

A View From The Hoof

Horse Behavior in Focus; *concentration without reason*

By;

Kerry M. Thomas

Equine Ethological Researcher

Founder of Thomas Herding Technique

Focus and concentration, two words that carry with them a basic idea, are often times much easier for us to say, than enact. When we think of what focus means, and when we consider how we concentrate on things, we can easily say that these things are important to gaining success. In life we must *stay focused* on our goals if we wish to achieve them, or we must *concentrate* on this task to get it completed successfully. Even now, as I sit here and write, I am attempting to focus on what I am doing and just how I want to say it, yet my *focus* is swirling within a streaming thought process. If you think about when we focus on things, it is actually a difficult thing to do when there are other stimuli around us, though we have logic to go along with those intruders, so they generally do not inhibit us. What does this mean? As you are reading this essay, or a book, or whatever, your ears and sense of touch and even eyes are bringing to you the various sounds, smells and sensations stirring about, all the while you continue to read. You know that you just heard the heater running, the door shut, the wind blowing, the car door or a horn, or you just felt your cat rub against your leg, the heat of the coffee mug perhaps? All these things happen around you, yet because you reason them out, you have what amounts to *explanations* for these various things, you can yet *concentrate* on this read, or a certain task. Having *reason* as your governor, you can maintain a relaxed disposition. Focus is your ability to direct your attention to a task, concentration is your ability to absorb what it is you are focusing on; reason is the link that allows the two to connect. Imagine then, focus and concentration, without the power of *reason* to successfully connect the two halves for learning. Imagine relying on the dynamics of environmental Assimilated Imprinting and your Acquired Instincts, as your bridge between the two. Imagine you are a horse. Would this then change the way in which you attempt to teach? It very well should.

To understand a prey animals' *focus* and *reactions* to perceived stimulus, one must start at the beginning. Comprehending the driving force behind the evolutionary push forward starts by gaining an understanding of the processes of *concentration* as it works for the prey animal which

is driven solely by the unique conditions of the primary predator. For the horse, a relatively large animal, the list of predators is not as broad as it is with other prey animals; however the reactions to fear are a uniform idea as it is with most any prey animal living in a group or band, herd or pod where survival of the whole comes with sacrifices. In the wild the horse's survival depends a great deal on the ability to counteract an assault. We all know that the horse is a fight or flight animal, and this mechanism has been the most successful autonomic survival technique the horse has come up with, or else another would have evolved. The ability to outrun many of its would-be attackers does not come without its faults; running at full speed the prey animal's senses are diminished. (Lions depend a great deal on their prey concentrating on what is behind them, because the animal can then easily be ambushed or forced into a trap). Here the main focus is to not be the last horse in the line as they run close together pushing one another along; a race driven by the fear of what's behind. The mechanics of the body steal energy from one place and direct it to another; in elevated states of anxiety and activity, your horse is doubtful to learn anything useful, but in the wild, it has survived to see another day. This is a fact of survival, pushing the issue with your horse when your horse is in a heightened state of stress, leaves behind only negative triggers. An attempt to truly understand focus and concentration from a prey animals' point of view, and affective teaching techniques to be applied to the prey animal, can only stem from an understanding of the predators it is equipped to evade.

We've all heard of the sad cases of animal trainers being attacked by their tigers, their long time trusted chimpanzees, or bears, or even dogs. These attacks come from out of the blue, and from no real perceived fault of the trainer. Never has the animal been mistreated, not fed, forced to fight for its food or water or probably even breeding rights. Yet the attack still came. This is a direct example of focus and concentration connected by natural survival instincts, be them acquired via environment, or imprinted; layer positive trigger atop positive trigger as often as you wish, you can never eradicate the underlying principles of survival. Predatory focus and concentration differs from prey focus and concentration in one main area, survival. The puma has to kill if it wants to keep eating; the horse has to avoid death, if it wants to keep eating. Even here, the dynamics of focus and concentration are the same, both are operating without reason and only the reactions to the triggers differ, with the basic goals one in the same. A good example of this can be seen in a daily occurrence in many homes or farms or city streets around the world. If you have cat in your life, your domesticated tabby offers you any number of instances. A true and unfailing test of focus in this predatory species is its uncanny ability to truly focus on an object. Be it a fly buzzing around at lightning speed or the string dangling from your hand. This is a reactionary, basic instinct dynamic of survival, for your cat isn't considering that you just picked the object up, and that you are the cause of the bouncing ball of yarn; the yarn itself is the focal point. Animal training for the predatory species is obviously associated with risks, but the techniques are very similar; control of triggers and associations stemming from the basic instincts of that species. The fact that your horse and cat are two different species is quite obvious, but the dynamics of associated or *Assimilated Imprinting*, which govern their survival, are very closely related. When I want to remind myself of this, I often think back to

