

Thomas Herding Technique

Discovering the Communicated Equine

A View From The Hoof

Training Efficiency of Motion: Building A Better Racehorse

By:

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“The space between performance and actual ability is defined within the Emotional Conformation of the horse. Thus, perceived performance should never be confused with actual ability.”

Often, pressure to get a certain performance out of a racehorse for an owner places the trainer in a position where they burden the horse with gear that may or may not enhance its performance.

However, it is important to note that the horse is a natural athlete and should be trained as such.

Horses in the wild run free and unfettered and it is not necessary to burden your racehorse with gear and special performance enhancing tools that limit or inhibit the horse’s senses and can produce the opposite effect of what you are trying to achieve.

If you truly wish to nurture the horse and develop the equine athlete, the only “tool” you will need is a deep understanding of the horse as an individual, and how it fits within the natural herd dynamic.

So much time and effort are spent on the physical athlete, from conformation to the paperwork of pedigree and performance records, that it overshadows a less understood and thus underutilized aspect that is ultimately running your horse – Emotional Conformation: *The mental capacity of the equine controls the physical output of the athlete.*

The Fabric of an Equine Athlete

Emotional Conformation Profiling the horse is the cornerstone from which to build a reliable program to fit the mental aptitude of the athlete. The key to your knowing the strengths and weakness of your equine athlete lie within the depth of your understanding of the herd dynamic.

The horse comes in two parts: physical and Emotional Conformation. We see the physical conformation, it’s easier to manage and condition, maintain, build. We can touch it, groom it and feed it. The physical conformation is familiar to us so we feel more comfortable with it.

However, the Emotional Conformation of the horse is the true ruling influence. It is the personality of the horse which affects the way we *see* the physical - it is why we’re a little fearful with some

horses and not others. The problem with things we know less about is that we sometimes allow ourselves to assume and we become apathetic. If we don't fully understand it, then it becomes *just the way he or she is*. There is no *just that way* for the herd animal; the horse is not a plant, but a living animal. You can train some plants to grow a certain way by how you trim them, but you can only truly train a horse by forming the environment in which they are living. Proper manipulation of the environment requires the base knowledge of the herd dynamic and the Emotional Conformation of the horse.

Developing proper training stimulus means knowing how your horse is geared to interpret that stimulus. When you know this, you can impact the outcome or the *reaction*, preparing your horse to adjust and still move forward.

The underlying truth for all horses is that every sense, physical and mental attribute, is pre-programmed at birth and they are naturally conditioned to live as herd animals in the environment. Physical and mental conditioning serves the purpose of survival.

The herd dynamic is like a complex jigsaw puzzle with far more parts than we see when we look at a group in the wild. The problem for most people is that they never get to see, let alone study, wild horse herds and witness the harsh realities of their natural environment. Thus, a deep understanding of this emotionally regulated puzzle is more difficult to comprehend.

The herd dynamic is made up of two essential parts: the female dominated Group Herd Dynamic and the male dominated Individual Herd Dynamic. These two groups are made up of individual horses, and each individual is comprised of various pieces like a jigsaw puzzle.

Emotional Conformation Profiling works toward identifying the emergent properties of these individual pieces.

When training the horse, it is important to understand its weakness to better develop its strengths so that what cannot be done does not inhibit what can be. We may never fully *change* the horse yet we can strive to bring forth its very best.

Time-In-Motion

The deciding factor of where horses finish in a race is determined by its *efficiency of motion*. For the racehorse, its mental aptitude, conditioning, and overall mental health are based on the ability of the horse to manage stimulus while in motion.

Protracted focus ability is the foundation that is required to elevate and enhance the natural physical ability of the horse. In order to attain the foundation for optimum mental focus ability, which controls your racehorse as it moves at an elevated rate of speed, we must look far beyond the human parameters and remember that the horse was born free of fences and able to cover great distances with relative ease.

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The trick to creating a successful equine athlete is in making an effort to recreate more natural occurrences in the training environment.

Training the racehorse requires us to think of distance and motion on two different levels as it actually occurs. Never train toward a given goal, or put the goal of the race in front of you as you work *toward* it - instead, balloon the actual training program. Start by training the horse far beyond that which it will one day be expected to achieve and work back, collapsing into it. In this way you begin to mentally and, by residual effect, physically condition the horse. In order to attain this we must first define what we call *motion*.

