

# A View from the Hoof

## The Acquired Instinct & IHP

By

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The first step to truly understanding your horse, as has been echoed throughout, is to gain as clear an understanding of his or her view of the world as can be done. Recognizing and comprehending the *circle* of equine reality is the first part of the journey, the second is interpreting the processes within it. Equine life is fed from three basic parts; sensory, voice and environment. Two *instinctive parameters* emerge from these, the *Basic Instinct*, and the *Acquired Instinct*. The **AI**, (acquired instinct), has an interesting companion along with it, and that is the **IHP**, or *Individual Horse Personality*, which itself harbors another form of IHP, individual horse propensities. This seems to be a complicated mess at best, though each segment works well together, the equines' longevity and durability speaks for itself. Solving any mysteries within the equine world necessitates an understanding of that world, or at least the attempt thereof. The many pieces of the puzzle are not visual in cause but often visual only in effect, and therefore treatment of the effect is far too often all that is doctored. Physical restraints and the will of man upon the equine through force is sadly but understandably often our answer. Though it is frequently the environment *we* have lovingly created for the horse that is directly responsible for the cause of the effect we are trying to treat and handle. Putting a band aid on a puncture wound will not ward off the infection inside. Equine cosmetics are nice and fun and saleable, but rarely go deep enough to truly circumvent the cause. But if the effect we see satisfies us, the horse then, of course, must be satisfied as well. If we do not *observe* the stress we are causing, then it must not exist.

The AI breaks apart from the basic instinct at a very early age and immediately begins its journey of learning and discovery; environment being the teacher. The *natural environment* is all of life within the herd, and the horse is well equipped for his life in nature, physically and mentally. For when the horse is born the foal has a mental capacity for retention, if it didn't, the horse would stand little chance of evolutionary survival as a prey animal. It is an easy assumption to make that if the natural horse environment controls associated learning within the herd; it does the same thing, outside the herd in. When we remove the equine from the natural world he is equipped to handle and live in, only the environment has been changed, (an artificial environment is a domesticated environment) not the capacity or the method of learning within that environment. The horse is still a horse, not the pet we often treat them as. The environment

consists of everything coming at the horse everyday that is translated and processed as life experiences. The way he or she is handled, who or what it is around or exposed to, indeed every aspect of the *controlled* natural world containing our human element is the environment our horse perceives and experiences, and that is the dictator of his learning. This element of associated learning begins long before any actual *training* is done, the environment is the foundation from which all else stems, and is very often the keeper of unseen stress and behavior issues we only observe much later, so we only treat what we see. Acquired instincts are formed out of the very dependable associated learning dynamic. When I did this, this happened, so therefore whenever I do this, this should happen. That translates into, *the mountain lion came at me but I ran, so therefore if he comes, I will always run*. For associated learning to have merit, it must have the quality of immediate stimulus reaction, ISR, which means, tell me once I live, tell me twice, I may not. Equines do not have the evolutionary luxury of hesitation, ask then run just isn't a very efficient survival technique for a prey animal. Because of this, the ability to reason is limited at best and if it is present in small degrees, it is controlled by associated memory and not by actual thought as we understand it. Associated learning slides neatly into the gaps of the basic instinct foundation; running from danger is the basic instinct dynamic, recognizing or *sensing* the danger, is the acquired instinct dynamic. In other words, running is of course natural, knowing when to run, is learned. If this was not the case, the horse would be running from everything all day long. The acquired instinct in essence serves as the control factor of the basic instinct, which is why it is developed along the way. This is also called *adaptability*, fitting the self into the environment is a powerful but basic survival dynamic. It should be quite clear then, why an artificial environment and herd dynamic, has to be handled with care. Acquired instincts are combined with the basic instinct as a survival necessity, the AI is created from the string of associated memories, and the associated memories are created from the associated learning dynamic. Associated learning is shaped from the stimulus received from the environment and anything penetrating the *circle* is associated as the *trigger* mechanism. Many steps backward are needed to truly make the attempt to understand what is causing the outward results, be them stress related or behavioral.

The trigger can be anything, and *is* anything that affects associated learning and is by survival necessity, *associated* immediately, lest there be no second chance. True learning ability here is self evident. Another example of why this element makes it a necessity that your response to stimulus, or the stimulus offered the horse, (both positive reward and corrective action), be given immediately as well. What the trigger is associated with determines how it is interpreted by the horse. How it is interpreted by the horse depends again, on the factors of its environment and the associated memories already stored. (That is why imprinting the foal can be so rewarding, for the associated memory links are nonexistent or limited at best). Being a man I have heard it said to me many times, *Oh my horse doesn't like men*. I very much doubt that, that is a human spin on an equine issue. Humans are very decisive on who we like or who we do not care for, and indeed, horses are as well in many ways, but the motor that runs this is very different. If you say your horse doesn't like men, that may well seem the case, but it is more

what a man may represent based on an associated memory; a man being the trigger. This can be quickly overcome because the horse hasn't decided not to like men in general. A new associated memory that is positive can go a long way.

