

By ZOË SMITH

# How well do you know your horse?

IF I ASKED YOU TO TELL ME ABOUT YOUR HORSE, WHAT WOULD YOU TELL ME?

Most of us could rattle off a whole list of facts about our equine companions – their age, colour and markings; their medical history; the fact that they work better on the left rein than the right; or how their bloodlines trace back to a multi-million-dollar racehorse. We can pinpoint unique physical traits, like the whorl hidden beneath his neck, a tiny patch of white hairs from a long forgotten injury, or the dusting of freckles that appear in the summer months. You could probably tell me how he goes crazy for polo mints, hates having his ears touched, or only spooks at yellow flowers (that one's from personal experience).

Start by spending time with your horse in his natural environment

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**B**ut how well do you *really* know your horse? Do you know how he spends his day when you're not around? Whether he is naturally outgoing or reserved, a born leader or a natural follower? How much do you know about your horse's personality and how much do you take it into account when riding, training, and handling your horse?

## AN EQUINE PERSONALITY TEST?

For any of us that spend time around horses, there's no doubt that each horse has its own unique personality and it's one of the things that makes riding horses so much more fascinating (and unpredictable) than driving a car or riding a bike. Unfortunately, while many trainers have their theories about the different horse personalities that exist, there is no scientifically proven way to know what makes your horse tick.

As Google is unlikely to come up with a horse-human translator in the near future, we can only rely on our interpretations of how we see our horses. This can make things tricky because, as humans, we often find it easy to anthropomorphise our horses – that is to describe horse behaviour using human emotions. Think about the words you might use to describe your horse – cheeky, naughty, spooky, genuine, sharp, lazy, stubborn, green – how many of these are quantifiable personality traits rather than words that we have assigned to explain a behaviour that we like or don't like? (For more about this, check out IH RT Rosie Jones' article 'Talking about Temperament' in the Winter 2014 issue – available on the IH website).

## NATURE VS. NURTURE

Another important distinction to make is between temperament and personality. Temperament refers to character traits that are innate, that your horse is born with and are often typical of their breed, while personality can be shaped through time and experience. Just like us, horses' personalities can alter depending on their stage of development, level of education, past experiences, physical health, and hormones.

Some parts of your horse's personality might be determined by their age, gender, or upbringing. For example, younger horses tend to have more expendable energy, be more reactive, and more submissive to elders, whilst they are still learning. Geldings and stallions are typically much more playful than mares, while stallions and mares will of course have hormones to blame for certain behaviours. But of course, there are exceptions to every rule, so try to treat your horse as an individual.

It's also important to note that the way a horse behaves around other horses may not be how he has learnt to behave around humans – a more dominant horse is quite capable of learning to be quiet, polite, and respectful around humans, while a timid, nervous horse can easily learn to be pushy and assertive around humans given the

right (or wrong) circumstances. We also have to consider the effect that domestic life could have on a horse's personality. Being stabled and unable to interact with other horses for long periods of time, being turned out alone or with different horses each day, or having to regularly accept new horses into the herd can all upset the natural order of things and cause a horse to display behaviours that we wrongly attribute to their personality.

“...we can learn a lot from watching how our horses interact with their equine buddies.”



Photos courtesy of Zoe Smith

Top: More important is to take notice of how your horse interacts with other horses. Bottom: How well do you know your horse – a horse's place in the herd has a lot to do with shaping their personality

## GETTING TO KNOW YOUR HORSE

So with all these variables, how can we get to know our horse better? The best place to start is to watch your horse in his natural environment and try to get an idea of how he reacts in different situations outside of our influence.

A horse's place in the herd has a lot to do with shaping their personality and we can learn a lot from watching how our horses interact with their equine buddies. Studies of horse psychology have led us to understand that there is a dominance-based relationship of some kind within a herd and figuring out where your horse fits on this spectrum is a good starting point.

A naturally more dominant, outgoing horse might be described as one that has no hesitation voicing their desires, controlling the movement of others, or claiming first dibs on food, water, and other resources. A more submissive, reserved horse might prefer to make choices that make for a quieter life – choosing to avoid or not antagonize more dominant members of the herd, moving aside to allow others to eat or drink first, or generally taking more of a 'following' role. Of course, the realities are never as simple as 'dominant' or 'submissive', and you may find your horse displays a range of different behaviours depending on which horses (or humans) he interacts with.