Motion is not to be confused with relative speed of movement - motion is irrelevant to speed. Efficient motion with smooth transitions from stimulus to stimulus grows in to confidence and even anticipation. When I'm thirsty, I go to the water fountain or refrigerator to get a drink. It doesn't matter whether I run to the source or walk to it, I will still drink. We see our horses run to their food or water source every day in anticipation of the result. But horses in the wild cautiously approach such sources and depend more on mental prowess to get them there safely instead of physical prowess which gets them there fast. Because of this natural *training* and mental conditioning, when wild horses run, they run fast with extreme efficiency of motion – their survival depends on it.

If you're going to properly train racehorses to have efficiency of motion, it is important to find ways that allow and encourage the horse to develop efficient movement and smooth transitions. This will not be built in the short and reactionary world of pure speed, but can be built over time of actual motion. Speed for the horse is defined in its physical aptitude. When that becomes exhausted and motion is still required, a transition from pure speed into the mentally controlled pace a horse is able maintain takes place, making up the two parts of motion.

You have to teach horses they can, before you ask them to achieve. Training for a given race distance measured in footage pre-set by humans has nothing to do with training for mental focus and pace ability that operates on a much larger and somewhat open ended period of time of actual motion. The successful pacer should never be trained to anticipate distance, for anticipation is finite and thus subject to the influence of urgency and if something happens apart from what is expected to happen, the gig is up.

Mental conditioning training is best accomplished as a foundation by introducing the projected racehorse to inflated distances, establish it, and then begin to reel it in as you speed it up. If your eventual target goals are races from one to two miles, then you would be wise to establish the condition of motion at three or four miles. Jogging, trotting, smooth casual motions, over a protracted period of time, begin the foundation of pace ability and are the building blocks. This blueprint leads to efficiency of motion as distance is eventually retracted and speed is continually increased. This teaches the horse the fundamentals of motion, like the coach teaching little leaguer's how to properly hit, throw and catch a baseball.



Patterns of Motion- The Comfort Zones

Among the key elements to properly developing equine athletes is your base knowledge of their individual behavioral patterns and propensities. Horses can often fall back into *default* positions of habit prior to, and after, an anticipated circumstance. One of the best examples of behavioral patterns in the horse is Zenyatta's Dance prior to each race.

Emotional Conformation Profiling, the *coaching* aspect of training, helps identify individual patterns of horses, and once the base horse is established you then can monitor progress as you train the horse, charting the subtle changes within these patterns. The horse relies on default patterns and behavioral habits on the move, as in a race, as well as when stationary in the stall environment. You can get a good feel for the behavioral make-up of horses on the move by studying their habits while enclosed in controlled environments like a stall. One thing I do as part of my beginning work in profiling horses is take note on where they stand in the stall. Where they stand and "hang-out" offers a great deal of information – are they in the corner, in the center, one side or the other? We know the obvious signs of behavior but you must also know that these stationary behaviors can and often do translate into motion patterns. Stall awareness is of great value as you train the athlete.

The *coach* is fully aware that you cannot train properly unless you are training the entire athlete; physical and emotional growth must become synergistic.

Identifying patterns of motion along this building process not only indicates the progress you are or are not making as you chart the horse, it also helps you pinpoint their sweet spot – their *comfort zone*. Considering again that proper coaching hinges on the ability to Push or Pull condition the athlete we have to manufacture real time, race simulation conditions every step of the way in order to trigger *desire to move into space*. Horses in motion act a great deal like they do when standing still; they like to be in safe, comfortable positions and will *desire* or have the emotional *will power* to get into such situations. Comfort and safety are rewards for the prey animal, not food. You're not going to ask the Jockey to carry a pocket full of carrots to reward the horse, but you can offer the Jockey the more powerful information of the horse's Emotional Conformation Profile, so that he or she can, when possible, place the horse into their naturally occurring *sweet spot*.

For a racehorse to move efficiently through space, it must do so within its own specific comfort zone. The Jockey has to know that comfort zone and put the horse in it in order to win the race. As the coach, when the patterns of motion and comfort zone are zeroed in on you then can begin to build upon them in slow but steady progressions. This will free a horse to move forward in the herd, or the race, because its desire for comfort is a naturally occurring trigger point. If you wish to get the most from your equine athlete, identify, know and develop its sweet spot – the comfort zone.



