

# A View from the Hoof

Project Athlete; *nurturing the natural...*

By:

Kerry M Thomas

Ethological Researcher & Founder of Thomas Herding Technique

## **I**

After much thought about the matter of what it takes for the horse to survive in a natural setting for which the animal was intended by nature, the development of techniques that are borrowed from the study of the *natural herd dynamic* has been and always will be the foundation of what Thomas Herding Technique stands for. Considering the question of horse training for any discipline simply means in affect assimilating the horse to something new. The horse does this remarkably well because of his natural ability to survive by reacting consistently to certain stimulus or triggers.

Survival in nature does not allow for interpretative mistakes, the horse is designed to react to triggers and stimuli in such a way that allow him or her to see another day, or get far enough away in fact, to have a *safe* look back. To error then, is to die or experience some form of discomfort. What we need to realize here is that discomfort does not always simply mean physical, it means emotional as well. Stress can leave scars on the body and the mind, but rest assured the one not so easily seen is absolutely the most powerful. If you think about this in the obvious terms that the mind does run the body, it should come as no surprise to you that your horse can be physically dominant but yet extremely inconsistent. If there are no obvious physical signs causing this, then it comes from the emotional level of the horse. If we agree that the horse is a social animal, very adaptable and mostly agreeable to learning things from a trusted guide, then we must also agree that the mind runs the body.

Ask any pedigree expert and they may surely tell you that you can breed a high standing sire to a wonderful and proven mare, and yet the get will be inconsistent even when there are two animals from the same parents in two years and they are brothers of equal physical stature. This is itself

evidence of the mind of the horse in complete control of the will, thus the performance capacity. The opposite is then also true; a great winner on the track does not always mean wonderful racers down the line. The *other* brother or sister who ran not so good, but who have the same physical bloodline, can equally produce get with an abundance of ability as a performer. If the animal were merely a machine, this then, could not be so. The fact that it is so, makes the evidence very clear that physical ability is of little consequence when up against a well nurtured horse of equal or even lesser, obvious physical aptitude.

## II

Train the horse to focus and you will train the horse to achieve. Indeed, to properly train the performance athlete on an emotional level that will unlock the totality of the awesome physical powers requires the nurturing of the mind. To do this affectively then, requires a keen understanding of how the natural herd dynamics work and also how your particular student is interpreting his or her individual dynamic within the group. The *where do I fit in to this puzzle* is not only a question the horse as a social animal needs to know, it is a question that must be answered before any attempt can be made to develop mental nurturing. This has got to be done no matter the training, the discipline or the goal, if you truly are going to nurture the horse along. To assist with this determination I have developed an ethologically based equine psychoanalysis gradient scale for behavior/potential assessments called the THT EthoGrade. Being properly assessed then allows me to better understand how the horse is seeing his own place in the world and the areas that are holding him/her back from moving forward. It also allows me to find the areas that need the most nurturing to thus develop the slow influx of confidence builds. If there is an area that needs attention, it is an area where information is most likely being misinterpreted by the horse. How does this occur?

Confidence and decision making for the horse is dependent upon only two things that together have many closely related cousins attached; environmental stimulus and associated trigger stimulus, which act as primary and secondary stimuli respectively. Both of these things are affected by one another and are governing factors over action. Swiftens of action and or reaction is highly determined by the smooth transaction of information, once the brain or *mind* gives the succinct and confident order to move, the body reacts, the time in-between these two actions being the *latent space*. The space, or time of this *latency* becomes the key to the horses' confidence and it is in affect the governing factor of focus. A confident horse reacts or even does not react, smoothly and without flaw. The latent space between interpretation and action/non-action alike, is hardly if ever perceptible. I give you two examples of how this translates into our reality because it is highly important when determining the therapy horse and the race horse alike. The confident therapy horse will have little latent space between the child falling or

tripping over something, a walker or chair or cane, and ending up under the feet of the horse. If this sudden and abrupt *environmental stimulus* is not quickly and confidently interpreted for what it is and what it is not (possible harm), the horse may take a step or jerk abruptly. Yet in confidence there is *mental soundness*, assuredness of the self within the environment, therefore there is focus, thus there is no damage but perhaps to the knees and honor of the fallen.

