



Why the Pro's Horses are So Well Behaved Holly Grayton

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WHY THE PRO'S HORSES ARE SO WELL BEHAVED:

*Note: this is an opinion piece so please, as in life, take what resonates with you and leave what doesn't.

Do you ever go to the warm up ring for the Grand Prix and really look around? If you do, you might notice how nicely most of the horses are standing and waiting with their grooms, while they have their corks put in and while the last small preparations are made before the rider climbs aboard. Alternatively, have you ever gone to the hitching area for the lower amateur divisions and noticed horses being difficult, some trying to kick the one standing near it, dancing around, chewing and drooling on some blanket hanging on the fence that doesn't belong to them?

I think the difference in behavior between the pro and the amateur horse is due to several reasons, not the least of which is the ground manners (or lack thereof) instilled in these horses. It really comes down to understanding how horses work in a herd, and how they feel most comfortable.

If you think about herd dynamics, almost everybody is being bossed around and put in their place by someone. And we don't all have the alpha mare – there simply can't be that many bossy horses in nature, we have created or enabled this behavior! Horses gain comfort by being told the boundaries around them and parameters for their interactions with others. Very rarely are they content to stay within their defined box, they have to be reminded again and again by their boss to stay in line.

As trainers we have to instill the same precedent in our own interactions with our horses. Far too often I hear 'Yes, but he doesn't like the trailer' or 'You just have to coax him into the wash stall with a carrot' and I think to myself that this horse wouldn't last a day in the wild with this attitude. This type of horse has learned to boss you around and dictate the terms of your interactions. They even can have a bad sense of humor getting away with it! It is important to note the distinction here from a scared horse. A scared horse needs guidance the most, and being a trustworthy boss is the fastest way to ease their fear. But, trust is not gained with a carrot!

I'm certainly not saying horses shouldn't have a personality or be allowed to enjoy life, but I am saying that if we don't keep reminding them of their boundaries they will come up with their own. Take my horse for example: if I don't keep an eye on him while leading him, he will drag me to the nearest piece of grass or rub his itchy forehead on my back! But I don't let him walk all over me or shove me around, and if I never make an exception to that rule he is a pleasure for whoever has to hold him at the ring while I walk the course.

I think it is also important to note that losing your temper with a horse cannot happen. Tempers, rage, frustration and other negative emotions will get in the way of being the trustworthy boss that warrants and deserves the horse's respect. If you are scared handling a particular horse, take extra time to ensure your own and your horse's safety, and ask a colleague or trainer for help. If you feel yourself getting frustrated with your horse, take a moment to consider how to better negotiate the situation – maybe that means going back to the barn and asking for a hand, or maybe it means today just isn't the day for whatever task you were hoping to take on. It would be better to try another day.

So the next time you are handling your horse, remember he doesn't love you more if you let him do what he wants and you ply him with carrots. Your relationship can be filled with treats and fun, but the real foundation is based on the respect and trust you earn by being a good boss.