what I call, the Lucy Experiment. A young tabby cat I called Lucy was a stray I felt sorry for and started feeding. After awhile she manipulated her way into the house to eat, and then ran back out when she was done. Soon she decided the house was a good place to hang out, but our other house cat didn't quite like sharing her space, so to avoid losing half the shelves and glassware, I would grab Lucy when she was finished eating and put her out on the porch with her water bowl. Soon she associated eating and her food bowl with not only food but safety, for she knew I wasn't going to grab her up until she was done eating. This space became her home base, as if in a game of tag. Whenever she saw me coming, she would run to the bowl and stand as if she were eating, and look at me as if to say, "I'm still eating!" Whenever I would reach down for her, she would hide, run away. She has been pretty much a house cat for quite some months, and yet even now if I go to reach down for a scratch, she scurries off like a streak of lightning. She has associated that action from me, as a negative trigger, and reacts to it accordingly. This is an example of how the Assimilated Imprinting dynamic works, and it works because it is a basic fundamental of survival; focus and concentration are subject to its principles. Ever had a pet at the door, or a horse at the gate, and when you go to open it to let them in or out, they suddenly run off or back away? Ever walked out in the pasture, and just couldn't catch that pony, even though he was just dying to get in a few moments ago...? You've just entered the world of focus and concentration, without reason.

It is essential to have an understanding of the similarities in principle between the predator and the prey, for it allows us to then understand and manage their differences. Your ability to comprehend the way in which the horse *focuses*, will have much to do with the success you have in the goals you are shooting for. No matter if your horse was born in your barn, with you present, and lives his early impressionable years in the presence of humans, there is no replacing the basic instincts operating on the natural herd dynamics. Any attempt to impose your will, will be met with an assault of some kind, seen or unseen. It is the unseen that does the most long term damage, for it is then a trigger you didn't know existed, tucked away as a safety feature to be used at some other time. The fact that your horse lives in a world of spaced out moments of time blended together is a self preservation feature that allows the horse to call on particular triggers for immediate response, as fresh in his mind as if it happened a moment ago, even if it happened years ago. Because of the way the horse is designed for survival, one thing done wrong but then corrected, has the potential to do just as much damage psychologically, as the thing done wrong each time. Many of the *out-of-the-blue* reactions of your horse, that you haven't seen before erupt from a negative association based upon a stimulus that happened a long time ago. This is why you so often only see the reaction, or the response, and not the cause. Doctoring the affects of seemingly recurring negative reactions to things that truly do not warrant it, is merely placing a band aid on the issue. The horse that shy's on the trail from seemingly normal stimulus, or perhaps no visible or audible stimulus whatsoever, is doing so because his focus and concentration are governed on the principle of associated learning. This form of assimilation is what allows the horse to have the best chance for survival. He is not reasoning that he is in your round pen, along a trusted trail with trusted rider, or in the safety of your corral. No matter the

goals you have for your horse, his goal is to survive. If you have caused your horse to shy by entering the stall too fast, or reaching for its ears from a peripheral blind spot, as two of nearly a million possible examples, you have imprinted him or her, and thus a trigger has been filed. Ironically, it is because of this natural ability to assimilate, that with continued proper approaches on our part, that trigger may never erupt. But rest assured, a prey animals' survival dynamics do not allow for it to erase a memory, another shared coefficient with its counterpart. This is why a predatory animal can attack without any outward provocation and why great care in consistency for both prey and predator, must be accompanied by an understanding of its true basic instincts. This is extremely important because everything and anything you do with or for your horse, or in the presence of your horse, is being documented lest it be essential in the future as a trigger that will aid in survival.

