



## Thoughts about Horsemanship

**Claire Vale, a seasoned trimmer from New Zealand shares her thoughts**

I love being a benevolent lead mare, it works great when the relationship is established and everyone is happy. With my own horses I've had loving and gentle relationships that have very seldom required antagonism from either party. As a trimmer and handler though, there are times when I need the horse to behave safely, right now, and that can necessitate a 'discussion'. That then means I'm being overtly dominant, for as long as it takes to establish the hierarchy (the actual reactions depend on the individual horse - a loud growl may suffice for some, others need more physical reminders). First though, I identify WHY the horse is 'misbehaving', and address the cause - is it because they're trying to dominate, or from pain, or worry about where their friends went, or because they've reached the end of their baby attention span, or ... There's no point treating the symptom inappropriately. It's acceptable for a horse to get snarky about having their feet picked out if they are sore and I haven't heard their concern about that - it's not appropriate for a young horse to try and push me around just because he's feeling his oats today and wants to try for herd stallion status <G>.

Once it is established that I'm the leader (however that is established, e.g. by offering safety and pleasure or overt dominance), the benevolent leader behavior is used. If and when appropriate, the horse may be reminded of their manners. It's very seldom that I need to go to the previous level of discussion again however - usually a light reminder that Yes, I AM still the leader, Thank you for asking, is enough and the horse is happy again.

Last week I worked with my friend's yearling who had just been weaned. The filly is friendly, wants to please, and yet jumped like a scalded cat at any noise outside the box (it really didn't help that her mate in the next box was very jealous of not being the one being handled and was kicking the walls!). She didn't know me from a bar of soap, and although she thought she wanted to be my friend she didn't know she could rely on me as herd leader. I spent half an hour becoming friends with her, while she still leapt out of her skin at every bang, running over the top a couple of times in the process. I'd made the mistake of concentrating on trying to be her friend, instead of listening to her concerns. Eventually, I realized that what she really needed from me was to know that I was in control of the situation and all she had to do was concentrate on me. Looking back, I should have established that in the first few minutes, since that is what she had from her dam and the other mares.

It took a few minutes of working her around the box and insisting that she keep moving correctly even when the tractor went past, and all of a sudden I could see her realization that she didn't have to worry about that stuff any more. I was now her lead mare, and she could leave all the worrying up to me <G>. After that it took about two minutes to get the halter on her and she was my new best friend. If I hadn't taken that time to show her that I could hold her attention despite exterior distractions, it would have taken



hours and hours and might have been even more distressing for her in the long run. After that, a benevolent leader is everything she needed - because she KNEW that I was the benevolent leader. I'm really looking forward to the chance to watch a herd raised benevolent leader however, and finding out how they work as well - always more tips to pick up!

Every horse is different, and it's up to us to listen to them, find out what's really going on 'behind the scenes' and respond appropriately.

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