

A View from the Hoof

The Natural Herd Dynamic; *in an artificial world*

By

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The Natural Herd Dynamic is an intricate social order, and the only true way to gain an understanding of the equine social structure and complexities within is through an open minded observation of the horse. Whether a band of two or a band of six, there are social and communicated dynamics going on within that change little from structure to structure, group to group. Going down the farm lane and looking out at a pasture of horses you are likely to see much the same goings on as you would if you were out in the wild observing a band of equines. The natural herd dynamic, or as we will say, NHD, in its purest sense, stems from the basic instinct animal and alters little unless an alteration substantiates survival. Reactions are reactions, basic instincts remain basic. Equipped for survival in conditions no modern human would endeavor to live in, the *natural* world of the horse becomes clouded and sometimes difficult to both see and understand, in what is to the horse, our *artificial* world. I have heard it said that the American Native Peoples were the best *natural* horse men and women of our *recent* time, their comprehension of the horse seemingly magical at times, the cowboy who had only one friend; a gentle eyed four hooved buddy who never left his side, is another good example. These magical, iconic truisms are rather easy to explain when you look at the bigger picture. These people had and have a better appreciation of the environment the horse is designed to live in, and therefore have a much easier time taking *a view from the hoof*. Being housed within the human world might seem so much better for the horse; few if any real dangers to face, not much in the way of daily struggles in the search for food, water and shelter. The perfect world of stall, water bucket and feeding schedules must certainly be better than a world where the foal might succumb to the mountain lion. In an effort to facilitate and design better behavior psychotherapy treatments and stress management technologies for the equine living with us in the *artificial environment*, I realized the need to be removed from the artificial, and attend the school of the natural. The behavior and stress issues that become realities in our back pastures and stalls, do not find themselves manifested in the band geared to survive in the wild, nor do very many of the physiological health issues an Equine Veterinarian is likely to face on a daily basis. It is the environmental influences surrounding all of us that dictate the way in which we survive. Behavior and stress issues are the result(s) and are not themselves a cause. Often missing pieces of the equine puzzle can hardly seem to be *missing* at all. How can there be anything gone amiss

when everything is provided for? The answer is hidden in the party; we brought cake to a pie eating contest.

Ever have anyone tell you; *you just don't seem to be able to focus...?* Doing things without thinking, indeed, thoughtless actions, are a human luxury, or a human bane, depending. It is also a condition of *free time*, meaning your attentions need not be totally focused on the survival of your being, allowing yourself the freedom of being *a part from* your environment. This is not an indulgence known to the horse in the wild, and is an adverse side effect of the horse in the barn. It is the change of the playing field that choreographs what become stress and behavior manifestations; like being given the equipment for water polo and taken to a baseball field. If you wanted to better understand the polo player, you should endeavor to find a pool. To comprehend the horse on a natural playing field, I journeyed to the Pryor Mountains and the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming and Montana, to immerse myself in an environment far removed from what is often seen as *horse country*. The Pryor Mountain Wild Mustang Center in Lovell, Wyoming, is the base of information. A trek to higher elevations rewards you with beauty untapped, and Mustangs unbridled. Hiking a few miles deep into the mountains and flats, bluffs and buttes, you become keenly aware of your environment. True *focus* for me became quite evident in this world without fences, gates or chains, and a terrain of slippery rocks, junipers and mountain mahogany. You are a part of, and not a part from, the environment, and as I traversed a horse trail amidst the often chest high trees, I paused for a moment from my thoughtless wonder, and began to *focus*. In this moment I realized that I need be careful of my footing, I need be well aware of the other living things that also shared this environment with me; big horn sheep, mule deer, bob cats, bears and mountain lions. This was the world of the Spanish Wild Mustang, and the purest view from the hoof was here presented to me; survival was dependent upon the senses. Observing several different bands of Mustangs in this environment revealed more in an hour than can ever be observed in any clinical environment. It became apparent that within the artificial environment there lurked an enemy that does not exist in the NHD, free, unfocused time. The only place this *focus* is absent at all in any variation in the wild is with the foal. For me this was a heretofore unrealized reality and having made itself so obviously known, can be shown as a root of many stress and behavior issues. With this truth in mind a keener sense of behavior management techniques and stress dissemination technologies can be developed for the individual horse. Assimilated Imprinting to the environment and the developing of *focus* are fused and blended as the horse grows in age and experience, two natural abilities of all horses. These elements are then fused within the nexus of the ever developing IHP, (Individual Horse Personality), which is itself an intricate part of the social structure that becomes the horse band, and is an elemental part of the overall *acquired instinct* dynamic. As in any social structure the hierarchy is dependent upon its foundation, the adage that the team is only as strong as its weakest link, is here quite evident. If your existence within the band will weaken the whole, you are shunned and forced to find your own group, or live alone. The existence of the bachelor group is the result of this to a degree, for any disruption of the group is not tolerated at length.