The AI being fitted amidst the basic instinct sequence of gaps that pulsate along like a heartbeat is directly linked to the ability to learn. The higher the cognizant ability, the higher functioning the animal. The larger the spaces in the basic instinct sequence, the more capacity for learning. This can be different, from horse to horse. From out of this dynamic of the AI is birthed the individual horse personality, or IHP. It is how the horse interprets what is stored within the associated memory that facilitates the development of the IHP. The IHP being the horse we see and know is the end result of a long line of unseen driving forces. The IHP is comprised of many influencing factors and coexists with the AI. These two dynamics have shared influence with one another and together serve as monitor of the basic instinct. Even though much of the IHP is stemmed from the components of the AI, individualism is equally as powerful from the onset. So much so that it can become its own trigger mechanism, and these are yet another form of IHP, this being the individual horse *propensities*. These propensities are blended from traits given the horse by his sire and dam, and the experiences that stem from the basic dynamics of the AI. It is within this that tendencies can become normal behavior and often are natural for the horse, yet we envision them as problems or issues. This long line of events can be linked back to the foundation of learning and development which is governed by the environment the horse is exposed to, which in turn then is indeed the *herding dynamic* the horse is naturally equipped to survive in. It can be said by many that their horse has certain inclinations or habits, some of which annoy us. However there is a difference between a stress or behavior issue, and a behavior dynamic. It must be remembered that these tendencies stem in large part from the acquired instinct, and the AI is any instinct that is not directly linked to the basic instinct. Knowing the difference between a troublesome stress-related behavior and individual equine expression is very important. Stress issues are inherently linked to behavior, though behavior is not necessarily linked to anything stressful. Behavior can also be associated with equine propensities and these are often presented within the communication in some form. Expressions of any kind are communicating something and the things we see in our horses are these expressions, though we do not always envision from where they come.

Expression being the communicated equine, then anything communicated can also be translated as language. Here again, as with stress and behavior, expressions are communicated to us in various forms, (propensities or habits), but equine language is not necessarily governed by these expressions. The fact that they are linked so closely, however, creates what is in essence a dialect, or an *accent*, on the equine language. Equine language and expression can be as complicated and diverse as human communication. American and British accents on the same language if you will, and within that there are often different meanings for the same word and so on and so forth based on interpretation. All this makes equine semantics every bit as capricious as our own. There is a fundamental parameter of the equine language stemming from the basic

instinct, which is in turn influenced by how the individual expresses his or herself, which draws from the acquired instinct. Ears back for one can have a very different meaning in a given circumstance, than ears back for another. Interpretation being of utmost importance, for it is within the interpretation, or *misinterpretation* on our part that many problems can occur. It isn't the horses' job to understand what we are saying or trying to say, in the survival scheme of things, he has no need to do so. If we wish to have an impact, an influence within the circle, we have to work to understand all of the elements within it, communication being our best friend or worst enemy. For just like there are many different expressions coming from our horse, there can be just as many imparted expressions from us to our horse. We know when what we say, even when in a different way, often means the same thing as some other way of saying it. But our horses do not. They are not privy to our many forms of expressions that often overlap each other. Another example of why making consistency of communication on our part, in any form, so very important.

Do all of these forms of expression and communication dialects then translate into what would be the *thinking horse*? The seasoned horse does seem to show clear signs of anticipation after all, and anticipating the future could be interpreted as *thought*. Thought can be described in many ways and has within it many levels, reason being one of them, anticipation another. The horse anticipates a treat or being let in or out it is true, but these are stemmed from associated memories and their triggers. Your actions and approach prior to an act conveys your intentions long before you realize. When you ride, your horse may well seem to be anticipating your next move, yet he may still spook at a darting squirrel even though he has seen them before. A horse's thought capacity is dictated by his learning capacity, which translates into his associated memories and recognition of triggers. This combination allows him to anticipate by linked associations, not reason the future from actual thought and conjecture as we do. Though often we may think our horse knows more than we do at times and treats us better than some people do. This is because the horse is not blown about by a capricious nature like we humans are; their survival depends on consistency of action, where ours often depends upon imagination and innovation. Acquired Instincts and IHP allow for many correlations between us, opening the door for close bonding and even likeness, horses even dream. We've probably all listened to a whinny as they slept, and watched them kicking their feet as if galloping about. Yet equine *thought* comes without postulation. They do not distinguish size as we do, nor time, and care nothing of your hairstyle or the fashionable accoutrements you bestow upon them. These are whimsical human propensities, and often I wonder how we are truly seen, when viewed from the hoof.