I take you now to the race track. I have placed my very able and physically royal horse in the gate. It is here that many races are won and lost, but indeed, a race is won or is lost long before the horse ever reaches a racetrack. (Jockeys can quickly assess their horses' herd dynamic by the way in which the horse is acting in the gate. An understanding of this can then be used to streamline racing strategy). If my horse is emotionally sound as well as physically sound, his or her probability of success is greatly increased. There are at times several factors in motion; one of course is the smooth transaction of the many stimuli in play erupting all at once. The self assured horse can focus without being distracted by stimuli that does not affect his well being, which are the stimuli that make up the associated triggers and are always secondary to the environmental. The nudge of the horses next to them, the weight on the back, the feel of the track, the horse processing this information smoothly will be the same horse during the *performance* as he or she is after, so then, this must mean that of course they are also the same before an event. When you free the mind you free the horse.

If you want your horse to have the best chance at consistent performances then you must work to allow them to run free, so to speak. This takes nurturing of what is a natural inclination taking place within an artificial environment. The horse that has a more protracted space between interpretation and action/non-action is the horse that is more dependent on the group herd dynamic for his final decision. This horse is not as *free* to run ahead, because of the herd dependency of *if my buddy next to me goes, maybe I can go too, but maybe I had better stay kind of close just in case*. This is happening when the otherwise physically dominant horse will very often show his inclinations to be safe in the herd. An act that occurs very quickly much of the time, only perceptible by us as we shake our heads and wonder *why that horse did not win?* You have been witness to the determining factors of herd hierarchy.

We must also consider how the stress of high energy output affects interpretation of stimulus. The performing horse experiences a constriction of sensory ability during an action. A good example of this reality of nature was exposed as I watched a herd of wild mustangs suddenly take off up a butte in Montana once the scent or even sight of a mountain lion was discovered. Yet they did not run but far enough away to be in a position to stop and turn in the direction of the assumed threat. Why did they not run down the other side? It is a simple fact of focus playing out in the react first ask later horse; that is to say that because there is a constriction of sensory perceptions in all areas in some form or another, in order to be safe the horse has to get away, then look and gather themselves which will allow all of the senses to tell the story. This is also self evidence of the herd hierarchy in play and the vital importance of it. (A good example of *sensory constriction* is the classic scenario of a bison herd being stampeded over a cliff. An act

that does not occur, quite obviously, in the relaxed state) in nature the nurturing of confidence happens naturally, nature's way of selecting the most mentally capable and *free* horse to be the leader of the band. A band on the move then becomes dependent upon the leader or the *freest thinker* of them all for guidance during a time of high stress activity where the senses are constricted. This is an acute definition of what I call HH, or *herding holdup*, a not so bad thing for the wild herd, but a not so good thing for the race horse. Because the last time I looked, the group of horses in a race looked a great deal like a band of horses on the move; making the same dynamics that dictate survival, equally determinant over an outcome of a race.

### III

Freeing the mind means building confidence, this is done in our *artificial* environment by paying close attention to how the horse is dealing with all environmental influxes, all of the time. This also means that we can lean a great deal on the very natural assimilated imprinting that allows the horse to survive and blend to changing environments in nature.

Training a horse is the art of nurturing that which is natural by gently nudging the horse along in one direction or another. Nature and horse do the rest for us. Building the athlete and the therapy horse alike both begin at the same starting line; only in outcome and achievement do the methods require changes or re-alignments. With the thoroughbred, who is himself a hybrid horse to begin with, we breed for optimum physical ability and further mix and match in the hope to find the right formula and create a horse that has a natural excess of will, or *nervous energy*. However, what is the good in this effort, without the supplemental effort to nurture and balance the mind with body as the foal grows? Perhaps not much unless looks are all you are after.