Though it is not an uncommon act that one stallion will usurp a family along the way or for mares to leave and seek out their favorite stallion.

As in any operating social order, the fundamentals of the family social arrangement are extremely important for survival. Herd stability is maintained through its existence, and all communication is founded upon it. The foal is nurtured in essence by several factors; environmental aspects which dictate how the herd fits together are directly linked to the ways in which the foal learns. Its focus here is upon the mother, who in turn is a reflection of the environment and herd dynamic as a whole. As the foal grows, like any youngster with enough brain capacity, there is a branching out, a curious sojourn of discovery that starts to split from the basic instinct. This division from the basic instincts is not an abandonment of them, but moreover a coefficient where the IHP is formed based on experiences and down the line, propensities to be then subsequently created. Among the greatest crimes against the natural herd dynamic in the artificial world, is the too early weaning of foals that are not sufficiently prepared to do so. Without supplementing the foundation that is the mare, a cavity is opened and many behavior and stress issues find their cornerstone of subsistence here, often only manifesting their existence years later. Behavior or serious stress issues do not come from nowhere, but they can come from any place along the equine timeline from places completely unknown. The adult horse learns how to deal with environmental changes and issues it is faced with in large part in the early years of its life, yet the ways in which it understands survival and self preservation can often be potential withholding, and stand in the way of future success and happiness. Maintaining the family unit in an artificial environment for as long as is possible for the filly and colt is more important than worrying about how soon weaning should be done. Great care should always be given to create a supplemental environment where this is not possible or practical. Trying to train the young horse that has hardly learned to comprehend his environment can be very detrimental. Without a proper foundation from which to grow from, the young horse is not mentally prepared for the things that are asked of him or her. In the natural world it is a necessity that the physical capacities of the horse, as a prey animal, must at an early age reach high performance levels in order to survive, however it takes much longer for the emotional equine to achieve a level that equals the physical. Just because your horse *can* do something physically, does not mean he or she should be *asked* to do it. Development of proper psychotherapy techniques can go very far in speeding up the process; yet in truth the levels of achievement are ultimately dictated by the capacity of the individual horse. Force feeding a young horse, or any horse, a certain methodology to achieve the result you want, can be highly damaging emotionally. You may have two children, and have high hopes for them in a given field, yet one may be great at math and science, the other much happier with a paint brush. The magic of the NHD is that each individual horse, equipped as they are with the basic instinct, becomes an individual, and as with any individual living in any society, individual propensities emerge. The social structure depends upon this very thing, stream-lining the survival of the fittest mantra. This concept of individuality shows itself early on as the AI, (*acquired instinct*) subdivides itself into what become the equine propensities; these are not physical traits, but rather emotional ones.

The principles existing in what is the fringe of the social hierarchy, can effectually show the complex pieces of the puzzle that make up the unit as a whole like cogs on a wheel, showcasing, if you will, each IHP. Like people, some horses may seem a little distant, while others seem to be nosy and into everything. A better understanding and study of this is what I call the *Fringe Factor Dynamic*, and can be used to better ascertain the capacities of the horse and how to continue his/her development; a key element when selecting a horse for a certain order of business. This is not to say that breeding and physical attributes have a lesser importance, in no way is that true; it does mean that this existing part of the IHP should be studied and considered with equal importance. The Fringe Factor Dynamic plays a very important role in the bands' inner movements, any understanding of the horse cannot be done without its being in the equation, making the *fringe factor* a major player in the development of both foundation restructuring, and athletic training protocols.

