



**RETRAINING
RACE HORSES**

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HorsePlay

AMERICA'S NUMBER ONE ENGLISH RIDING MAGAZINE

JUDGING DRESSAGE

Thoughts From
Wolfgang Niggli,
Donald Thackeray
& Fiona Baan

**DANNY ROBERTSHAW:
HAVE FUN
SHOWING YOUR HORSE**

- Controlling The Speed Of Your Horse's Canter
- How To Think Like A Horse
- The Key To Confident Carriage Driving
- Tips For Trailering Your Horse Long Distance



HorsePlay

VOL. 20 NO.2

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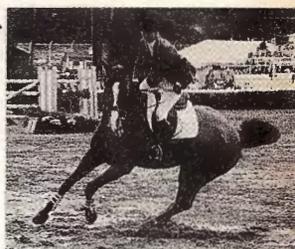
DRESSAGE

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Cover photo of Hilda Gurney & Willy The Great competing in the U.S. League finals by Charles Mann; inset of race horses by Cathy Kuehner

Not Understanding Horse Behavior Is A Major Obstacle For Many Riders

Why You Should Think Like A Horse

by Kathy Matthes

At one time or another, we have all experienced the frustration of riding an uncooperative horse.

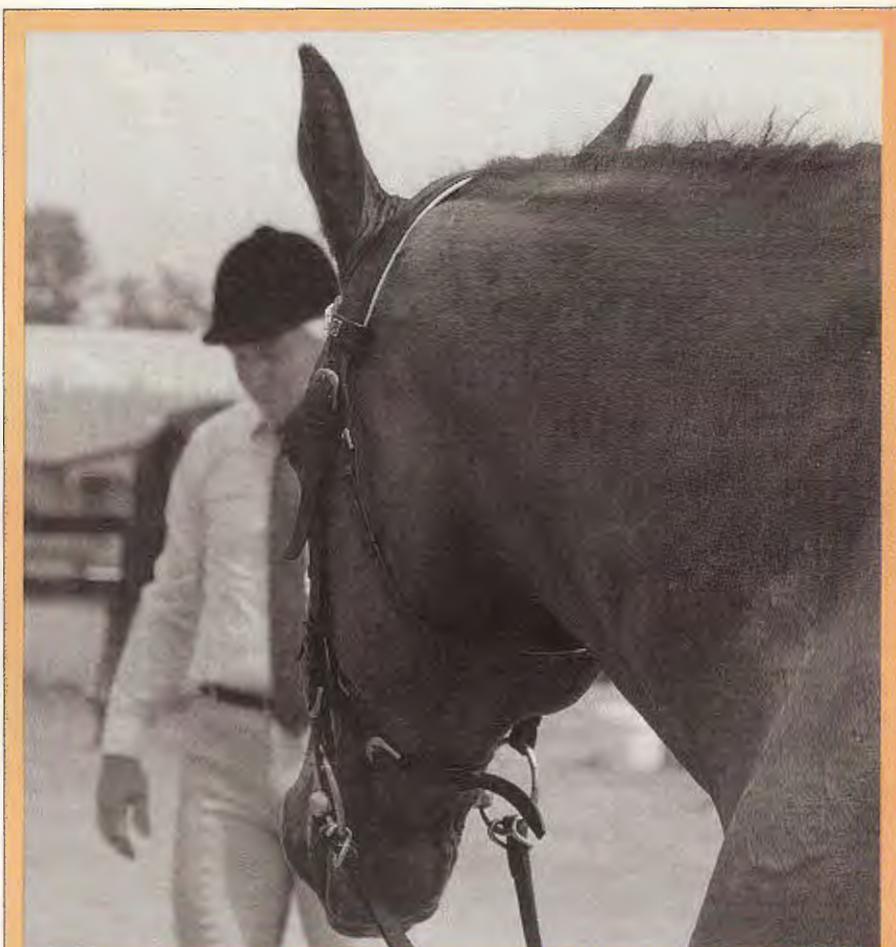
One of the major obstacles to successful riding is having an inaccurate perception of the horse—how he thinks, communicates, learns, and reacts to his environment. Unless we learn to think like a horse, we will never achieve true obedience, trust, and mutual respect.

Horses Lack Self-Awareness

The most common misconception that riders have about horses is that they think and react like humans. Horses, like most other animals, do not possess self-awareness—they are not capable of sophisticated reasoning or logical deductions, nor do they analyze situations ethically, morally, or psychologically. They cannot read your mind, though they can read your body language and sense your emotions, especially fear and tension.

They are essentially creatures of habit and instinct. They respond and learn through punishment and reward. Except for simple verbal commands, they cannot understand your language.

