

An Equine Perspective

A VIEW FROM THE HOOF

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Have you ever wondered. . . "What does my horse see?" or, "Why does my horse act that way?" Well, in order to gain a better understanding of horses and their behavior it is important to start at the beginning. The following is an attempt to provide a better understanding of horses, their behavior and how the **THOMAS HERDING TECHNIQUE** can improve your understanding of your horse's environment and thus the relationship you have, or want to establish, with your horse.

When you look at your horse you are sure of what you see. Yet, how often have you taken the opposite approach? That is, asking yourself what your horse sees when it looks at you. What environmental influences along with the animals own instincts combine to form the equine perspective? Naturally, the equine perspective is one very different from our own and, all too often, we blindly approach our horse without ever considering what "*A View From The Hoof*" is really like.

Obviously, we humans do not live in an environment with the same parameters as the horses we own, train, ride for fun, or even use as a work animal. The horse, due to its survival needs, is a creature that lives in singular moments of time, which allows them to be very successful in their natural herd environment and the larger world of nature. This is not to say that a horse does not develop some individualism within a herd, or the world in general. Rather, it simply means that from birth the horse is equipped with all of the basic instincts it needs to survive and will still demonstrate precocial behavior, i.e., independent activity at birth. As the horse matures and gains experience in the world its' basic instincts are blended with its' acquired instincts (lessons learned in the real world) here the **Individual Horse Personality**, or IHP, begins to define the horse as a part of, as well as apart from, the herd.

The moment the foal enters the world it has every basic instinct it will ever have or need for its immediate survival. In addition, its mind is also ready for learning so that the foal doesn't just survive, it thrives and becomes the next generation of smarter, better horses. Learning provides for "survival of the fittest." By the time the young foal is entering the yearling stage there is a divergence between the basic or **default response** and the acquired or **learned response**. This means, that while the young horse is still quite dependent on the social and family structure for guidance, he or she is starting *come in to their own*. To the horse, its' IHP is essential for not only surviving herd life but also for thriving and learning to fit into the hierarchy of the herd. That is, each horse must find its own place within the herd and its IHP will play a major role in that effort and in the ultimate survival of the herd and the individual horses that make up that herd. Gaining a better understanding of the horse requires that we learn to view the world from the perspective of the horse, for it is from this perspective that all else follows.

In order to begin to comprehend the horse perspective one must consider both the *basic instincts*, which would include the very basic "flight" response and the *acquired instincts*, which would include responses, other than flight, that the horse learns as it matures. We can call the **basic instinct** response the *default response* and the **acquired instinct** response the *learned response*. In truth, it is within the *learned responses* that we can begin to discover the *why* and the *how* of horse behavior.

Acquired instincts are molded by numerous factors that include life in the herd, environmental factors, interactions with other animals and humans and various other stimuli. Additionally, it is within these responses where we, as humans, seek to train the horse to suite our needs. With a domesticated horse it is the humans who largely influence acquired instincts. Both good and bad behaviors have their roots in the acquired instincts; however, to build an effective approach to training your horse one must never forget the horses' basic instincts. This portion of the horses' psyche can never be removed or altered entirely as it represents the survival mechanism of the animal. To better comprehend both the instinctive behavior and learned behavior of the horse it may be helpful to view them as a series of lines on a continuum. For example, singular moments in time might appear as a series of dashes, - - -, and these dashes, in large part, will represent the basic instinct or the *default responses*. In contrast, the acquired instincts or the *learned responses*, which eventually become the IHP, may appear more like this, ~ ~ ~ ~, more elongated moments of time that allow for the building, learning and remembering of all new stimulus. Keep in mind, however, that the basic or **default response** is forever locked within the **learned response** and, when all else fails, it will take over. Gaining a better understanding of these important components of horse behavior will aid in bringing the equine view of the world into greater focus.

As it is with many animals, and humans, the time when a horse has the most capacious brainpower for learning and remembering is when they are young. From early on the **default response** is beginning to rely more and more on its' **learned responses**, and thus

the *puzzle of equine life* has begun to form. Indeed, by now, a picture of existence has begun to come into focus for the yearling.

This puzzle for the equine is made up of three components: sensory, auditory and environmental. The first two, sensory and auditory, represent the purely basic instinct parameters and, as they are generally governed by natural urges, are used to interpret much of the natural environment for the horse. All instinctive or natural urges, along with other sensory and auditory input work in conjunction to form an interpretive picture for the horse. This allows the horse to find its' place within the herd and the environmental setting in which it finds itself. It is important to remember that the environment is a large piece of the puzzle that is the equine life and it accounts for much of **who** the horse is as it associates those various environmental experiences. In the yearling stage of life the basic instincts (**default**) may seem more exaggerated at times as the acquired (**learned**) responses become more useful and established in the mind of the horse. This is a difficult stage, a time when numerous and varied situations present themselves to the yearling; however, it allows each horse to hone its IHP to become *what* and *who* they are. As they learn how their particular puzzle fits together this can be a time of rapid learning and associated memories. In this case their graph line may appear much like this: - - - ~~~ ~ ~~~- - -, (- - = basic or default instincts; ~~~, = associated memories of the acquired instincts, ~, = associated learning of the acquired instinct). The underlying basic or **default** instincts mixes with a string of acquired or **learned** instincts and singular experiences to form a blend of memories and associations, ultimately forming the horses' perception of its' world and thus, its' behavior.

In a natural environment, the wild, the herd dynamic assists the young horse by providing a series of checks and balances, which are contained within the social interactions of the herd. In this environment, the puzzle of the horses' life generally remains unchanged from day to day as all the pieces of the puzzle are in place and somewhat static. Conversely, when your horse is living in a pasture or barn setting the pieces of the puzzle change dramatically and, often, very little, if anything, resembling a natural environment is ever within reach of the average domesticated horse. While the basic sensory input is there, the environment for which the horses' senses and instincts are geared has been transformed by the addition of humans and domestication. Fortunately for the horse, and for us, **adaptability** (assimilation) is a key element to the evolutionary survival of the horse and they are truly master of this element.

