Throughout the millennia of horse-human interactions, humans have been fascinated by their equine-work, -war, -sport and -recreation partners. Even before Xenophon wrote *On Horsemanship* in 350 B.C., anecdotal experiences were passed from person to person and generation to generation to lay the foundation for traditional training of horses and relationships with them. However, active scientific study of this all-important animal was rarely available, due to logistics.

Yet, without such knowledge, in addition to a holistic understanding of the mental, emotional, social, psychological and physical nature of equines, true horse mastery is not possible. Only in relatively recent years have specific studies been funded to explore the movement, psychology, communication, intelligence and expression of horses.

It wasn’t until the 1870’s that former California Governor, Leland Stanford, hired photographer Edward Muybridge to settle a personal bet he had, which the human eye and mind could not process quickly enough to determine: do all four hooves leave the ground for an instant during the trot and gallop? Muybridge’s innovation of ‘pictures in motion’ settled Stanford’s bet (they do, and he won), and was so noteworthy a breakthrough that it appeared in a *Scientific American* article and contributed to the development of the motion picture industry!

**Horse Nature vs. Human Nature:**

The most important factor to keep in mind when dealing with horses is the many hard-wired genetic difference between predator and prey since man is the major predator of equine prey. This fact underlies the differences and the difficulties built in to any attempt at relationship between horse and human.

As predators, humans see, think, act and smell very differently from horses. Predatory hunters think in direct-line, stalking modes while prey animals are instinctive, lateral-thinking, flight-seeking evaders.

As prey, horses are very tuned in to the energy, body language, sight-lines, smells, intentions and emotional indicators of predators. In order to survive, prey animals must discern predators’ intentions and then often do the opposite to survive.

This is why it’s almost impossible for humans to *force* horses to do what humans want. Forcing triggers fear and resistance in the animal, and due to sheer size and strength,
horses will usually win a power struggle. It is most effective for humans to learn to think like a horse, then induce the horse to choose the desired action as its own best alternative, so it becomes *their idea to comply*. Hence the adage “Make the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult”.

Learning to think like a horse plus using body language appropriately to interact with horses leads to effective communication. Clear communication, shared understanding and trust between horse and human leads to cooperation and confidence.

**Herd Dynamics:**

In the wild, horses live in small family bands or larger group herds and thus look to one another for safety. The head (Alpha) mare leads the band while the dominant stallion protects his charges by driving them to flee from danger; by fighting off rivals or predators attempting to steal or harm herd members. Additionally there are sentries that keep watch over the group when at rest, and even surrogates who assist in tending foals.

Dominance among horses is not determined by aggressive behavior. It is demonstrated by one horse being able to make another horse move, or stop it from moving. Aggressive horse behavior is usually punished by ostracizing the herd member to the periphery of the herd, where he is most in danger.

This is an active social order with a hierarchy of respect and leadership that is challenged, defended and changed as leaders get older, injured or weak, and are then defeated by younger, stronger members.

Since there is only one Alpha mare and one dominant stallion, most herd members are submissive followers who realize their lives and security are dependent on competent, confident and knowing leaders. Thus, the vast majority of horse populations are followers who rely on a few proven leaders.

That is what humans need to become: competent, confident, astute and knowledgeable leaders for each horse in their care. This does not mean “Showing them who’s boss” through force, fear, strength, intimidation or mechanical coercion with harsh tools, but rather proving that you possess common sense enough to be an equine leader who can protect and partner up through effective, consistent equine education and survival skills that supply comfort, safety and security to each animal.
Leadership begets Partnership:

Herd animals are team/partnership minded for co-existence and survival. To determine leadership, horses test each candidate on a fairly regular basis. Each leader candidate must pass the tests to earn and then maintain the other horses’ trust in that leader. An individual horse may submit to the leader one day, but test it another day and lose confidence if those tests are not well met by the leader. This is what’s meant by the caution, “Deal with the horse that shows up today.”

The true horse master is a knowledgeable, mindful, understanding reader and leader of horses who justly corrects the horse’s behavior and consistently provides security through intelligent equine stewardship and partnership.

Psychology of the horse:

By nature, horses are curious, gregarious, playful, athletic, suspicious, and flighty with a recognizable social hierarchy of leaders and followers. While civilized human culture declares that people are considered innocent until proven guilty – in equine society, people, places and things are all considered guilty until proven innocent. This inborn skepticism protects the safety of the individual and the herd. When horses are taken from the collective security of herd sentries and leaders, this underlying suspicious fear is heightened. Further, when a horse is alone in the company of a human (predator), it is most concerned for its own safety and its anxiety is heightened since it is literally ‘on its own’ without the collective oversight and guidance of its band or herd.

If the horse senses threat, anger, unhealthy domination, confusion, conflicting cues, pain or incompetence from the human, then it becomes agitated, fearful, resistant and will attempt to seek out other horses, flee for its safety, or fight for its life depending on the level of perceived danger. If, on the other hand, the horse deems the human to be a knowing, dependable and worthy leader who does not exhibit threatening predatory behaviors or actions, the horse becomes more confident in its company, can relax, and follow calmly...even willingly.

This is why it is imperative for owners to learn how to be with horses in a manner with which the horse can be comfortable, confident, assured and relaxed. To accomplish that takes knowledge, understanding, communication, confidence, clarity and consistency.

Types of personalities:

Studying a horse’s personality type can help you understand his behavior patterns and comfort level.
As with humans, horses have personalities—Horsenalities™, if you will. There are extroverts and introverts as well as left brain and right brain horses. Social, fearful, aloof and challenging are other descriptions.