Have You Herd

As trainer becomes coach, a new set of glasses from which to see your athlete will be required to train forward. In order to coach properly we need to know the naturally occurring propensities of both female dominated Group Herd Dynamic and the male dominated Individual Herd Dynamic. Developing a properly fitted athletic program hinges upon understanding how a horse views itself within a herd or group of horses; it is inherently essential to know the horse's Emotional Conformation and to monitor it during the growth process.

Training the Group Herd Dynamic means knowing how to coach the individual filly or mare. In order to do this a careful consideration of how the female moves up and down within a herd environment is essential. Remember, in a herd environment it isn't always the strongest horse that is the assumed and accepted leader, but it is the smartest. The herd would rather follow, at a walk, the old smart one to the water hole than run with the impetuous.

Females enforce their position in the herd hierarchy in two ways: reactively by the whims of those above them, and proactively by their influence on those below. Protection of personal space, where important, does not override individual decision making nor does it have tremendous influence on herd shuffling up or down. Rather, females in a group move up in a way that can be defined as pushing. Because the most dangerous place to be is at the bottom of the herd, fillies and mares work themselves forward by pushing forward and asserting their influence when *they feel they can*. You can identify the place of a female in the herd by tracing her spirit and will - does she assert herself often even when beaten back, or does she succumb? These are key factors when profiling an established maternity band as well as fillies and mares at sales auctions.

This has a great deal to do with the development of a proper *Push Training* program. The proper development of the Push Program for the female is vital because as the trainer and coach you need to know how many other horses to train her with and exactly where she needs to be within the group as they begin to move. Influence of motion defines the herd hierarchy and has in nature nothing to do with speed. But for the racehorse, speed is the source of victory, so we manifest an environment of motion that offers our athlete the best opportunity to push herself forward to the front. The particulars of this designed training method are based on the Emotional Conformation Profile - the way in which to properly push your filly or mare forward are revealed in her mental aptitude. It is crucial for her to have horses or a horse behind and in front of her, but not always beside her, until after a period of time of actual motion. In order to trigger the desire to move forward you have to create the sense of isolation within the group. There is no place that creates a stronger will in the female to move or push forward than the feeling of isolation in the midst of others. Once you manifest this sensation you will have your foundation set, for *sensations and perceived realities* are nature's triggers to act.

Training the Individual Herd Dynamic means knowing how to coach the individual colt or stallion. But it gets a little tricky because you must coach the colt in a way that moves it into acting like a



stallion. The one has the desire but is not always mature enough to have the ability where the other has both the desire and the maturity.

Let's start with the stallion. Whereas the female's priority is acceptance and placement within the group dynamic, the stallion's most important personal worry is the ownership of his space.

Who is coming into my space, near my herd? Who is threatening my area? Who is my target? Not the mare over there. Not that young colt sticking close to mommy. Alas, I see my target. It is the other stallion fracturing my personal space.

When the stallion protects its space, while standing in the stall or on the move, it targets the intruder to take ownership of it. The stallion's target pulls him toward them. Thus, we embrace this occurrence, inherent in the stallion, and provide space infractions and targets to move him. *Pull* training the stallion means providing moving targets for him to overcome, to own, and to move past. Because stallions by nature are more likely to *buddy-up* in a race it is essential to provide an anticipatory aspect to the training program. If you want your horse to consistently sling-shot past his competition the best way to do this is to train him to *anticipate* that there is yet another horse that will be ahead of the one he just past.

The Emotional Conformation Profile defines the measured space of influence that will trigger your stallion's desire to chase off the competition. Where it is important to manifest a manufactured sense of isolation in the female to trigger her reaction to push forward, you kick start the stallion by making a space competitor readily available from the very beginning – that is, another stallion or two moving right along with him.

Coaching the colt is a delicate matter because it requires a lot more patience. The best way to coach the colt is to provide him with as much natural herd nurturing as possible and allow him to mature with guidance. If you're planning on racing a colt that is physically fit enough to race, at the beginning of training he should be coached with the influence of the female dynamic and then finished with a male target to overcome. The combinations of Push and Pull training methods will help the colt to transition properly during a race. However, I never recommend putting a colt into a race to *get his feet wet* before his time. It is useless and even dangerous to toss the colt into a hell-bent-for-leather sprint race if you are setting his future goals for distance. If you are going to do this, you may as well let the colt sprint in open pastures with his buddies, it's more fun and less stressful. As well, if you *teach* him to anticipate a finite distance, as we mentioned earlier, you will find it is very challenging to expand him mentally into the open ended mind set required to maintain speed with pace in a distance race.

