

The following is an article written by Jan Dawson, President of the AAHS (American Association for Horsemanship Safety). I incorporate many of the methods from her books, Secure Seat: The Art of Staying on Your Horse and Learning Feel and Teaching Safe Horsemanship when instructing my beginner students. This article may give you some idea of why horses act the way they do and why I cannot ensure that the horses will behave appropriately at all times, after all, a horse will be a horse! The following information is stressed in the students first few lessons until the student begins to use the techniques automatically, at which point reminders are given as needed.

The Nature of the Horse

By

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All too often at riding schools and trail ride establishments, the first lesson or pre-ride instruction is under-utilized or completely wasted from a safety perspective.

The first lesson, or pre-ride instruction, even with advanced students or riders, is the best opportunity to frame all the instruction that follows in terms of safety in a way even the most novice rider will remember and in a way even the advanced rider may not have considered. We all may say “I knew that” but we must know it so well that our unconscious survival instinct will push it to the surface when needed.

Unfortunately, a set of quickly listed rules, oral or written, is soon forgotten if the rules have no logical framework. Riders will remember them when they have heard them over and over but is that enough?

How about these words following an accident, “I knew better. I have heard that all of my life but just didn’t think.” The information had never turned into habitual practice.

The following initial ground lesson is excerpted from the AAHS Instructor’s Handbook of Horsemanship Safety.

1. The very things about the horse that cause us so much trouble are the very characteristics that have kept the horse in existence for thousands of years. His instincts protected his ancestors and kept them from being eaten, so they could live long enough to

reproduce offspring, including the horse your student is about to mount.

2. No matter how good the trainer or rider is, we cannot teach the horse not to be a horse. The instincts are imbedded genetically and are always there.

3. When the horse is under mental or physical pressure, his instincts take over and the training goes out the window.

4. What are those instincts? They are characteristics that have kept the horse from being eaten by predators. The short answer is to fight or flee, but that is too simplistic.

5. Man – the supreme predator – must separate himself somehow from the lions, tigers and bears when dealing with horses.

6. Predators must bring a horse down quickly if they are to have dinner. They can go to the neck and slice the jugular vein and carotid artery; they can cut the hamstring above the hock; they can cut the band on top of the neck that holds the neck up; and, if it's a group of predators, once can grab the nose and the rest can bring the horse down.

7. So, we don't approach a horse from behind, or the neck or the nose (head). The wolf that tried to bring a horse down by biting his shoulder would be squashed. We approach the shoulder, which tells the horse we mean no harm.

8. Predators must sneak up on a horse to be successful, so we must announce our arrival. We speak to the horse and wait until he acknowledges us by looking at us or turning his ears to us. Then we walk normally to his shoulder and stroke him.

9. The horse's keen sense of hearing has protected him for thousands of years. His eyes on the side of his head allow him to see almost all the way around himself. He cannot see directly behind or immediately in front of himself, which is why horses are such poor typists. So we want to stay where he can see us. We whistle when coming through a door or around a corner in the barn area to announce to all horses that we are approaching.

10. All animals with skulls protecting their brains are protective of their heads. We don't like to have someone come up and put their hands on our faces without permission, and neither does a horse. How often do we see someone reach out and touch a horse first on the face? Not a good idea.

11. Horses have stayed alive for many generations by reacting quickly to surprises – run or get away first to a safe distance, then turn and look. Don't look first or you might not have time to run. Suppose old Dobbin falls asleep during grooming, you step away to visit, and then go back to grooming. That touch to a dozing horse may trigger the instinct. Keep the horse awake. If you step away, talk to him and announce your presence before touching him again.

12. The horse has his own space. It is a circle about 12 to 15 feet around him. This is

the area he can either defend or still have time to get away if there is an opening. Consider the wise old ranch horse in the pasture: you get to within 15 feet of him with your halter, he takes a step, you take a step. He knows you aren't going to catch him if he can maintain his distance from you. He will not allow a predator within that space. So, don't act like a predator.

13. Not acting like a predator is easy. Just make sure the horse knows who you are, where you are and what you are going to do. To the horse, this means you approach him talking to him, you stay where he can see you, and you make it clear that you aren't going to hurt or eat him by making no sudden moves. Example: we run a hand down the leg of the hoof we are going to clean, we don't just grab the foot.

14. Caution must be exercised in the barn or saddling area. In most barns, the aisle is not wide enough to allow students to pass the horses without entering their space – so we approach each horse individually at the shoulder after they have acknowledged us with a look or an ear; then we keep a hand on them as we go by.

15. It is important to know where not to be when the instinct kicks in. If we go under the lead rope, the horse can smash a face while stomping a fly. Or worse, if he spooks forward, we will be stomped. If he is tied to a solid wall, we may be squashed. When leading, whether you turn the horse toward you or away, the main thing (and this is really important with small children) is to stay out from in front of the horse's front feet.

16. When you are behind a horse, closer is better. When going behind a horse, if you are up close and he kicks, you won't get the full force – farther back you may get kicked with the power that can move the horse forward at 30 miles per hour. So keep your hand on the horse, let your arm pass to the other side before your body does. We like to have our shoulder touching the tail as we go by. If he is going to kick, he will probably do it when only your arm is touching his rump; he won't wait for your body. The fact that you have touched him all the way from his shoulder to rump is good insurance that he probably won't kick. He knows who you are, certainly where you are, and you don't seem to have plans to eat him.

17. If students understand that it is quite a miracle that a horse lets the supreme predator ride on his back, they will have more respect for the horse.