

Herd Bound

By Marie Hoffman

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I often receive questions about herd bound horses. A person may own two or three horses. When they want to ride one, or even two, there is lots of whinnying and pacing by the other(s) left at home. The horse being ridden is also not very attentive to the rider's signals as he is worried about his friends at the barn. This can be very frustrating!

Next month's article will be on what you can do to let your horse be in a herd and still be obedient while ridden. I call it alone training, the horse learns to be confident alone when worked or just separated. When the session is over he is turned out with other horses. Like the horse's normal herd social training, it is best if "alone training" is done when the horse is young, but it can be done at any age.

First we need to know why horses act this way. Learning horse social behavior is important to have a healthy minded horse that is able to leave the herd with confidence.

To understand how to handle the herd bound horse, it is helpful to understand the horse's point of view. We know that horses are gregarious, meaning that they desire company. This is instinctive behavior for the horse. Not all horses have a strong herd instinct, but all do to some extent.

In the wild, he needs the company of his own kind for protection against predators. The saying there is safety in numbers applies directly to the horse. The herd provides guidance to where food and water are, plus the many eyes and ears to look out for danger. The horse instinctively knows (perceives) that if his herd mates leave and he is unable to follow he is at risk of being attacked by a predator. If your horse seems panicky when left behind, he probably is. The horse thinks he is going to be easy pray for some predator. A horse must feel totally safe not to have this instinctive behavior take over. It is important to realize that the horse left home is reacting instinctively when he is calling frantically for his herd mates he is not misbehaving. On a trail ride if your horse acts barn sour when you return home*. Your horse may instinctively react as if he is now the one being left and becomes frantic to get back to his herd mates. Or perhaps he reacts like he is in danger whenever he is alone; doing anything he can to get back to the safety of the barn and his herd mates.

The good point about this instinctive behavior is that the horse's gregarious (herd bound) behavior is why they bond so well with humans. They want company! Horses have been known to bond with chickens, cats, goats, pigs, donkeys and I am sure other animals too. They instinctively want companionship of another equine but can substitute any animal available. Horse bond with their owners and that is very good, but I know of no human that is able to spend most if not all of 24 hour with their horse. He desires company when his human handler is not around.

I realize that some horses must be raised alone or have to be kept by themselves because of the owners circumstances, but this is not ideal. Owners of orphans will often tell you of how hard it is to train and work with the colt if he was not raised with a foster dam. Some adult horses lacking social skills will seriously hurt or be hurt if turned out with another horse and must be turned out only by themselves. If the owner has a choice, there are good reasons to let the horse be a horse. Ideally a horse should be raised and live with other horses of his own age. I know that this is often not possible, so any compatible equine company will do.

Show horses are kept away from their herd mates so they can be in the proper condition to show. A horse doesn't have to be with the herd non-stop to learn his social skills. A horse can and does adjust well to being taken out to be conditioned and shown. When show season is over it is beneficial to turn the horse back out to be a horse. More on this next month. There are several ways people can deal with the horse's instinctive herd bound behavior.

One way to do this that usually causes problems later, is to take the horse out of the herd situation from weaning on. The horse grows up living in a stall and alone in a turn out pen. Horses that are deprived of any social behavior with other horses often do not develop the herd bound behavior, while they are separated. Problems can develop though.

Listed below are things that can happen if the horse is raised without equine companionship from weaning through adulthood.

1. If always kept alone till they are adults, the horse will never develop the social skills needed to live with others horses, especially if weaned early. They often live very lonely lives. They can't be turned out with others because

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they are usually either a bully or outcast. The only social behavior learned was when they were with their dams. It is well known that if a foal's dam has an unwanted behavior, you wean the foal early and he will be unlikely to learn this behavior. A horse's proper social skills are learned. If the horse is not allowed to learn these lessons in the early years of his life, it is much more difficult if not impossible for some horses to develop them when they get older.