Although the horse has been around for about 50 million years, he has only been domesticated for about



CATHY KUEHNER PHOTO

How Horses Think

- Horses are not capable of sophisticated reasoning or logical deductions.
- Horses do not analyze situations ethically, morally, or psychologically.
- Horses are prey animals—that is, they are eaten by predators. Their instinct—their main means of survival—is flight, running from danger.

How You Can Improve Your Thinking

- Do not attribute human motivations to your horse's behavior.
- Develop an affectionate, but workmanlike, relationship with your horse.
- Consider all the reasons why your horse is disobeying—it might be you.
- Give clear commands and aids. If your horse doesn't understand what you want, how can he obey?

5,000. In some ways, the horse has adapted and learned from his association with humans. When you consider that he allows us to sit on the only indefensible spot on his body—his back—and ask him to do activities that he would not ordinarily choose to do in the wild—like jumping a cross-

country course—then he has definitely accepted this partnership.

Horses Run First, Think Later

But the horse has been a prey animal much longer than he has been a companion to man, and nature has endowed him with strong survival in-

instincts—escaping from danger is his first priority. Most of the problems you will encounter with horses stem from this fearful, instinctual (run first, think later) response to the environment.

This does not mean that the horse cannot learn to tolerate perceived threats—most horses do grow accustomed to bicycles, golf carts, cars, tractors, trash trucks, dogs, and other potentially dangerous creatures. But the key here is that it is a learned response. The horse has to learn to accept a person on his back. He must learn to be tied up with a halter and lead rope, which from his point of view is a serious

threat to his ability to escape from danger. He must learn that the horse turned out in the next arena is not running away from a predator, but burning off excess energy. Ultimately, he must learn to comprehend the aids, subject his body and will to a human master, and live in a confined area—all of which go against his instincts.

Dealing Effectively With Horses

Try not to interpret a horse's actions from your perspective, and do not attribute human motivations to his behavior.

Read some books and articles about horse behavior to familiarize yourself with the physical, behavioral, and social differences between humans and horses. Spend some time watching horses to see how they react to each other.

Learn and obey all safety rules for working around horses. This includes learning common disciplinary actions for bad or unsafe behavior, as well as how to deal with a spooky or run-away horse on the ground and when mounted.

Horses Are Not Big Dogs

Do not treat your horse like a pet. He is a large creature who is capable of instantaneous reactions that can cause serious damage—to himself and to you. Do not coddle him or even reinforce bad behavior by giving treats or pats at the wrong time. It is best to develop an affectionate, but workmanlike, relationship with your horse.

Look At Yourself

Then try to understand why he might be disobedient. If he's cranky or reluctant to do as you ask, don't naturally assume that he's being deliberately disobedient to irritate you—he

might be tired, ill, sore, or injured. Be very sure that he is ready, both mentally and physically, to do what you are asking of him. He will not trust you if you punish him for something he can't do—and if he truly doesn't understand your intentions, how can he obey?

Lay aside your ego and assume the responsibility for communication problems. You might be giving him a wrong aid without realizing it—in which case you are punishing him for obeying you. You might be teaching him bad habits, or even reinforcing them with your behavior or lack of disciplinary action. Strive to control your temper, look at the problem from his point of view, and take the proper steps to restore mutual communication.

You will have a much more rewarding partnership if you try to comprehend how he thinks and reacts to his environment. ■

Kathy Matthes is an instructor at Traditional Equestrian School at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center, where she teaches dressage and combined training, and conducts clinics.

Horse Behavior & Psychology-Related Books

- *Horsewatching*, by Desmond Morris, Crown Publications, Inc., New York, NY
- *Understanding Horses*, by Garda Langley, Trafalgar Square, North Pomfret, VT
- *The Horse's Mind*, by Lucy Rees, Arco/Simon & Schuster, Englewood Cliffs, NJ
- *Talking with Horses*, by Henry Blake, Trafalgar Square, North Pomfret, VT
- *Beyond the Mirrors*, by Jill Keiser Hassler, Goals Unlimited Press, Quarryville, PA



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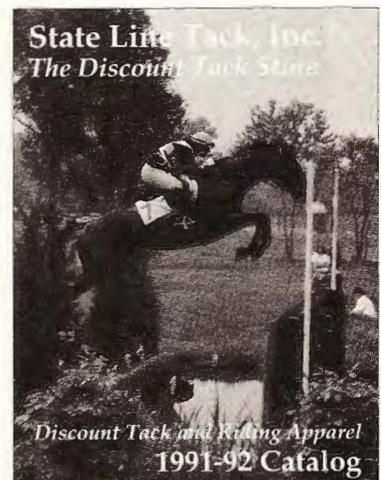
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