this maneuver? There are subtle ways a rider can give away her alpha status in an everyday training session.

Horses and Humans Have Brain Differences

Horses learn through repetition, not logic. A horse learns a skill by physically repeating that movement a number of times.

In training a skill, through the process of repetition, a rider needs to be precise with the location and in the delivery of the cue. As a result, that cue can be duplicated to ask for the skill again. A horse who has been taught that a left lead is maintained with his rider's left leg at the girth and right leg distinctly behind the girth will connect the dots when the counter canter and, eventually, flying change is introduced.

A rider must have a plan as to which of his body parts affect which part of his horse when he delivers a cue. That cue or stimulus will be followed by a response from the horse – either correct or incorrect. The rider must respond instantly with reward or negative reinforcement. This can be applied to teaching a new maneuver such as a turn on the forehand or neck reining. This process is repeated over and over again until the horse “gets it” multiple times in a row.

The difference between punishment (for acts mental/willful in origin) and resistance or pressure (for all other wrong responses) needs to be clearly understood by the trainer. Applying punishment to fear, for instance, will frustrate the training process. There are specific reasons a horse might give the wrong response and there are also appropriate reactions of the rider.

If we have systematically built a language which our horses understand in the home arena, it will be a logical step when we take the show on the road into an unfamiliar environment. Everything the horse has come to understand about who is alpha and what various cues mean apply to the warm up ring and then progress to the show ring. Distractions, misbehaviors and even wrecks on the show grounds can often be avoided by thinking like a horse!