

LEADERSHIP

By
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Trail riders lead their horses on adventures to the unknown. Predators lurk behind every tree and every blade of grass. The horse who has not been prepared carefully will spook at the slightest movement, change in shading, sudden sound, or even an unexpected energy wave in the ground below his feet.

Horses have evolved as herd animals, surviving in bands led by a trusted leader. They are highly sensitive to any change in their environment and instantly connect with the leader's response. If the herd leader flees, the rest of the herd flees with her. If she stands her ground, they hesitate awaiting her signal. This communication between the herd leader and the herd is instantaneous and subtle enough to escape human detection. The horse alone among prey animals made the evolutionary decision to partner with mankind in a herd for safekeeping. A deer will not let us ride him down to the mailbox more than once and elk rarely pull handsome carriages around Central Park. This unique decision by the equine species has assured its survival on the long, slow evolutionary cycle.

Domesticated horses in effect have joined our herd. They seek a leader and accept even a predator like you or me as the leader if they trust us. When you see a "bomb proof" horse out on the trail you are not seeing a prey animal who has lost his sensitivity, you are seeing a prey animal who has developed trust in its leader. You will never convince your horse to be less sensitive than his nature dictates. But you can convince him to trust you. In order for a horse to collect himself emotionally when faced with the unfamiliar, he is most comfortable in a herd with a strong and trusted leader. If your horse is still "spooky" after the first hundred rides, it's because he has not learned to trust you enough.

Prepare your horse for the unknown by accepting responsibility as the leader. A plastic tarp on the ground in the arena is a pretty good place to start. Ride your horse calmly up to the tarp with confidence. Present him to the unfamiliar and do not respond when he turns away suddenly. Simply ask him to cross the tarp again. Do this over and over with a kind of gentle rhythm, never forcing your horse to do anything but merely turning him back to the tarp again and again. We think that the horse is simply getting used to the tarp and becoming less afraid. What's more to the point is that the horse has been "checking in" with your response to the tarp every time you present him to it. If you bring up no emotional energy but remain placid and calm, your horse will eventually "trust" that the tarp will not hurt him if you don't think it will. With precise clarity, he conducts an instantaneous reading of your response. If you balk every time he balks, he will never cross the tarp. He is looking to you for leadership. You are the source of all his courage. Alpha horses are leaders because they display dominance and good sense and, therefore, are trusted and respected by the herd. Because trail riders routinely present their horses with the unfamiliar, they must learn the skills of the alpha mare and accept that position at all times. No other element of horsemanship is more important on the trail.