More important is to take notice of how your horse interacts with other horses – how social is he, does he graze close by others or prefer to keep a distance, does he initiate mutual grooming or play with other horses? Look out for useful information about what your horse likes and doesn't like – for example, does he seem to prefer peace and quiet, or to be at the centre of the action? Which other horses does he spend most of his time with – does he have a close bond with one horse or prefer a wide band of companions? See if you can figure

out why he spends his time with those horses – sometimes a more timid or nervous horse will bond with a calmer, more confident horse, while a playful horse might choose the companion that he finds most interesting or receptive to his demands. >>

## Did you know?

**A HORSE'S BRAIN HAS A LIMBIC SYSTEM – THE PART WHICH IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EMOTIONS – AROUND THE SAME SIZE AS THAT OF HUMANS,** but the big difference lies in the size of the neocortex – which controls the ability to create, conceptualise, and problem solve – it's less than half the size of humans, making complex emotions like guilt, jealousy, and shame extremely unlikely. Consider this as you observe your horse – instead of assuming he's feeling a certain emotion, try to focus instead on his actions and reactions, and 'think like a horse'.

## How well do you know your horse?

### TAILOR-MADE TRAINING FOR YOUR HORSE

Armed with all this new information about your horse, consider how you could adapt your training to work *with* your horse's natural character, rather than against it.

If your horse is constantly hounding his friends to play or loves to investigate new objects, it's likely that he has an active, curious mind and you might want to challenge him or keep him busy with lots of fun, different exercises (check out our creative groundwork training ideas on P20-25!). On the other hand, a horse that enjoys peace and quiet might find the biggest reward to be just quietly standing still together.

Most horses find rest to be a valuable reward, but to a horse who is high-energy and constantly moving this might be more of a punishment than a reward – perhaps



Photo courtesy of Sarah Weston

Tailor your rewards to suit your horse's likes and dislikes

“...adapt your training to work with your horse's natural character, rather than against it.”

build his confidence and trust in your leadership before you hit the trail. 📖

allowing him to walk out on a long rein would be a more fitting choice.

As humans we are often preoccupied with being the kind of leader that we want to be, but consider whether that is the kind of leader your horse actually needs. If your horse is a more dominant type and used to taking on a leadership role, he will likely only be willing to hand you the reins (literally and figuratively) if you prove yourself to be a reliable and decisive leader. At the other extreme, a very sensitive, nervous horse may crave leadership, but need a more gentle, consistent touch to win his trust and help him feel secure. A horse that is very closely bonded to his herd mates might find it more challenging to hack out alone than a more independent horse, so you may need to take time to

#### Try this!

IF IT'S SAFE TO DO SO, PLACE A STRANGE OBJECT SUCH AS A FLAG OR TARPULIN OUT IN YOUR HORSE'S FIELD.

What is his reaction? Curiosity, fear, hesitation, indifference? Is he among the first to come and investigate, or does he keep his distance, or even run away?



### LEARNING POINTS...

1

Horses can possess a wide range of personality traits, just like humans!

2

We can learn more about our horse by watching how they react to new objects and interact with other horses

3

Different rewards can work better for different horses

4

Adapting your training style to suit your horse's personality could lead to a stronger partnership

## Are you a good match for your horse?

**MOST OWNERS ONLY EVER CONSIDER WHETHER THEIR HORSE IS A GOOD MATCH FOR THEM, BUT SPARE A THOUGHT FOR WHETHER YOU ARE THE BEST MATCH FOR YOUR HORSE TOO.** Taking on a boisterous youngster or a nervous horse if you don't have the confidence, skill, or experience is not only potentially unsafe – it might also be detrimental to the horse to not have a strong leader to provide the reassurance they need. Also, think about how their personality fits into your goals – a curious and confident horse might really enjoy disciplines such as TREC, hunting, or eventing, while a timid horse who values their personal space might find contact sports like polo or horseball challenging.