



A Horses View of Natural Horsemanship

By Gerrie Barnes

Many people are working on Natural Horsemanship (NH) techniques presented by many different clinicians. Research shows that people retain about 60% of what they are taught when they both hear and see the information, thus, the demonstration format. I wonder which part of the 60% of NH philosophy people took home from the various presentations and are using with their horses today?

I thought I would weigh in on this subject from my point of view; more accurately from what I believe the horse's point of view would be. The first part is a review of herd instinct and dynamics. Herd behavior will then be translated into Natural Horsemanship principles.

Horses are prey animals. Therefore, they herd together as a means of protection from predators. As part of the life cycle, the predators need their lunch. So they pick off the horses on the fringes of the herd: the young, the old, the injured, the disabled. This leaves the most robust horse genes to live another day and breed robust horses to live for another generation. Since horses as a species have been around for 58 million years, this life cycle works.

As part of herd behavior, horses assume different positions of dominance within the herd that they earn. And they earn these positions through behaviors that establish which horse is more or less dominant. The horse's level of dominance within the herd is vital because the more dominant horses, for example, eat and drink first - which in the wild means survival.

These dominance-establishing behaviors can range from benign (a direct look, pinning, the ears), to more aggressive (turning the hindquarters to another horse with the threat to kick), to behaviors that are meant to disable or even kill (biting, striking, kicking). Horses generally start with the benign behaviors to challenge the other horse because starting at the most aggressive behaviors, those that draw blood or disable another horse, would leave a herd mate vulnerable to predators. In the wild, reducing the herd in this manner would force "good" horses to the fringes to be picked off by predators. Not a good scenario for continuation of the species.

When you watch the dominance "dance" between horses, you see a no-nonsense approach to enforcement, starting with benign acts and quickly increasing the intensity of insistence until the other horse either submits or proves itself more dominant.

Frequently when we introduce a new horse to a herd, each day we see more and more bites and possibly kick marks. As time goes on, the marks become fewer until there is only an occasional bite. The reduction in those dominance battle marks can mean one of two things. Either the horse is winning the battle for dominance and other horses are submitting to him, or he is learning his place in the herd and is respecting the herd mates who are more dominant. The less dominant horse's behavior reflects submittal to the more dominant horses' control of space and movement. The reaction is done in a quick enough manner to satisfy the more dominant horse's request.

Having reviewed herd behavior, how does it relate to Natural Horsemanship? Why does Natural Horsemanship, if done correctly, result in easier communication with your horse?

NH is based on natural herd behavior that horses learn when they are babies from their mothers. The mothers carefully teach correct herd behavior because it gives their babies the advantage of living safely and with harmony within the herd. So, presenting your training goals in a manner that the horse already understands allows you to meet your training goals with less confusion or resistance on the part of your horse.

In my opinion, NH is based on the following natural herd dynamics:

- Respect of the herd order is ultimate and translates into a horse's survival from predators and control of food, water, and other resources.
- Since the order of dominance means survival, your horse wants to be as far up the herd in dominance as he can be. Since the horse sees the human as part of the herd, in his mind one of the two of you is going to be higher in the dominance order. Keeping in mind the type of natural behaviors that horses use to be more dominant and stay there, the human does not want to be less dominant than the horse for safety reasons.
- A horse generally starts with small requests and increases his assertive behavior and intensity of insistence. The human needs to mirror this dynamic and generally start with small requests from his/her horse and increase the intensity from request, to insistence, to demand as needed.
- A horse approaches his request in a no-nonsense way without engaging tempers or egos. Horses can get confused and sometimes defensive when a human presents negative ego-related actions or extended anger.
- A horse expects a reaction quickly from the other horse. Since they are essentially non-verbal animals, they don't talk about what is being asked. They ask, expect a response, and increase the intensity of the "ask" if the correct response is not obtained immediately. Humans need to mirror this tempo. Three seconds or less is our current rule of thumb.
- Herd dynamics are engaged at all times of day and night; under all conditions of playing, being tired, being hungry or thirsty. There are no conditions under which a more dominant horse allows a less dominant horse to be disrespectful of the herd order. Humans sometimes give their horse "a break" when they feel that their horse is tired, it is feeding time, the weather changes, etc. They allow the horse to push past them, ignore them, or do other disrespectful acts. Keep in mind that horses do not allow that with each other. The respect between horses must be ongoing and consistent since their survival depends on it.

The horse species is different than the human, dog, or other species in construction of the brain and its learning process. The overlay of survival instincts including the flight and herd instincts also adds another dimension. The horse is an amazing and unique species. Humans need to understand horses on their own terms and not interact with them as we would another human, dog, or other species. I believe that Natural Horsemanship, if done correctly, helps us with this inter-species relationship.

Basic Tip: Some horses are satisfied with their status in the herd order while others can challenge their position within the herd regularly. Know your horse-handling abilities and choose a horse that allows you to have fun. Fun for one person might be having a horse that is challenging, while fun for another person might be having a horse "pal" that is easy to be around and non-challenging.