

Teachable Moment

Aggressive Horses

Gerrie Barnes

Scenario: Napoleon is a mature quarter horse gelding that is at a training facility for respect issues. He has bucked and been difficult to ride and handle in the past. After he arrived, he bucked with the first trainer. The trainer was even more prepared the next ride. He rode him and he bucked and was even more aggressive. A different trainer worked with Napoleon on the ground. He charged her with teeth barred and ears pinned and then backed up to her, trying to pin her against the panel while double barrel kicking.

Many of you have researched the topic of horse instincts and behavior. There are two important topics that Napoleon helps to demonstrate.

1. Herd Instinct
2. Dominance versus Training

Herd Instinct

Based on his past behavior, it appears that Napoleon is genetically more dominant than other horses. In any given herd he would probably be either the alpha horse or near the top. This does not make him a bad horse. It means that he is willing to take on the responsibilities of that position and willing to fight to maintain his dominance. Remember, the top horse controls the resources . . . meaning that in the wild if there is a shortage of food and water, herd behavior allows that the most dominant horse(s) get to eat and drink first. That also means that they get to live. If there are no more resources, the rest of the herd has to wait and possibly die until more resources are available.



When this type horse (Napoleon) forms his herd of two or three with his owners/riders, he will naturally want to maintain his dominant position and will be willing to fight for it. Fighting can include biting (flesh chunks or tearing the head off), kicking (breaking bones) and striking (stomping the challenging herd mate into the ground until it is dead).

Most middle-of-the-herd horses can show aggressive behaviors if the human herd mate doesn't assume the leadership position in a way that the horse respects. Once the human herd mate learns how to control the horse's space and movement, the middle-of-the-herd horse will give in and become respectful and much safer. However, if the human herd mate controls the horse's space and movement AND the horse continues to challenge the human, that horse is probably a more alpha horse. He is willing to put his life on the line to be at the top of the herd

– which means that he can control the resources and live – while other herd mates die – which means YOU.

The alpha horse is what he is. This doesn't make him a bad horse. . . just a dangerous horse for the human herd mate. It is best to move on to another horse before someone is severely injured or killed.

Dominance versus Training

The researched method for effective training that works with people, horses, and other species: Ask, Tell, Insist, Demand. Always start with the first step – Ask.

This incremental training method is for teaching new skills.

However, when a horse exhibits aggressive behaviors (holding his space, bumping you out of your space, pinning his ears, turning his butt to you, acting like he is going to kick you, nipping you), you and your horse are NOT in training mode. The horse is challenging you for the higher position in your herd of two.

It's time to match testosterone (or estrogen ☺). The correct response is not to Ask or Tell. The correct response is to quickly assess how assertive the horse's behavior is on the scale of minimal (such as holding his space) or maximal (making harmful contact with you – biting, kicking, striking, bucking, rearing). Your job as the human herd mate in this situation is to maintain your alpha status in the relationship. Your response is to act *one step more aggressively* than the horse's aggressive behavior. No Asking or Telling. This means that you go into Insist and Demand mode.

As a reminder, horses are taught the herd dynamic/dominance behaviors by their mommas when they are hours old. Horses understand the "dance" very well. It's the human that needs to take the time to understand this species.

Clinton Anderson has an excellent video about aggressive horses. You can hear what he has to say about horse and its behavior and watch how he handles the aggression. You will notice that he immediately approaches the horse in a demand mode. Do a web search for:

Clinton Anderson Presents: Running Scared

Recreational riders must come to terms with the genetically predisposed nature of their horses. Some are alphas and are not safe or fun regardless of the determination of the rider. It's "live or die" in their nature and would be so within a horse herd or with you. Although my position is not popular among the TV clinicians, I strongly suggest that recreational riders re-home an alpha horse and own a less dominant horse.

