



Balance Part II - 'He would tell me if he didn't want to do it'

So I'll ask the question that is all important to me...what is too much pressure for a horse to bear?

I often read of so called problem horses that refuse to lead, refuse to leave the yard or load; the list of possible problems is endless. How do these problems arise, why do some horses seem to have more than others and how is it that we all too easily miss the early signs of them?

For many years I've been intrigued by the behaviour of horses. Since I experienced a loading problem that developed into an all-round unwillingness to cooperate with me I've wanted to understand much more about what goes on inside a horse's head. Therein lies the problem! As a lay person I'm aware of the role that neurons, receptors, transmitters etc have in the way horses' brains work but I've given up trying to understand the minutiae of what actually happens. I will content myself that horses (like us) build mental pathways during training (or indeed when we're not even aware of it) that, if we are patient, can become strong enough and clear enough to form a communication channel between us. I don't think you need to be a neuropsychologist to appreciate the science of equine learning but I feel it does help to appreciate some very basic tenets that apply to training horses:

- All horses are not equal. The nature/nurture balance varies from horse to horse.
- Some key elements are hard wired (innately part of the horse); even the horse is unaware that they are governed by them.
- Horses don't naturally love or hate training; they look for nourishment, safety and security and avoid pressure, pain and fear.



- Horses can have their behaviour modified through conditioning and experience. Every incident that affects him will set a response and will be stored up for next time. Horses learn through associative learning (classical and operant conditioning) or non-associative learning (habituation, sensitisation). We have the choice to train a horse to understand that compliance makes something it dislikes stop (negative reinforcement) or that trying to offer something in terms of behaviour gains a reward (positive reinforcement).
- Timely reinforcement of behaviours facilitates learning whereas muddled or delayed reinforcement leads to confusion. Reinforcement of behaviours needs to be within a very short timeframe, literally a couple of seconds.

- It's not all about US it's all about THEM-consideration of our equine partner's needs should always be put before our own needs. The horse (like the customer!) is never wrong; the communication system has failed.
- Overly long sessions of learning are counterproductive.

In applying the first point it follows that some horses will appear more outwardly stoical than others; nature (some breeds are considered naturally more accepting than others) and nurture (have they been listened to in the past) can lead them to show or hide their fears and apprehensions. We can change this somewhat by considered training but equally we can change this by getting things wrong with our training and even, as I discovered to my cost, during every day handling. By understanding equine learning and applying positive reinforcement techniques, where appropriate, we can allow horses to have a voice, a say in their training.

If we are to harvest the goodwill of our horses and use it to create beauty and presence in the arena then we need to find the perfect mental balance. Stoicism has no place if we expect honest answers from our equines! If we want to know if a saddle is uncomfortable, a bit pinching, a foot in pain then we need to be able to clearly hear the responses given by the horse that can tell us this.

To discover more about the hard wiring that comes pre-programmed into your horse along with what early nurturing has added then it's important to spend time just observing from a distance. Look out for things like how he spends his days in the field, how he relates to his field

mates and if he is disturbed by sudden noise and movement. If your horse is ultra-reactive in his regular environment then it's a pretty safe bet that he's going to be quick to pick up on things whilst training, even sensing cues that you're not even aware of. On the other hand if your horse is happy to be moved about by his friends, unafraid of noises and unexplained movements then lighting his touch paper in terms



of training may need to rely on more imaginative thinking. So yet again the balance is important, finding the happy medium is essential and knowing how your horse reacts to information is vital.

So I'll ask the question that is all important to me...what is too much pressure for a horse to bear? The answer is not so easy! How can we ever know what is pressure and what is just a guiding hand? Is pressure bad? Is all pressure bad? Ah, more questions as ever. I truly believe that the only way to find a balance, a happy medium (for the horse) is to constantly observe and question. Horses are sometimes fragile in their emotional

balance but experience tells me that they can also move on and accept our mistakes just as long as we change and learn from them.

In my own training I've come to rely heavily on positive reinforcement because it allows me the space to observe my horses and question my methods. Traditionally the training of horses has used the pressure and release system and I'm not prepared to throw the baby out with the bathwater and say that is all wrong because I still see some quiet work along these lines (indeed some of my students still prefer to use it) but with my own horses I have evolved a system using predominantly positive reinforcement training which I then use to attach more traditional cues like feeling the rein for softness and touching the leg for forwards.

In my own horses I have Chapiro who is the most sensitive soul and shows tension at the least distraction whereas Moralejo seems more of a stoic and accepting of stress. What I'm pretty sure of is that they are both feeling the stress but dealing with it in different ways. Which is worse, the stoic who can internalise the stress or the sensitive soul who can't? I'll leave that one for you to ponder!

Can we accept then that it's impossible to ascertain that our horses would 'tell us if they didn't want to do it' because it really does depend on a number of things, not least of which would be whether we were truly capable of listening to him! If we strip things right back, remove the tack and remove the boundaries does he still want to be with us? If you can't be sure then you are not alone, welcome to a lifetime of equine observation and learning, truly a balancing act!