The left brain extroverts are the original rule breakers. They discover what your rules are and then challenge you. They are dominant and will challenge your leadership.

The left brain introvert wants to play by the rules, however, not when you want him to.

Right brain extroverts are the prey animal personified. Instinctive flight reaction and intense need for safety are uppermost on their mind and they need to be convinced that you are a friend.

Right brain introverts, although hard to read, are taking everything slow; really, really slow. When you think you have taken it slow already, slow down some more. Right brain introverts appear calm on the outside, but their emotions are in high gear.

**Learn to Read the Horse:**

The real horseman learns from every interaction with horses and becomes proficient in “reading” horses (assessing physical, mental and emotional behaviors, plus the intent of an animal) as well as communicating with each individual horse, then interacting and training with those individually inherent traits in mind.

The hallmark of a horse-master is this ability to “read a horse”—knowing the species and individual animals so well as to be able to interpret their every move, mood and motive so as to respond appropriately and/or elicit an appropriate response from the animal itself. While horses do vocalize and can be trained to a few voice commands, their true source of communication is body language, facial interpretation, reading energy, senses and demeanor. The ability to read his body language and control your own is important to be able to communicate successfully.

Success with horses requires one to know and respect the inborn nature of horses; then treat and train them with that nature and equine behavior always in mind. If treated as mere pets and not trained with knowledge, compassion and respect, horses will not trust in the human’s leadership ability and soon become unruly by ignoring the intention and requests of its human handler.

**Opposition Reflex**

As prey animal, whose very life can depend on each decision made, the horse has a highly developed set of self-preservation skills, driven solely by the primal need to stay alive.
Opposition reflex is an instinct horses have, which causes them to do the opposite of what a predator wants. Examples of this reflex are biting, kicking, rearing, bolting, striking, opposing the bit, swishing the tail, grinding the teeth, laying ears back, refusing to move, pulling right when you try to go left, etc.

Most people think these are vices (see Chapter 12), but they are reactions and are related to the prey/predator relationship. The horse has to learn to trust you, when instinct tells him otherwise.

Spirit, Temperament, Psychology, Hormones, Bred-in Traits

Buy horses bred, built and trained for the desired use. While horses as a species are incredibly adaptable, it’s not practical (and often not safe) to expect an off-the-track race horse to be the best beginner’s trail horse. Re-training, rehabilitation and going against inherent nature is risky, time-consuming, expensive and often unsuccessful. Once you know what you want to do with your horse and what temperament you can handle, look for that criteria – don’t try to re-train a breed or an animal that may appeal to the eye, heart or imagination, but in reality will not fit your needs!

Just as one should check a horse’s physical signs when with him, mental and emotional states should be monitored as well. Those indicators are even more impactful for a safe ride. Never get on a horse that is not physically, mentally and emotionally ready to be ridden.

Wild vs. Domestic

While all horses are born with a hard-wired fear of predators, feral foals born and raised in the wild are imprinted by their dams and learn survival behaviors from their herd that are different from domestic foals. From birth on, feral foals fear, run from, and resist human predators much more than domesticated foals that are raised with horses living and working calmly within the human domain. Feral foals learn that their very lives depend on out-running, out-smarting and fighting to resist all predators, while domestic foals learn that their lives depend on cooperating with humans who provide their food, water, comfort and safety.

Emotional, Environmental and Exposure Education

“My horse doesn’t do balloons…bikes…motorcycles…water…etc., etc…” The more one tries to ‘bubble wrap’ a fearful or reactive horse, the more harm one does to that animal’s confidence and its ability to live calmly in the world in which it’s been put.

Instead of limiting its world of stimuli, one must educate each horse by defusing as many scary situations as possible. Not by harshly “sacking out” a young or fearful horse, but rather through educated exposure and calm advance-and-retreat training. As
a horse owner, one needs to look at a horse’s spooks, spins and suspicions as educational opportunities that will expand the horse’s world and improve relationship and the ultimate success as a team in any sport and situation.

Patience is the key: Underneath their initial skepticism, the horse is a curious and gregarious creature, but these qualities may only be exhibited when the horse feels confident.

**Intelligence: Shying, spooking, running off, resisting**

Horses have an unfair reputation of being stupid animals. People may see a horse run from a plastic bag blowing in the wind and think, “How dumb is that! He’s a thousand pound horse and that’s a 2 oz plastic bag – what an idiot to run from that!”

Unfortunately, this is human ignorance talking. Most people do not realize that as prey animals, horses see, hear and think very differently from humans. That seemingly ‘innocent plastic bag’ when filled with air, is as big as a wild cat or coyote, it makes a ruffling sound like something running through brush, then it leaps up from the ground at the horse with the speed of the wind! The horse’s monocular vision does not give the clarity or depth perception information needed to make a positive identification, so the horse takes the smart, self-preservation action: it takes off and runs far enough away to then turn and re-assess the situation. It is this innate intelligence that has allowed horses to exist, adapt and evolve successfully for 52 million years. Now that’s smart!

Additionally, one measure of intelligence is the ability to successfully adapt. Horses adapt readily and successfully to many new environments and situations. They have evolved from small forest animals to large plains animals, to feral bands now living in deserts, swamps, savannahs, and mountain environments. Further, they have been successfully trained for a multitude of chores, jobs and sports that have served and improved the lives of mankind. By all measures, horses are highly intelligent, adaptive and productive animals that have earned the love, admiration and respect of humans the world around.

By learning to understand, read and think like horses and then to train them with compassion, communication and leadership, one will advance well along the fascinating road to horse mastership.