How that will is used, how that extra energy and power is streamlined, is dependent upon the focus, the decision making ability, the confidence, indeed, the latent space between interpretation and action. What this really means is, if you want a sound and consistent athlete you cannot only train the body, you must first train and continue to train the decision maker that runs the machine, the equine mind. This is done by a series of slow and methodical confident builds, which means that to properly nurture the decision making process, or to *shrink* the latent space it must be determined what areas are operating at a higher level than another. I do this again by using the THT EthoGrade because I feel it is so highly important in testing and assessing mental capacities and thus herd level, that an effort should be made to test/assess each sensory and decision made from it in an isolated manner. Making an effort to breakdown and dissect each of the horses' senses allows you to better determine how information is being interpreted and subsequently processed. This then affords a better understanding of where the horse is mentally and how he is envisioning his or her herd dynamic, both the group and individual dynamics

alike. These two factors work together for the social animal, which is why an understanding of this is so very important.

The operating group dynamic is made up of the band and can be two horses or as many as perhaps 10, the size being greatly influenced on the individuals within it. This means that if you have a group of 8 horses on the move, what we see as a race of 8 may be for any given horse a group of two, of five, or maybe of none at all if there is any isolation. This is a fact that becomes very clear on all racetracks all over the world, every day, every race, since the beginning of racing. (To address this form of Herding Holdup, a determination of total area of the individual herd dynamic must first be made and expanded. For the horse mostly living in isolation from other horses for one reason or another, I like to use, when tolerable, a goat as a pasture mate to assist with this natural expansion. The goat will inevitably provide the horse with intellectual motivation. In fact, no matter the situation, a goat or two within a herd who will tolerate them provides a very good babysitting service for mental stimulation).

For example a group of three or four are running close together, leads may flow back and forth and then all of a sudden a horse creeping up from the back, from the outside, or inside or even middle, passes the field without so much as an ear twitch to or from the other horses. This happens because anything operating outside the herd dynamic has no direct influence on it. It is for all intents and purposes a parallel universe no more important than a bird over head or a sage bush rushing past in the wind. The reason the very capable sensory horse does not become influenced by something, namely another horse that at any other time would not be able to walk into the pasture 100 yards away and not be known by all the horses in the field, is an example of the reality of *constriction of focus* during activity. Therefore this makes it very clear that the more latent space there is, as we have already described, the more *herding holdup* will be in power.

Nature's reason for this is quite simple and affective; in a band there can only be one true leader, and on the move, the leader leads and is naturally followed by the others, quite significant on the race track. I would like to here point out the differences between a lead mare and a lead stallion. I will tell you that nature has equipped each with different strengths and adaptabilities, many of which are rather obvious. The lead mare is mentally equipped and naturally formatted for the social order of the family unit that sees her nurturing her young and other members within the band, finding food and water and shelter even. In this same social structure we see the lead stallion as the protector; therefore he will *push* the band along behind the mare keeping the *swaying* stragglers and playing youngsters moving forth as well. The stallion always has the ability to lead if need be, and in the event of an injury to the lead mare, or if his life is in danger by being too far behind, or even having been separated by a predator, the stallion will assume total leadership of his own dynamic. (Often times when a horse is within an isolated dynamic, male or female, a sense of urgency may impress itself upon the animal making the sense or fear of being chased relevant. This can add a major burst of adrenaline and yet also a great deal of confusion. Well balanced leadership means devising specific methods for specific horses to run

both within and without a group dynamic. This is extremely essential for the training of a mare, whose position naturally is to lead a group, making the isolated herd dynamic much more concerning for her).

The relationship between the mare and stallion on the move has been a successful one, streamlined through evolution. Serving different requirements to sustain the species has also given to them different communal dynamics. The stallion has to be more social, more understanding and quicker to react to environmental changes than does the mare because of his protector mentality. This does not mean that he is always stronger, but it does mean that the ways in which the sexes should be trained on a mental level is inherently different. Lead mares are far less likely to ever become completely victimized by any herding holdup because in nature, the lead mare, leads. However the stallions' roll is much different and can at times be somewhat confusing, another factor leading to inconsistency. He is more apt to herding holdups because his mental capacity is geared differently owing to natures' design. The stallions' piece of the puzzle fits in a different location, his job is not only to be the strong protector but the one who firmly encourages the stragglers along for their own safety. This is why I have designed the *push & sway* methods of natural training protocols that can be fitted to the individual placement of the horse.

