



Dominance and the Horse

By Andy Beck

There is perhaps no single theory in horse training today that is as liable to misuse and misunderstanding nor mutilated by populist dogma as that of dominance.

The alpha/dominance model that is so often referred to has its origin in short-term studies of wolf packs carried out in the 1940s. The theory supposes that in all social groups of animals there will be a tyrant – the, now infamous, alpha animal. Beneath this 'top dog' is a descending hierarchy through to the 'omega', or lowest ranking, animal at the bottom. When this simplified idea is applied to training the trainer takes on the role of the alpha individual – the theory being that the lower ranking individuals will attempt to ingratiate themselves by doing what the 'tyrant' orders. As with all theories this model has its applications – lion taming for one – and, perhaps as a result of our carnivorous characteristics, it also applies quite well to human behavior. It is then no wonder that the theory has been made into a tool well suited to human psychology, but, if it is applied to species whose social strategies do not follow this tyrant regime then all we are doing is imposing rules of carnivore social psychology on other species, in this case the horse, and while it is certainly true that status plays an important part in the social life of *Equus Caballus* it is case specific rather than generalised, and we need to be clear how, where and when it operates.

So, let's take a critical look at dominance, first in those groups that are natural to horse society; the harem or family group and the bachelor group, and then at the unnatural groups in which so many domestic horses are kept.

The harem group has a clear hierarchy in which the stallion and head mare are the two most central individuals in a very literal sense. The head mare is often referred to as the lead mare, but this can easily lead to some confusion about her actual role. An easy way of thinking about the head mare is as the 'general' of the group. Her place is at the centre of the group, where she is protected by a screen of lower status mares. She is the single most important member, and the group's primary decision maker. Head mares are 'elected' to their position by group consensus. The position cannot be captured by aggressive behavior, nor can it be maintained by tyranny. So while the head mare is certainly the highest status female in the group, and is in many ways far more important to their survival than is the stallion, there is no need for her to physically dominate other mares and it would be a betrayal of her freely accorded status were she to do so. Lower status mares may improve their standing by achieving an alliance with the head mare – a win-win element of equine female social politics.

The stallion's role is also pivotal, but in a completely different way. Where there is a potential external threat, such as small predator or challenging stallion, his role is to move out from the centre of the group to confront the danger with elevated paces and the clear signal of dynamic muscular tension. Should the herd take flight his role is as rearguard, keeping stragglers from being left behind where they would be easy pickings for a predator – and it is certainly the case that he can exert a physical dominance over other herd members where there is any perception of imminent danger. But we should bear in mind that the behavior is evolutionarily programmed to protect the group – not to dominate in order to influence status. Such is the respect in which the stallion is held by younger members of the group that it is very rare that any discipline is required. Both colts and fillies acknowledge the stallion's power by a behavior



sometimes known as 'snapping', a rapid opening and closing of the mouth signalling obeisance during which the neck is stretched out with head held low. This is similar to the roll a subservient dog carries out, which defuses the dominant dog's aggression, and the stallion is bound not to attack by the same type of behavioural protocol. Nor can the stallion insist on his conjugal wishes – alliances of mares can and do operate to prevent service in certain circumstances, and while lower status mares are highly likely to court his attention in return for his protection the head mare is quite able to refuse his advances. More than anything the stallion's role is to maintain the social integration of the group – spending grazing or resting time with all group members, very often within a two to three hour period. It is only when the time comes for colts, or fillies, to leave the natal group that the stallion asserts physical dominance over his progeny, and there is absolutely no room for argument – they are ejected. It's common for people to view this merely as pre-emptive removal of competition, but this is a rather narrow view. In a wider sense what the stallion is doing is acting as an agent of exogamy (outbreeding), for if the colts were to stay they would be very likely to mate with herd sisters with all the dangers that are inherent in breeding between such close relatives.

Once colts are forced to leave their natal group they join a bachelor group. The newcomer is a source of great interest and excitement, and two of the higher ranking individuals will flank him for much of the first day, as if acting as guides and, at the same time, announcing an acceptance of his membership to the rest of the group. As the most junior member, and in consequence representing the least challenge to the dominant stallion of the group, he will also be allowed a greater degree of latitude in some respects, and may also divert physical aggression by 'snapping', as may other low status members of the bachelor group. Of course should the newcomer wish to challenge the status quo and move up in rank he will have to assert physical dominance over those he wishes to depose in the order. Equally the dominant stallion must at all times be willing to defend his dominance, although much of this is done by display rather than force. Although there is a reasonably clear order of dominance the bachelor group functions best by co-operation, and in the final analysis the purpose of the group is to support the dominant member in his raiding of fillies from the periphery of harem groups. Once the 'alpha' stallion has begun his harem he will leave the group and the next in line will take on the dominant role. If the 'alpha' individual in this type of social group can be likened to a tyrant then he is only one in a very temporary sense – and there is no intent that other group members will continue a relationship with him after he wins his first females.

In unnatural groupings, such as those consisting of geldings, mares or an admix of the two there is often not the same level of integration as would normally be found, for instance, in a harem group. These social groups often have an ill defined status order leading to an increased level of petty aggression. Lower status individuals may be repeatedly harassed even though they offer no challenge to more aggressive higher status animals. This behavior generally has no useful function whatsoever, and may often be triggered by resource levels – either feed or water, or space. Mares may also assert physical dominance over geldings, the absence of muscular development and testosterone betraying the gelding's lack of potency – both in a physical and sexual sense.

Of course this is only a sketch of relationships within various types of social groups of horses, and much more could be said. The intention is to illustrate the uses to which dominance is put, and from it we can make some reasonable deductions. First and foremost dominance is not used toward other individuals with a view to building an alliance. Nor in the main is it used to assert leadership except in the pseudo militaristic bachelor groups. At no point is physical



dominance used to teach – rather young horses learn by social facilitation (in other words by observation). Nor is it used to punish in the sense that we generally use the term; retribution following an infraction. The 'drive', in which a high status individual puts another to sustained flight has one real purpose – and that is to eject the individual from the group or to drive it out onto the periphery of the group, denying it the safety and comfort of the centre. In the case of fillies treated in this way by their sire they become the target of raids by bachelor groups, the harem stallion often making no attempt to protect them.

With this in mind we come to the dominance behaviors used by human trainers. Use of round pens to set up the 'drive' has no real analogue with natural behavior. There is no level on which it makes any sense to the horse to be subjected to ejection behavior but confined to prevent escape. What must surely result is confusion and panic – and after a time, depending on the strength of the particular horse's will, the outcome will be learned helplessness or injury, potentially fatal, or an attack on the trainer. Imagine a dominant horse 'driving' a subordinate – were the subordinate to make the soft mouth chewing action said to mean 'I'm a herbivore please don't hurt me' or some such thing, the dominant horse would not even be able to see it! If horses in a round pen were to exhibit 'snapping' perhaps we might conclude that this was para-language (body language) for "I'm only little please don't hurt me" – and we might stretch the idea a bit to suggest that the horse is acknowledging our higher status and dominance. But 'snapping' is only used between one horse and another – not between horse and human.

One of the things that is often said of 'dominance strategies' is that by doing this the horse is made to acknowledge the human as a higher status horse. Is it not amazing that horses should be thought of as so stupid that they could possibly imagine a human was another horse? But if we did want the horse to accept us, learn from us and trust us we would want to behave as if we were a head mare, or perhaps benevolent and protective harem stallion – in which case we would signal our high status best by regular and predictable socialising, unflappable calmness, confidence and self-control.