

EQUINE BEHAVIOR AND TRAINING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE



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My goal is to help horses with behavior and training issues, or who aren't performing up to expectations. Solutions come from insuring that the horse's physical, social, and psychological needs are met, identifying what motivates them, and understanding how they learn and process information. The principles that guide my training are based in equine welfare, ethology, learning theory, and neuroscience. My approach offers an alternative to methods that prioritize the trainer or rider's goals, and that judge the horse against an idealized and often unrealistic performance standard. Anna Blake describes this "natural human instinct" and its harmful impact on equine training in a blog: <http://annablakeblog.com/2015/08/07/natural-instinct-the-human-half/>

For us humans, we bring ... ingredients [to equine training] that are nearly combustible. First, we have passion. Desire is like pouring gasoline on a fire. We rush and hurry and if we don't get an answer fast enough, we ask again, louder this time. Ambition about the future clouds the immediate. We surrender awareness in the moment and look to the end result, without involving a step by step path to get there happily. We see ourselves cantering rhythmically with our horses but we don't know how to get them there without a fight.

- **Focus on the whole animal.**

Putting the horse first in the training process helps it develop to its fullest potential. My training approach addresses the multiple aspects of equine learning—physical, intellectual, emotional, and social. The training goals for each horse depends on his personality, developmental stage, physical abilities, and emotional preparedness; new skills are introduced when the horse is ready.

Addressing the whole horse also refers to taking care of the its needs during the "other 23 hours" outside of training, by providing it with enriched environment, which includes proper nutrition and grazing, social contact with other horses and people, mental stimulation, and freedom to move and explore.

- **Ask the question; "why is my horse behaving this way?"**

During training we must work with the horse that is present in that moment, but provoking and then *reacting* to problems as they come up is a relatively ineffective way to train or change behavior. Unwanted behaviors in horses may be caused by pain, fear, anxiety, excitement, inexperience, frustration, or learned strategies that have worked in the past. Knowing "why" provides a powerful tool for customizing and refining training, and to be *proactive* by dealing with the underlying reason for the behavior issue and preventing it from happening again.

- **Personalize instruction to fit the individual horse and rider.**

Every horse is unique and special. Success is achieved by providing learning experiences that are customized for each horse, and by choosing exercises that advance, but do not exceed, the skill level and abilities of the owner/rider. My training plans recognize these individual differences, and allow horses to perform in ways that complement their unique learning styles, temperaments, and backgrounds. Consideration is given to the horse's resilience and competency when choosing what tasks to work on, how often to train, and the best training method. It is an alternative to "one-size-fits-all" approaches that provide all horses with the same type of training with little variation from horse to horse.

- **Build a foundation of positive learning experiences, and advocate for the right of every horse to humane training practices.**

My primary training objective is to create a connection built on trust and positive experiences for the horse, not fear and negative experiences. To accomplish this goal, my approach employs a wide variety of methods and provides a diverse selection of learning experiences. Horses should be mentally engaged and physically active in the learning process; an engaged horse is neither bored nor overwhelmed. This approach cultivates strong horse-human relationships by adopting clear, consistent, simple, and fair rules, which are easy for a horse to learn and follow, and by applying positive, low stress training techniques.