

In Your Horse's Opinion
By Misti Seppi, Wasatch Humane Horse Rescue and Adoptions

Unwanted horses are often horses whose owners did not understand or appreciate the nature of horses. Without that understanding a bond was never formed. When there is no bond, you'll come up with any excuse to "get rid of the horse". With a little understanding, some patience and time, however, many of these "incorrigible" horses have proven themselves to be wonderful, willing, intelligent horses with a lot of love and enjoyment to give and have been placed in lifetime homes with people who recognize they have "the best horse in the world". Same horse, different understanding.

Horses and humans are very different from each other and yet together make an unbeatable team. Horses are willing to do whatever we ask of them; even laying down their lives if asked. We owe it to them to understand their view of the world and understand their needs.

Their view is by nature very different from ours. Horses are prey animals, humans are predators. We look like predators, we act like predators and we smell like predators. Horses know this but many humans do not: When we get angry or frustrated with our horses, our actions just confirm their worst opinions of us.

What does it mean, to be a prey animal? It means that you eat grass and are eaten by predators. Prey animals have very highly developed methods to avoid being the particular prey animal that is eaten today. They have developed ways of foiling predators that often frustrate us; like flee from danger, run now, think later. They are very perceptive to predators; which is why you can go out with a bucket of nails to repair fence and your horse is on you like a cheap suit. The next day you can go out acting cool but thinking "I'm going to catch Roany Pony and go for a ride" and the horses are gone! Do you really think they don't see the halter behind your back? They can read you like a large print book. Don't be frustrated, be fascinated.

Prey animals give birth to precocious off-spring. This means the baby is up and moving shortly after birth. According to research done by Dr. Robert M. Miller, horses are born full faculty learners. This means they are learning from the first breath. The newborn foal's first experience with humans can have lasting effects for good or for bad. Dr. Miller's imprinting research has revolutionized horsemanship and is worth the time to read and understand. Dr. Miller's newest research indicates that while the foal is with its dam, the left side of the brain develops more rapidly than the right side of the brain. The left side is the thinking, curious, confident, playful side of the brain. The right side is the panic, flight-or-fight side of the brain. Something to consider when raising a foal and thinking about when to wean and how to wean.

Prey animals have eyes on the side of their head. This gives them very nearly a 360° view of their world. They cannot see directly in front or directly behind. This allows them to see most of their world, but the trade off is that they don't have much depth perception. Ever wondered why your horse won't cross a half inch water puddle without sticking his head down to investigate first? He's not being "stubborn", "stupid", or some other expletive, he's trying to determine the depth of the water. A horse coming up to a jump may start shifting his head around because he's overcoming the blind spot directly in front of him – right where the jump is – and is gauging the distance. Tying his head down and kicking him is not going to help matters but it will damage your relationship.

Prey animals find comfort in a group of their own kind; preferably in the middle of a group of their own kind. They know that if there are lots of horses, the chance lessens that they are going to be eaten. They also know the middle of the pack is less likely to get eaten. This explains why horses get buddy "sweet" or barn "sweet". This also explains why your 16.2, 1300-pound horse gets nervous and crowds in on little ole you. He's not trying to kill you, he lacks confidence and thinks being behind you is a safe place. Smacking him or yanking on the reins is not going to do much to restore his confidence.

Prey animals know that predators will seek out the young, the weak, the injured and the ill. So they will mask injury or illness as much as possible. That's why your horse can have a huge laceration and show no signs of pain. For a long time people believed that animals didn't perceive pain as humans do. Pain research has shown that, while there is a physical as well as emotional component to pain, animals do experience pain to the same degree as humans. Pain management of animals has only recently been addressed by veterinary medicine. Pain management of horses has received very little attention but hopefully there soon will be other options beyond banamine and bute. Recently, the use of fentanyl patches for horses has been published. Meanwhile, if your horse experiences something that would cause you pain, you can be sure it's causing your horse pain. Talk to your vet about safe ways to manage your horse's pain, whether it's caused by surgery (gelding OUCH!), injury or illness.

Horses' psychological needs are safety first. For horses, safety is a matter of life or death. They are not afraid of being hurt, they are afraid of being killed. That's why a scared horse can injure themselves and their rider. Until they feel safe, they will not be interested in anything else. Punishing a scared horse only confirms to the horse that you are not to be trusted. After safety, horses seek comfort. This means comfort (and companionship) with their own kind or with a trusted human. For you to be effective with a horse, the horse needs to trust you. If your horse trusts you to keep him safe he can be calm when otherwise he would blow up. Comfort also means taking the pressure off your horse. When he has done something you've asked, give him some time to relax before asking again. After safety and comfort is food. Food treats can be effective if safety and comfort are in place, but if your horse thinks the horse trailer is going to get

him, all the carrots in the world are not going to get him to go in. Once safety, comfort and food are addressed, your horse will be interested in play. Play is where we experience excellence with horses. We've all seen two or more horses at play demonstrate flawless transitions, lead changes, roll-backs, piaffe, extended trot, slide stops, etc. If you are like me, you've dreamed of riding your horse and doing those moves at that level with him. Excellence is heart and desire. Get your horse wanting to play with you and you are on your way to excellence. You are also on your way to developing that "once in a lifetime" bond with your horse. And isn't that why you got involved in horses in the first place?