Using the natural ability and mind set of the horse, both mare and stallion alike, allows one to *nurture* the nature of the beast. This is however merely one circumstance for the stallion. Much of his life will be spent within the social structure that makes up the bachelor herd. In this social order, the horse that is next ready to challenge for his own band will most likely be the horse that is the leader of the bachelor band. To accomplish this, the stallion must see his placement as being ahead of the others, and not behind. In this situation the stallion on the move can be *nurtured* ahead of the rest by utilizing the elements of *cover brush* stimulus; the act of introducing fresh stimulus that cannot be ignored on the move such as obstacles and other horses. This action forces quick decision making while in motion, an event that serves to strengthen the stallion's confidence in leadership, but can often weaken that of the mares'. Either way, neither *Push and Sway* nor *Cover Brush* can act alone and be successful without the horse being nurtured to focus.

#### IV

Going the distance and staying power for the horse is as much determined by the ability to focus as the pedigree and physical training. It can be said that the longer the distance to be run, the more physically fit the horse must be. This may be true I grant you, but I also would like to point out that just like the horse does not naturally look at a child and think how *much bigger I am*

*than you*, he also does not look at the gate at the far end of the pasture and think, *that's kind of far*.

Distance for the horse does not exist, but what does exist is the time it takes to get to a place where a change of stimulus, physical or environmental, determines they are at that point, and more importantly, the time it takes to avoid something. The old catch-me-if-you can pony in the field, who will be eating away until you, after sneaking up to within arm's length, reach out only to grab yourself some air, is a classic example of the equine's concept of time and distance. Space is space for the horse, ahead by a lot or ahead by a little matters not, so long as the required time and space that it provides, supplies the ends. Considering the way the horse sees and comprehends time, as moments strung together by association, the ability and level at which the horse is able to focus will be a determining factor in the time it takes to get to point B from point A. This translates into the mental make-up between the sprinter and the distance stayer.

The less latent space between mind and machine, the more succinct the order from mind to muscle. This is why you may well find that a great distance horse will also be a good sprinter, but why too that a great sprinter does not always a distance runner make. The five furlong horse does not have to have near the focus as the horse running the mile and half, though if he does, he will be far superior to any horse that is not. This truth makes the ability to focus every bit as important as the physical ability of the athlete in order to be more consistent in performance. In nature the leader is balanced, and balance in nature means survivability.

Handling the influx of stimulus during activity on a consistent basis means the horse can maintain this over a period of time. As an example I offer this from my own personal experience. If I am out on a time motivated speed walking 1.5 miles I have seen time and again how focus on the singular moments of each step maintain a consistent pace, the ability to maintain pace over time is determined by my ability to stay focused. When I begin to physically tire, I have found that my mind wanders a bit on other things environmental or otherwise. I have also found that even when I am not physically tired but I lose focus early on, my time over the same distance decreases greatly. This is a challenge for all human athletes and it is also the primary antagonist determining how your horse will run and over what distance and how consistent they will be.

You will also note the ability of a horse to *recover* during a race from some form of stimuli, be it blocking or near fall or change in track position, is directly linked to the focus of the horse. Natural training methods such as *Push & Sway* and *Cover Brush*, serve to increase the horse's inclination for recovery in motion.

Based on these and many other factors I fully believe in the obvious and very natural necessity of training the mind as well as the body of the horse. Building confidence by the isolation of the senses and designing training protocols to fit the needs and balance the horse is as important for the race horse as it is for the therapy horse. An understanding of the complex social structure that make up the herd dynamic in its various forms will open the way for a more streamlined training

program for the horse on a mental and physical aspect. This is natural training at its best, as nature intended with human nurturing to allow the horse to find the balance of life. In so doing, you are taking a view from the hoof by advancing the natural herd dynamics into the artificial world.