

# HORSES ARE STUPID ANIMALS! ARE THEY NOW?

This is a very, very tricky and controversial area for anyone to venture into and we all have our own opinions regarding the matter. The real difficulty is that we as human beings cannot even define intelligence accurately. We can measure and “score” intelligence in the form of tests which are designed to give an IQ rating for members of our own species. This is great, and, not being an expert on the matter, as far as I am aware, is pretty accurate. (I know that many of you out there are now thinking of all the “intelligent” people with academic knowledge but who lack the most important intelligence tool for survival – commonsense!).

Any horseperson who has worked with many horses over many years will most definitely have their own opinions on equine intelligence, this may or may not agree with the recognised scientific thoughts on the matter. It is a very difficult subject for any scientist to broach and no matter what they say, someone will disagree. All science can do is base their research on facts, proven, documented and unquestionable records of tests and material evidence. This approach is the only option for any scientist to use as quite simply they must have evidence to back up any statement and this evidence must be supported by physical research and documented proof.

As a person with a scientific background I totally understand the predicament that this can put people in. You may suspect deep down through your own experiences that what the “books” say about equine intelligence does not add up, but you have no way to prove this other than stories or feelings or other anecdotal evidence that quite simply will not stand up to scientific scrutiny. Here my friends is the crux of the problem. Most scientist would love to say that horses are intelligent, but there is no way of proving this is so with today’s current understanding of psychology and the function of the brain.

So here we are, are horses stupid animals that react only to pre-programmed instinct and have absolutely no reasoning powers? I know what I think, but that does not make me right and everyone else who disagrees wrong. One of the main pieces of evidence regarding equine intelligence relates to the size of the equine brain in relation to their body. It is about the size of a grapefruit. Not particularly big for the size of the animal and this is usually used as an example that not much brain would be left over for “thinking” after all of the functions of the body are allocated their own areas of control. I am no expert on the subject so I cannot argue one way or another, I know that studies of the human brain show specific areas for memory, emotion, social skills, motor skills, reasoning and creative thinking. These areas, when compared to the equine brain, show quite clearly that the areas required for reasoning, creative thinking and logic are not nearly as developed as in the human brain. This again can show that the horse has limited reasoning. What is interesting to note is that the area of the equine brain given over to emotions is as developed and almost equal in size to that in a human brain.

I had to go along with the scientific view based on the evidence but inside I just felt that things were not as simple as brain size and areas of allocated control. This feeling went hand in hand with my practical experience of working with horses. Granted, I have met a few horses who quite frankly were in the “Tim nice but dim” category whilst others demonstrated a highly developed ability to manipulate people and situations to their advantage, one could almost say highly intelligent. I maintained this conflict in opinions for many years until I watched a television programme regarding extraordinary people. This highlighted the case of a woman who quite simply put, had no brain. Apparently she had a medical condition that had caused her brain to develop in such a way that what should have been two small fluid filled spaces in the centre of her brain took up most of her skull space and had limited the actual working area of brain cells to a small layer lining the inside of her skull and sandwiched between the bone and the fluid. What was most remarkable about this condition was the fact that the woman was perfectly normal and of above average intelligence. Again, not being an expert I cannot be accurate in saying that if you rolled the entire working area of brain into a ball you would be lucky if you had something the size of a walnut, but I’m sure I would not be far away. This really made me think (I almost used 2 brain cells!). If this woman could function normally with such a small working

area of brain then this really challenged our concepts of how we and probably other animals actually use our brain. The programme also demonstrated that intelligence did not relate to size of brain, in fact, it proved that intelligence seemed to have very little to do with surface area or working area at all, in fact it now seems that we simply just do not know what makes someone intelligent.

