

Good Manners Cost Nothing.....?

How many times have you watched someone being dragged about by their horse and thought to yourself how ill-mannered their charge was being and how your precious little darling would never behave in such a way. How often have you heard people say, "I want to buy a youngster who has not been wasted by stupid people" and agreed with them without realising that all the wasted horses of this world were once innocent youngsters who may well have been bought by someone with the very same notions.

At the end of the day we must all look to ourselves and our own horses first before criticising or commenting on others. People have an impossible range of what they deem as acceptable or unacceptable behaviour which varies from individual to individual and culture to culture. What I find truly amazing is that horses the world over have the same set of rules of behaviour between themselves irrespective of their country of origin, whether they are wild or domestic, live large groups or small families.

Perhaps we should take a leaf from their book, often the most ill-mannered of horses with people is the epitome of politeness and etiquette in the company of other horses and this speaks volumes with regards to human/horse relationships.

The biggest problem seems to stem from the fact that to a horse everything is very black and white, there are no grey areas. You are either allowed to do something or you are not. However, we complex humans can sometimes have ever changing goalposts which seem to vary from situation to situation or person to person. We have the ability to "lie" be it "white lies" or not we can bend the truth to suit our own ends or cause trouble where horses on the other hand never lie.

What we need to do is base our rules of behaviour or manners on what horses have agreed between themselves. The first rule is one of personal space. A horse will not invade the space of another without invitation or intent to dominate. If a horse is invited into personal space it may be to groom a friend or play with a friend, for whatever reason there are subtle exchanges of posture which amount to a conversation along the lines of, "Hi there, do you want to play with me?" the answer will either be yes or no. If the answer is no and from a subordinate the next comment might then be one of mild annoyance or aggression from the horse that wants to play in order to show his or her displeasure at being turned down. This will either cause the other horse to move away or give up and turn to play for a short while. If the answer is yes then serious horseplay will begin. When horses play (especially males) it can get pretty rough as it is basically stylised fighting, it will almost always finish with one of the horses backing down and submitting and ending the play session, so there is almost always a "winner". If it is the subordinate who is asking for play and the superior says no then the subordinate will either walk away or stay quietly grazing or standing next to the superior just being a friend.

Horses don't have to approach each other for a purpose they may simply want to hang out and be with their friend, but either way they will always ask politely to approach another. If a horse is not polite and barges through another's space with a "get out of my way or I will hurt you" attitude they will either be met with a very aggressive response and be "put back into their place" or the others will move away showing deference and submission. They may well get a nip or bite by the dominant bully to underline his or her authority. What you will find is that most horses avoid the company of such a bully as it is just too much hassle and they are too unpredictable.

Let's look at this scenario now when the other horse is substituted for a human. Most people are completely unaware of how horses encroach on their space and push them around, in short most horses are used to treating people in much the same way as the equine bully treats the herd. They may ask to approach your space but most of us are not clued into the subtle signs and miss them altogether. Some horses take this as an invitation and move in anyway, this can also lead them to think you are being submissive to them. Depending on what they want will depend on what happens next. The horse may ask to play, this may begin as gentle nuzzling or nibbling of clothing or hands, or "punching" with their nose or head into your face. You may push them away (this is part of the push me push you game) and they come right back at you with an increase of intensity. This shove game could go on for some time

till the horse gives you a nip or bite and you lose your temper and either hit them or chase them away, you may even become frightened and move away from them. A horse will be confused by a playmate that has suddenly become violent and angry, especially after inviting play and may regard the human as an unpredictable bully. If the human moves away then the horse is the winner and they have established a higher ranking over the human.

Then you can get the other extreme where a human will come in with all guns blazing and push and shove the horse around, moving into their space without asking or being polite then punishing the horse if they don't move quickly enough. This is the action of a bully and although the horse's may comply, they will avoid the company of a human bully as much as an equine bully showing very little trust or confidence in them.

If you watch a herd long enough you will see that there are some individuals who hardly ever "play" with others. They may still be well liked and will socialise with friends and may even be relatively high ranking, they simply don't want to play and they make this clear in a subtle but definite way if a horse approaches them. Other horses respect this and will always be polite around these individuals often choosing to follow them and want to be with them. This seems to be because they are very consistent in their behaviour and steady and clear in their communication. These are the individuals that we should model ourselves on. We are not physically able to deal with horses on an equal basis and so must make it clear what is acceptable behaviour. Humans should not indulge in horseplay as seen between male horses as we would be seriously injured or killed. As long as we make this clear to the horse then that is perfectly acceptable to them. The key to developing this relationship is to be consistent. Decide how you would like your horse to behave and be consistent with the rules, never change them, never say "oh it's all right to barge into me today but not tomorrow." It doesn't matter what your set of manners are between you and your horse as long as you both stick by them. Remember that no one likes a horse that bites, kicks, barges, bolts or is dangerous in any way, these are the wasted horses that will eventually be thrown away.

So it is clear that one of the best ways of deciding what are good manners is by observing equine etiquette in a herd. We can model our own set of rules around these and ensure that our rules are in line with everyone else who is working with our horse. We must also be careful never to assume that other people have the same set of rules, for example, some people feed tit-bits some people don't. Never give a strange horse a tit-bit without first checking with the owners if this is acceptable or not as this may be a direct infringement of their set of rules of good manners. What is important is that you keep in mind that "God forbid" you may have to sell or move your horse on should your circumstances change and it is therefore vital for the well being of your horse that they have universally acceptable good manners. For example they don't bite, kick or barge in any way, this will give them a better chance of a good home and fair treatment.

It is very difficult for some humans to instil good manners in their horses as they are sadly lacking in good manners with other humans. For one reason or another some people are inconsistent in their behaviour with others, they may be rude, they may be nasty, they may be bitchy, they may be superficial, they may be erratic and irrational. Often their behaviour is mirrored by the behaviour of their horse as the lack of good manners they have in themselves makes it virtually impossible for them to impose good manners on their horses.

It is therefore important that you look closely at yourself and be honest with what you see. It may be necessary to change how you approach others, how you behave in society and how you interact with your own species before you can help your horse. If you are not sure about your own nature then I suggest you look at your horse, I was told by an old horseman, "If you want to know about a person, then look no further than their horse" and never a truer word was spoken. It is very difficult for people to admit their shortcomings but in order to grow and develop we must understand our weaknesses and work towards developing our strengths and creating balance.

Horses are honest and open and you should follow their lead in this respect. Try not to tell lies, try not to think badly of others. Be yourself, if you don't like someone or something then simply avoid association and never say or do anything to cause trouble or create ill feeling. This is easier said than done and there are many people who simply don't want to change their ways. This is perfectly acceptable, but don't expect the horse to show good manners if you will not.

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Watch your thoughts
They become your words

Watch your words
They become your actions

Watch your actions
They will dictate your future