

Horsing around: Equine body language

By Birgit Stutz

Horses are social animals. As herd members, they interact with other horses continually and use a system of communication including sounds, body positions, movements and odours, to let herd mates know what they want and don't want.

Horses obviously don't use words. They don't even use sounds to any great extent. But if you watch horses as they interact with one another and with people, you will notice that body positions and movements are their main mode of speaking to one another.

During the first training session with a new horse, be it one of mine or one that is sent to me for training, I turn him loose in the round pen. Having the horse loose, without any ropes or lines attached to him, gives me a chance to read him and find out what he is all about. Is he a passive horse, an aggressive horse, or more something in between, passive-aggressive? Is he friendly towards people? Does he respect people? Is he fearful of humans or disrespectful and pushy? Each type of horse requires a different kind of approach. You may be saying that you are not training horses and wonder why you should bother learning how to read horses, but the truth is, every time you are with a horse, be it your own or somebody else's, you are training the horse, for better or for worse. Learning what your horse is saying will greatly improve your partnership with him.

The most obvious signal is the horse's overall body outline, his frame. It's easy to tell the difference between the high-headed frame of an excited horse and the level or low top-line of a relaxed one. I then start reading the horse from back to front, his tail, hip, barrel, shoulder, neck and head.

A horse's tail can express six different messages. A nicely curled tail means the horse is calm and relaxed. A swishing tail means the horse is annoyed. A horse with a wringing or twirling tail shows signs of aggression. A tail that sticks straight out or up ('high-tailing') means the horse is excited and feels good ("Let's play"). You can see that a lot in high-spirited horses. A tail pointed straight down means the horse is apprehensive. And a tail tucked tight between a horse's hindquarters is a sign of fear.

Next I look at the hip. Is it cocked in at me in a disrespectful manner or is it politely away from me? Is the horse's barrel (middle part) bent into me, with his ribs pushing towards me, or is it bent away from me in a polite manner? Is the horse being pushy by dropping his shoulder into my space?

From most people's perspective, the most easily analyzed part of the horse is the head. If you want to read what's going on in the mind of any horse just look at the position of and gestures coming from his head.

If he flips his nose up, he is challenging my lead-

ership and doesn't accept me as being the one pushing him. A twirling head means aggression. If a horse shakes his neck laterally, that is a positive sign. It is a release of muscular stress, like shaking of a writer's cramp. The same goes for a yawn, which is a release of anxiety. A horse may also bow to me. However, there are different types of bows, and not all of them are based on trust and respect. If a horse bows to you, but his head immediately comes back up high-headed, the respect for your push comes from fear. If the horse bows to you with his head going down to the ground low and staying down with eyes blinking, lips licking, and ears moving, or if he bows to you and then his head comes back up level-headed, he accepts your leadership out of trust and respect. However, if his head goes down and stays down, with his eyes open staring wide, his mouth closed tight, and his ears stiff, the horse is sullen and pouty and has most likely been pushed too hard.

Ears are good indicators of your horse's mood as well. A horse has 16 muscles in his ear so he can move them all over the place. A horse has excellent hearing, and the ears point in the direction of the horse's attention. A horse with his ears pricked forward is curious and paying attention. Ears moving back and forth often indicate uncertainty. Floppy ears are a sign of sleepiness or feeling sick. Ears pinned back (put flat back on his head) indicate anger or fear, which are closely related. If you are handling a horse that you don't know very well and he puts his ears back, you need to be careful. He could be angry or frightened about something and may kick or bite. Ears back can also be a warning that another horse is getting too close to him and he doesn't like it.

Putting his ears back is a sign of resistance. If you

are riding and notice your horse is putting his ears back it could mean several things. He may be doing something he doesn't want to do or something he finds difficult. He could also be uncomfortable due to a badly fitting saddle, bridle or bit, hard rider hands pulling on the bit, or a rider with an unbalanced, bouncy seat. He could also have some pain in his back or maybe his teeth are bothering him. Pinned ears should not be confused with ears pointed in the direction of the rider, as some horses will do that when they concentrate very hard and focus on their rider.

More subtle for us humans are facial signals. A tight mouth shows anxiety and fear. A mouth that is chewing with lips licking means the horse is thinking and relaxed.

A wrinkled nose indicates annoyance and disgust. A horse threatening to bite has an open mouth and possibly bared teeth. Note that this is not the same as 'mouthing' in foals which is a submissive gesture. A long nose with a slightly open mouth shows the horse wants to mutual groom, a gesture you may have seen while grooming your horse. It becomes the characteristic long nose, drawn-back lower lip and extended neck when you find the itchy spot. What I have mentioned here just skims the surface of horse communication. Observing horses in a herd environment combined with reading books, magazines and articles and watching training videos will teach you a lot. Learning to understand what our horses are telling us – and responding appropriately – makes a huge difference in our relationship with them. The ability to understand equine body language makes our partnership with horses more rewarding and safer.

Birgit Stutz is a Chris Irwin Silver Certified Trainer.

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Valemount and Area Recreation Development Association

The Valemount & Area Recreation Development Association will be holding its next General Meeting on Wednesday, **February 06, 2008 at 7pm** located in the Valemount Legion. All **VARDA** members and general public are welcome to attend to get updated information on **VARDA** current events and ask general questions of the Board of Directors. A current Membership to **VARDA** is required to vote on matters at hand. Memberships can be purchased at the **VARDA** office Wed-Fri for **\$20.00**



Road Talks

Lets talk Winter Driving again;

When driving in winter conditions do everything slowly. Keep in mind driving in snow, sleet and ice is very treacherous and even if you maintain control of your car, not everyone else will.

Don't get lulled into a false sense of security.

Do everything SLOWLY and GENTLY (Remember in winter conditions your tires are just barely grabbing the road). Accelerate SLOWLY and GENTLY, turn SLOWLY and GENTLY and brake SLOWLY and GENTLY. To do this you have to anticipate turns and stops and that means what? Going SLOWLY and leaving plenty of distance between your car and other vehicles. And remember that person passing you may not do everything slowly and gently. We recommend that when safe to do so you pull over to the shoulder, slow down and let the "fool rush by".

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