Inner herd movement itself serves two main purposes; establishment of the hierarchy for the safety of the band unit, and is a major component to natural stress dissemination. Freedom of movement is here essential, making the artificial environment of stall and fenced in pastures a great obstacle. The necessary environment that is the *artificial world* is by its own circumstance one of the most troublesome impediments to natural stress propagation. The equine basic instinct is equipped for many things; confinement is not one of them. This in turn leaves the handling of the stress relief variables solely in the hands of the AI and the *Acquired Instinct* is at best an ambiguous governor. Stemming from environmental influences and founded on basic instincts, anxiety and stress, entities that must be disseminated or placed, can be bounced around indeterminately. Sometimes the AI will run back home to momma, (basic instinct dynamics, reactionary relief), and sometimes, even from the same stimulus, the AI will send stress to some other place, often harboring it where it can build into diseases and depressions. The importance of proper, daily stress dissemination cannot be overlooked or underestimated as an essential part of any preventative medicine regime. With Thomas Herding Technique, the area of LTT techniques and stress management protocols have been formulated and are then further developed for the case specific needs of the individual patient for both daily work and convalescing patients. It cannot be stated strongly enough that the most inhibitive and dangerous predator is the ambush predator; for the horse in the wild this may be the mountain lion, for the horse in the artificial environment it is often the build-up of shrouded, misplaced stress. These factors are compounded greatly when the added anxiety of injury is incurred. The convalescing horse is faced with immeasurable anxiety and stress, with even less avenue for its dissemination. Keep in mind, the smaller the space, the higher the stress. Equine Cabin Fever, or *ECB*, can be highly unfavorable to the healing process, and lack of attention to this detail can have a catastrophic impact on the future emotional well being of the patient. Everything that was disseminated by the AI prior to injury is suddenly bombarding the horse at a rate in which the confined animal cannot disperse. The door is left open and even though the patient may be physically healed, the emotional scarring within can be potential withholding times ten. Every experience in the equine circle is layered one on top of another upon the basic instinct dynamic,

clouding the processes the horse uses to learn and assimilate. Emotional stress controlling the physical can be cited in many cases of stall-bound diarrhea, as just one example.

Can this affect the stable or the barn? Most certainly it can and it does. When the normal array of stress management for the horse is pinioned by the artificial environment, the horse will automatically revert back to the things for which it is programmed. The NHD becomes the only playing field, and the elements that make up this *Natural Herd Dynamic*, find themselves being greatly elevated in importance. Rough play in the youth, agitated impatience in the adult and an overall tension in the band unit can be seen and felt. The usurping of food sources, water sources and the order in which each horse is placed can become greatly obscured and makes an otherwise orderly group seem anything but; if it affects the group, it affects the individual. This is a natural reaction to unnatural circumstances. Social hierarchy sustains the band by the proper order of horses from top to bottom. This jostling and rearranging can be expected daily in both the natural environment and in the artificial environment. Add into the equation compounded stress and anxiety that is inherently related to one existence, and nearly unknown in another, and the uncertainty evolves into a kind of panic like fear, making the need to be higher up on the totem pole than your buddy, a major survival strategy. The horse, not being a forward thinking, reasoning animal, can be easily stressed when any part of the puzzle goes askew within the *Acquired Instinct* dynamic, where he has no alternative but to revert to home base.

The emotional side of the horse is not the only part of the equine that feels the impact of the artificial environment, the physical is also impacted. When you think of the horse as a flight based species, you know without a doubt that movement is the primary power point of the horse as an animal. A study of equine anatomy will introduce you to a plethora of bones, ligaments, bursa sacks, tendons, muscles and joints, all designed to work in unison. The hoof itself is an amazing design in form and function, yet we see innumerable hoof related issues, the most horrific, and seemingly the end result of almost anything, being laminitis. However if you study the wild horse herds in various parts of the world from the Spanish Wild Mustangs living in the rugged and steep environment of Wyoming and Montana, or the horses living in sandy, swampy soils along the Eastern Seaboard of the US, you may be hard pressed to find diseases of the foot and leg with the frequency they exist in the artificial environment. Consider the surfaces that the horse in the artificial environment walks on most of his/her life, generally flat, mostly solid surfaces, and you may find a clue to the etiology of leg and hoof issues. An array of surfaces in the wild from hard to soft to steep to flat, rocks and trees and shrubs and mud, are all important natural strength training tools. This variety pack assures that as the horse grows the myriad working parts of the leg and hoof anatomy are all being worked and doing the work they were designed to do. The end result is a rugged, sturdier animal. Wild horses live in a world where their *gym workout* is meted out every day; the artificial environment is very often a controlled environment. The leg anatomy of the domesticated horse, not facing the same demands in the same variations, especially in the youthful years, makes the potential for ligament and tendon injury more likely. Thomas Herding Technique, in an effort to further bring as much of *the*

outside in as can be done, has developed and will continue to develop the *Walk-A-Bout Trail* to address these strength issues, where both a convalescent pathway and obstacle course can be made available based on the requirement of the patient and circumstances of environment.

The Natural Herd Dynamic in an artificial environment may seem to have greatly opposing factors, and they certainly can. It does not have to be however, a hopeless truth or endeavor. The horse is a magical, even mystical creature, with abilities to cope with and exist in an extreme variety of places, the environment we have created for them being among these. Supplementing your horse and his or world with more than the physical can go far in the processes of assimilation and stress management. If you were to view life from the hoof, you can be assured that you would stand a better chance of achieving the potential you were born with when afforded both physical and emotional supplements. The essential first step must reach beyond the outward beauty we see when we look at the horse, and into the incredible beauty within.