

# Reading Your Horse

by Nanette Levin

November is often designated as a month to give thanks. This might be a good time to take stock in how effective you are at noticing the signs from the equines you encounter. Relishing your ability to produce and interpret a horse's, often subtle, signals of reactions, comprehension and appreciation can be a great source of pride, wonder and thanksgiving.

It's tough to find a comparable high to the one that you get when you are able to read a horse, respond to them in a language they can comfortably comprehend and reach an understanding that is sublime. Why not make this a time for celebrating the horse savvy you have and the resulting relationships, or committing to experiencing this kind of reality by this time next year?

Such skills have applications well beyond your current mount. Whether you strive to assess a potential future purchase, react smartly to a horse you are handling for the first time or save yourself from the embarrassment of missing behavioral cues that noted, would have kept you from an unscheduled and unappreciated dismount, knowing what to look for, and how to respond in kind, can be a huge advantage for both you and the horses you encounter.

The big secret to being a better and more effective horseperson has a lot more to do with your powers of observation than you may realize. Sure, you can learn a lot from books, riding workshops, instructors and other resources, but the real talent depends on how effective you are at learning to 'hear' what a horse is trying to tell you. This is not a process that can be formatted and applied uniformly to every horse you encounter, nor is it a skill that can be gained without direct observation and experience.

Horses communicate in many ways, some more obvious than others, but there are some telltale areas you can focus on for amazing awareness.

## The Eyes

One of the most telling areas of the horse is the eyes. They'll not only provide tremendous insight into the nature of the horse you are approaching, but will also clue you in on likely imminent behavior. Watching a horse's eyes will also offer guidance on how to handle a particular equine.

Many mistake fear for aggression. If a horse is scared, you can't reach them effectively with force or discipline. The eye will tell you if you are dealing with a frightened horse. Equally true, you can see a mean horse through the eye. Don't mistake the two.

The best way to get a really good read on what the eyes are telling you, is to observe how behavior results from certain eye expressions. Once you gain a good feeling for particular clues, this will easily transfer to any horse you encounter.

## The Fear Factor

Scared horses typically have "eyes bulging out of their head," which may include white showing around the perimeter, a seemingly bulging eye, a raised head and, if you really look at what you are seeing, a clear indication of terror. Generally, it is a very bad idea to discipline a horse that is truly afraid, as this only reinforces their fear of the task at hand, and equally substantiates their fear of the human providing this experience. Instead, once you are able to read fear, strive for patience, encouragement and a process that allows the horse to gain confidence in himself and you as the handler. Ideally, you want to first assure the horse that his handler will not increase the fear factor, and subsequently, help the horse to gain self-assurance in his ability to tackle scary situations with the help of a friend.

## Mad as a Hornet

Once you've seen the eye of a mean horse once, and experience his wrath, you'll likely never forget it. Fortunately, these horses are few and far between, but they are vicious, usually having been taught that their only recourse for pain and abuse is violence. A truly mean horse is dangerous and deadset on drawing blood from any of the people he encounters. If bloodlines are the cause, these horses can be tough to turn and may be best



Photo courtesy of Halcyon Acres

*This Thoroughbred mare has a quiet eye and attentive ear while being ridden bareback.*

avoided. Most often, though, this is a taught behavior, and if caught early enough, these horses can be turned. Still, mean horses are not for the light of heart, and may be best recognized early on and avoided when possible.

If you are stuck with a mean horse, or are determined to face the challenge of trying to turn such an animal, make sure you develop a program where you can assure your protection as you proceed with training. These horses rarely respond to praise initially, but must be dealt with through an approach that controls their movement sufficiently to impede their vicious aims effectively. Do not make the mistake of assuming you will kill these characters with kindness and arrive victorious. Such an attitude may land you in the hospital.

Your first objective should be to secure and control behavior to gain respect with an eye toward your personal safety and the horse's acquiescence. This need not be done with hostile behavior, but must be approached with the understanding that your welfare is at stake. Interestingly, responding in kind to the horse's aggressive behavior is rarely effective. Instead, an approach that allows you to stand your ground out of harms way while encouraging the horse to comply with requests through controls over his behavior without necessarily getting into confrontational situations works best. Consider tools as drastic as an iron halter to get the animal's attention while leading, a 20-foot lunge whip in the

round pen and secure ties in the stall such as a stall guard vs. a bungee cord. A helping hand at the horse's head is also prudent when you tackle grooming and other activities that may be difficult alone.

### The Kind Eye

Horses with a kind eye can tell you a lot about how they are likely to respond to starting under saddle, ongoing challenges you pose to them and general handling. These equines have a quiet, peaceful and accepting appearance that is most clearly seen in their ocular expression. Being able to recognize a kind eye is huge relative to picking the right horse and extrapolating how they are likely to respond to requests. It's also a cue for encouraging behavior with praise vs. reprimanding unwanted responses. Kind horses are wonderful training projects and the easiest way to identify them is by looking at the eye.

### The Ears

Riders can anticipate a horse's reaction easily by simply watching the ears.

It seems almost silly to address this seemingly obvious expressive characteristic of a horse's attitude, yet so many seem

unaware of how the ears communicate what is on a horse's mind.

Whether you are on the ground or on a horse's back, ears pinned back against the neck is a sign of anger and aggression. Be ready for a vicious, violent or uncooperative response when you see this sign and make sure you are not within biting reach.

Ears pricked forward generally indicate that the horse sees something that may be of concern. Be ready for a horse to bolt, wheel, slam on the breaks or retreat as you see the ears fixated forward.

When a horse's ears are tilted to the side and/or flicking back and forth, it usually means they are listening to rider or handler cues and in sync with what you are trying to tell them.

Ears pinned back can be a sign of resentment for whatever aid you are applying. Often this comes as a reaction to leg pressure that a horse is unaccustomed to and they will learn to accept it over time—but don't overdo it when you see this response. Demand acceptance, but be ready to end the lesson early if a positive response is realized.

When we revisit this issue, we'll talk about how your body language can effectively



Photo courtesy of Halcyon Acres

*Note the tranquil eye and ears twitching; it's clear this mare is paying attention to the handler.*

communicate with the horse and other cues that may be guiding your mount or young horse's behavior, knowingly or not.

Nanette Levin owns Halcyon Acres, a breeding, breaking and reprogramming facility that specializes in working with Thoroughbreds and Irish Sport Horses. Visit [www.HalcyonAcres.com](http://www.HalcyonAcres.com) for ideas on neat stable management tricks, starting ideas and fixing problem stories. If you'd rather start with a foal already receptive to whatever you request, check out our two lovely Irish Sport Horse weanlings at [www.HalcyonAcres.com/IDSHweanlings](http://www.HalcyonAcres.com/IDSHweanlings).

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