I then began to think about equines. What if they used their brains more efficiently than we do, what if in fact they used all of their grapefruit sized ball of cells to function, would that, in light of recent understanding, not give them more than enough to raise them in the intelligence stakes? I began to find myself moving towards more unconventional thinking regarding our equine partners. We do in fact have more in common with horses than we think. We are both mammals, we live in organised social groups that are designed to ensure the best chance of survival for our offspring. We have both evolved over millions of years to be able to adapt to our environment, we both have evolved efficient means of communicating our emotions and personal needs to others in our social group. We both form lasting friendships or enmity with others of our species and/or with other species. We are both capable of a full and expressive range of emotions. We both have the ability to learn and understand the language of other species!

The biggest difference between us is the fact that we act and think like a predator and they act and think like a prey animal. This means that the basic values and reasoning of horses is almost diametrically opposite to our basic values and reasoning. What makes sense to one species makes absolutely no sense to the other and I truly believe that it is this fundamental difference that has led the horse to be labelled stupid. The commonality between our species should mean that it is not really the place of people like you or I to prove to science that horses are intelligent and capable of understanding far more than we give them credit, no, it is more the responsibility of science to prove beyond reasonable doubt that horses are not intelligent and capable of understanding.

I found that by approaching the training of horses with the assumption that this was an intelligent, sensitive being that simply experienced the world differently from me and whose senses were more honed to their environment giving them a high level of sensory input, things became much, much easier. Instead of thinking that this was an animal that was only capable of reacting through instinct and that needed to be repetitively conditioned to respond to cues I tried instead to “explain” what I wanted, not in language terms of course, but through actions. I approached the training with the attitude that I was trying to communicate with and work with a creature who was capable of understanding much more but who viewed life with different eyes. The results have been, quite frankly, astounding.

There is a great fear among scientist to anthropomorphise other animals, in other words, to give animals human feelings or emotions or to interpret an animals actions through human terms. (Oops! Please see the illustrations to show this fault!!!) This fear I think has held back many people from looking at animals in a different way. In light of the above it is not unreasonable to assign an emotion to a horse’s reactions and if we free our method of describing an event by explaining it in human terms then we just might free up our minds in our understanding of equines and other species.

What must be remembered at all times is the simple fact that a horse is a horse and should be treated as such, they deserve no less. They are not human, they do not see the world like we do and they do not think as we do. We must accept however, that this simple fact does not make them stupid or unintelligent. The more that you learn about the equine the more you see that in their world, with their values, they are in fact intelligent, sensitive beings. Perhaps one day we will know for sure either way.

What I can say however is that we as human beings are capable of changing our views and concepts, more so than the horse who’s view of their world and ours continues to be measured and analysed in terms of their evolutionary development and understanding. This does not make them more or less intelligent than us, it just puts their interpretation of this world in a slightly different place than ours. What should give you all food for thought is, when our journey to understand the nature of the universe and all it contains becomes complete and we can experience all that it has to offer with an open and receptive mind, what other beings that share our world will we find at this journey’s end, who have had this understanding for millennia and who have been patiently waiting for us to finally just get with the programme!!!

# Equido



Equido is a detailed and comprehensive training methodology and system designed and developed by Ross Dhu Equestrian.

This system gives the student the unique chance to qualify in an alternative training system based on Natural Horsemanship philosophy.

Equido is open to all students irrespective of their learning capabilities or physical challenges. We endeavour to cater for any special learning requirements and our courses can be customised to the students needs. For Example you can qualify under the following categories:-

**Equido Academic** - Theory based only with little or no practical handling skills required (ideal for physically impaired students).

**Equido Groundwork Instructor** - Full qualification for non-riding students ideal for those students who do not wish to be advanced riders.

**Equido Full Instructor** - Full qualification including ridden requirements to an advanced level for chosen discipline.

We also understand that flexibility is required when it comes to offering study times for students, to this end we at Equido are available to you the student seven days a week from 9.00am - 5.00pm and we can also arrange evening training from 6.00pm - 9.00pm at a date and time that suits you.

## **Other Services Offered**

We also have mobile instructors who are able to travel to you and your horse to assist with your training needs. This does not need to be related to Equido but can be geared towards specific requirements i.e. difficult to catch, load, lead, etc.

We also have very limited availability for your horse to come to us to be trained using Equido methods.