2. When they are young, the horse may look to the human for a playmate instead of a leader. When the handler comes to work the horse he may try all the behaviors that he would with other horses to initiate play or dominance. This is instinctive behavior enables the young horse to learn social skills and find his place in the herd's pecking order. This behavior may come out as rearing, kicking, chasing, biting and striking. The handler then is responsible for teaching the colt all the manners which the horse will learn. Needless to say the handler should be very experienced. It is much easier, safer and more appropriate to let the herd help develop his social skills. I am not saying that raising a horse with other horses means that your horse may not try out some of this behavior on his human handlers. What I am saying is it will be much easier to correct this unwanted behavior because the other horses give the young horse some boundaries for behavior and enforce these boundaries much better than a human can.

Why do horses in today's modern settings need herd social skills? They need them because when they interact with other horses they learn to obey subtle signals from the lead horses. They learn to look for direction from a leader. They learn to restrain themselves not to go eat the lead horse's hay or kick the lead horse when they want to play. The horse learns boundaries of acceptable behavior; this makes the trainer's job much easier.

A tremendous amount of a horse's communication is through body language. For the most part, this language must be learned. The foal's dam is his first teacher. The horse that doesn't know what these slight gestures mean will be harassed more by the other horses. If the horse is a bully and he does not understand the use of his body language to keep his #1 position in the pecking order. When another horse approaches he kicks and bites instead of using his body language by swishing his tail or pinning his ears. The timid horse may misinterpret most gestures to be threatening and over react.

I have had two such horses at my farm in the last couple of years. One of each type mentioned above.

One, a bay TB cross gelding took off running every time another horse just looked at him. He had to be put in at night and every time we left the farm because he also occasionally ran through/over the fence for about a year. If a horse hits our fence hard enough our fences will break away and he was never hurt. Of course, when he took off running the other geldings figured they should chase him. I would like to add that the geldings in the pen did not act aggressive toward this horse to initiate the chasing. Under saddle he was very nervous and forward. It was interesting that as he steadily improved in his confidence and behavior under saddle, he slowly learned social skills in the pasture.

It has been four years and he has now learned enough social skills to get along in the group. He is now a normal keeper instead of a very hard keeper. His under saddle work has gone from spending "hours" getting him to walk on a loose rein to normal workouts. Good training and T.T.E.A.M. techniques helped bring about this change. I am sure the T.T.E.A.M. training developed his ability to think instead of react under saddle and on the ground. He transferred this ability in the pasture. He was 9 years old when he arrived and was unable to be led, ridden, or turned out in a group of horses. He would bolt off at the slightest provocation. He did not have any social skills in a herd situation yet was very herd bound when away. He was definitely maladjusted.

The other was a Quarter Horse mare that was raised in a stall and turned out alone. She was good when she could see other horses, but was very nervous when she could not. She was insecure and extremely barn sour from the very start of her training. When ridden with other horses she wanted to kick or bite them if they came near. She always seemed to feel threatened by other horses being near. In the herd of about 5 or 6 she was second in the pecking order and continually chased the horses lower down away from her. She had a habit of kicking the walls in her stall. She was so bad, we could not stall her. When she was turned out she would kick what ever she could connect with when she was put in her place by a lead horse. She had broken her hind sesmoid bone twice. She was generally willful to work with and though did train to be a good riding horse, it took a very long time. Much longer than if she would have learned as a young horse some herd social skills.

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The TTE.A.M. methods used to train her, her owner said was the only way we were able to get through to her. Though she did learn to think instead of react with a human, she didn't transfer her learned behavior to the pasture and other horses. I have found young horses raised alone and orphans to be the most difficult for me to train. They are usually extremely pushy or timid, depending on their personalities and handling. Young horses need to be raised with other horses. They learn to lessons in social behavior and confidence that a human can't duplicate. The young horse should ideally be in a herd of stable personalities horses. The calmer the herd mate, the calmer the colt will learn to be. I find the horses raised with other horses are easier to train and the training progresses much faster. These horses are neither excessively very dominant nor timid. They usually will be able to handle new situations better.

Next month I will tell you about ways to develop your horse's confidence to leave the herd and be calmer when left behind. I will also tell you about ways to keep your horse's instinctive behavior from becoming so strong that it creates a behavior problem. As with most things, there is a balance. My goal is happiness and contentment for the horse and the confidence to leave the herd and feel safe. In return, I get a more willing partner that is more able to give his total concentration and effort to our partnership.

* A horse may be barn sour and return home for other reasons. This can also be a learned behavior.