As is the truth for any animal, the greatest degree of learning anything has everything to do with how the information is presented. If you one time had a bad experience on a roller coaster, or a bus, or a plain, or ate bad seafood, chances are the very thought of or smell of or sight of it, may well bring with it horrid memories and even fear. This happens for every species, prey and predator alike. This is a learned response. Learned responses have two parts; they are either a direct reaction to a direct stimulus, or they are a response to an associated stimulus. You are afraid of motorcycles because you crashed before, as opposed to you are afraid of motorcycles because you just past by an accident. For your horse, he may not be reacting to the tiny little bird suddenly taking flight at his feet directly, but he may be reacting to it because the action is associated with something negative he/she has reason to fear. Assimilated Imprinting is both the cause of this reaction, and also the best chance to limit its associated affects. By monitoring the influx of stimuli in the artificial human environment you start to have greater control over the Assimilated Imprinting dynamic. This opens the door for greater results when you are training your horse and he or she needs to focus. In a loose sense of the word, this is how your horse *learns*. If I feel a heightened sense of anxiety in your presence, do you think I can ever hope to find a sense of safety and comfort, while in your presence? Do you yourself like to be *told* to do something, or rather *asked* to help? The point is, no matter the species, when your blood is up, you are less likely to learn anything, or even be able to focus, much less retain information or make good decisions. If this is obviously true, then the opposite also, must be true. The world of subtly shows us that just because something is loud and makes a lot of noise, doesn't mean it is correct. Purchasing a horse without having an ethological check-up is like buying a used car and trusting the salesman when he tells you, *oh the car is sound, I knew the previous owner*. The same is true for your horse.

The inquisitive natural behavior of the social horse allows for a tremendous amount of amazing *learning*. Because Assimilated Imprinting works naturally, is continuous and at all times in action for your horse, the more calm the environment and approach, the more *natural* is the associated learning. Positive and negative stimulus and/or triggers are equally etched into the Assimilated Imprint memory banks; keeping in mind that any stimulus package, if you will,

related to a high stress, high anxiety, blood up kind of experience, makes the only avenue of association for the focus and concentration without reason, purely negative. This also applies to any training technique or new obstacle presented in an anti-survival mode. Anything delivered in a stressful environment, either environmentally or humanly imposed, can be seen and *imprinted*, as a thing to be wary of in the future. This is why little quirks are at times present, and why your horse may do something correct ten times in a row, and then out of the blue, seem to lose his/her head and *focus*. This is not a sign of horse behavior out of focus, but rather an example of equine focus in operation.

The fact that focus and concentration have everything to do with the ability to *learn* in all animal species, knowing the dynamics of the Assimilated Imprinting process and how it affects the way in which your particular animal views the world is paramount to any training protocols. In fact, training protocols implied or imposed without an understanding of this, presents a plethora of potential problems. You need only watch horses working an obstacle course at an event, to see examples of this *potential with-holding* behavior. Whether you are introducing something new, or trying to reveal the layers of imprinted issues, the best philosophy is that less is indeed more. This then opens the way for the concept of REM training, (Restless Eye Movement), as a key to both testing the depth of any perceived issue, and introducing a new task. The casual introduction of stimuli in a relaxed state often has a more lasting effect, and can be a clever aid to any communication of information between you and the horse. This touch and go method works because of the way in which the horse understands his puzzle of life; one moment at a time. The basic dynamics of survival in the wild for a prey animal are based upon the principle that there may not be any second chances; react first, then analyze. No matter what area you are asking your horse to be in; racing, dressage, cutting, penning, therapy animal or working with an animal actor, the underlying principles are always going to be the same. You can have the most physically imposing animal breeding can produce, but unless coupled with true and proper behavior management through the natural herd dynamics, all you really have is half of what you could have.

The physical will always be the ward of the emotional, of the *psychological* equine. By taking this view, a true view from the hoof, you are embracing the horse for what he is and allowing yourself to discover, what he could be.