Horses do extremely well as a domesticated species; of course, they do just as well left to their own environment. However, when the environment contains a more human element and we ask the horse to adapt to our world and live on human terms within the parameters that we dictate, the mere fact that we can approach a horse in an open space or a stall is a testament to the true nature of the animal. Often, if our horse deviates at all from the way in which we expect him to act we blame the bad behavior and accompanying stress on the horse when, in fact, it is the human who has changed the environment and therefore the behavior. Naturally, the environment has a great deal to

do with the horse IHP, or learned instinct, and changing this means changing specific pieces of the puzzle. It is easier to supplement various other pieces of the puzzle by providing nutrition, health care, proper breeding strategies and gelding than to remove specific portions of environmental stimulus to which the horses' basic instincts are geared. When pieces of the horses' environmental puzzle go missing, he must fill these in, supplementing for himself that which he cannot perceive or experience naturally. Often, these supplemented responses and behaviors are viewed by humans as stress issues or simply bad behavior when, to the horse, it is a normal way of dealing with the life which he is experiencing. As noted earlier, the horse is an animal that, by its' very nature, experiences life in singular moments of time. Therefore, associated learning will grow into longer strands of associated memories, which evolve directly from the horses' environment. Knowing this and understanding this process will aid in developing a greater understanding of your horses' behavior or horse behavior in general and once we gain an understanding of this process we can begin to observe various **triggers** (behaviors formed from various stimuli), which result in specific behaviors. These triggers may cause the horse to call on the **default behavior** or the **learned behavior** depending on the stimulus. For example, was that a leaf blowing across the field or a predator coming in for attack? Naturally the horse will fill in the blanks in any way he can if he has not been provided with a **learned** behavioral alternative. This is why yearling training is such a highly sensitive time as acquired (learned) instincts are rapidly advancing, making hardcore injections of information that require serious concentration, often overwhelming and confusing the horse. When the horse is confused, a default trigger may be activated and negative behavior may result. During this time, it is important not to "overload" your young horse. Short bursts of information, daily, with extremely attentive handling and communication are paramount; otherwise, the **flight response** might be engaged with every incoming stimulus; try sitting to that. In order to survive in the wild, horses had to evolve as an animal that associates with immediate stimulus in order to live in the natural environment. Immediate stimulus association and learning are the guiding lights of the **acquired instincts** creating an **actively mental and emotional horse**. Consequently, **positive** triggers are very important and negative human interactions and/or associations should be avoided at all costs. This is a time when proper communication between horse and human is a most influential training tool.

Young adult, the middle or prime years, is the time, if we are so inclined, that we would be riding or working our horse in some discipline. In large part, most of the horses' puzzle is complete by now making it easier to observe, by virtue of your horses' quirks, negative behaviors or stress issues. That is if your horse has supplanted (filled in the blanks) with bad behaviors if certain, positive, behaviors were not learned during the growth years. It is important to note here that your horse can be re-trained and, as noted earlier, possesses a very capably evolved associated learning dynamic that works in synchronicity with the associated memory dynamic, all governed of course by the basic instinct dynamic. At this time our graph line might look something like this: - - - ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

- - -. This is the time when an animal that lives in singular moments of time can,

indeed, be expected to concentrate now that he or she has acquired a more complete puzzle from which to draw.

Periods of intense concentration, which we would view as "training" periods may appear like this on our line graphic: - - ~ ~~~ - ~ - - - ~~~, and as the stimulus is lengthened a bit by a few repetitions, our graphic will appear more like this: ~ ~ ~- - - ~. This, then, becomes an associated learning dynamic for our horse, i.e., if this happens, then I do this; if I hear that or see this, I do the following. An immediate, positive reward or experience will link the associated learning into an associated memory – **this is a trigger** – and you want it to be a **positive** one, not negative. If your horse is uncomfortable or his view of the puzzle is skewed in some way, he will **instinctively** twist it back into an acceptable form, which in our view, may be displayed in the form of being stress related or simply bad behavior. The non-forward thinking equine does not reason out possible results of their behavior; rather, they react **instinctively** in either a **basic (default) or acquired (learned)** manner. Therefore, uncovering and handling issues such as these requires an ethological study of your horses' IHP as well as an assessment of your horses' fears. If the triggers causing bad behaviors can be disclosed, they can be dealt with. Fear assessment through a process called **reverse association** (a process whereby the sequence of associated memories are broken down to their associated learning components, which formed them, thereby uncovering the associated triggers that set a specific sequence of negative events in motion), can work to re-socialize your horse to its' current environment thus supplementing the missing pieces of its' puzzle with more positive stimulus resulting in positive behaviors.

Older horses have deep-rooted associations and along with that come deep-rooted, horse supplanted, pieces that "fill in the blanks" with various other behaviors that become habitual comfort zones for your horse and they can be good or bad. With much more associated memory in place, there is less and less room for associated learning; however, this does not necessarily mean that new learning associations and improved socialization cannot occur. New learning and new socialization behaviors can occur once you understand the IHP and the makeup of the acquired instinct. It is impossible to have a long lasting influence on your horse and reconfigure your horses' acquired instincts without first studying the dynamics of their creation. The ***Thomas Herding Technique*** protocol seeks to provide a deeper understanding of individual horse behavior. The blending of all that is the horse, sensory, auditory and environmental is what makes a horse a horse and gives it its' IHP. To understand this puzzle, one must seek an alternate perspective, one must seek ***–A View From The Hoof***