THT Step Training

The Step Training protocols are introductory coaching tools based on natural herd dynamics. The horse in motion manifests three primary features that blend together in layers with protracted



motion. The successful racehorse smoothly and efficiently transitions into each step and as it does is able to go faster and maintain it longer, and even accelerate as required. Each step makes up the unique layers of motion like the layers of a cake.

Speed – is likened to the fight or flight base reactions which are natural and non-coachable. As the base of motion, speed has no pace and is short lived.

Speed and Pace – the continuation of speed is eventually dependent on the mental ability of the horse to maintain pace. As the horse runs, the management of speed and pace become highly important.

Speed, Pace and Variable Stimulus Influx - as the horse tires it relies more heavily on the interpretation of stimulus to maintain efficient motion. This is a coachable dynamic owing to natural assimilation, because in nature, no energy is wasted.

The horse needs to be able to react to stimulus changes during a race without losing pace. Speed fluctuations necessarily and rightly occur, but when this happens it is mental aptitude that allows the horse to get back up to speed and even accelerate as needed. Because a race is a set distance and the jockey has only so much time and footage to make up ground, the ability to make concise and smooth transitions becomes vitally important.

Hesitation amidst race transitions kills efficient motion. In order to manage efficient motion, the racehorse must be presented with a wide variety of variable stimulus training in conjunction with the protocols set up and defined in the female dominated Group Herd Dynamic and the male dominated Individual Herd Dynamic protocols.

Step Training, decision making on the move, teaches the racehorse how to smoothly manage sudden variations of motion and still maintain its focus. As an example of how this is done, again based upon the information provided by the Emotional Conformation Profile, your group training protocols for the mare's workout may have her pushing up through two horses ahead of her. That is not a problematic goal until one of the horses suddenly moves into her, squeezes her on the rail, pushes her outside, makes her change leads, makes her slow up or accelerate at a moment's notice. The group training dynamic remains the same, but now we've required her to make a decision and handle an encroachment on her speed and pace to reach that goal of pushing forward. Getting her accustomed to pushing forward in such circumstances at a safe and reasonable speed means our training manual of the individual racehorse is ready to move into the final race ready stage.

We've got the record spinning smoothly, now, let's speed it up.

THT Retraction Training/Implosion of Power

"Efficiency of motion supersedes physical deficiencies as necessitated by the demands of survival, the most mentally fit are the ones that ensure species survival."

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We've established mental focus aptitude for our athlete with Time-In-Motion distance works. We've employed training methods based on either Group or Individual Herd Dynamics for our athlete. We've applied this base material to the escalated demands of Step Training and have a smooth running machine, clicking on all cylinders as we drew in the actual distance to just over the race goal, but not quite at speed.

The fundamentals of the racehorse are in place. The net is cast, the line is thrown – time to reel it in.

The concept of working in balloon fashion, starting with distances far beyond actual race target goals, allows for a solid foundation to be built. As you work to reel in the distance you have the opportunity to allow the horse to become extremely confident like the marksmen honing their skills. Skilled athletes react quickly to change and handle the basics of their craft almost automatically. As the racehorse begins to enter into the area of an actual race where fixed distances are the rule, you begin to speed up the clock of mental movement. Starting slow and big, you have continually been working backwards towards your goal honing the ability on all levels for the horse. The tighter the circle the faster you spin and you have built a mentally sound athlete that can handle it with ease.

Working backwards or *retracting* inward toward a set goal offers unique advantages. Extremely swift, efficient motion is based upon a solid foundation, and a solid foundation presents you with a very confident horse. Because of this implosion of power you do not have to have a *lead* horse to get to the front for you've manifested, as needed, a *perception* within your layers and thus all you really need is an efficient mover to get the drop on the competition.

With Retraction Training, as distance is shortened speed can be increased and will naturally manifest continual increased speed and pace with each phase until the target goal is reached. Thus, mental aptitude and focus ability is attained above and beyond what is necessary making the shorter distances inconsequential to required focus. The rate at which the actual speed increases takes place as each phase is introduced and should be monitored by Emotional Conformation Profiling.

Mental Conditioning, Physical Performance

Pro-actively coaching the racehorse for efficient motion is about adjusting the environmental stimulus and monitoring the behavioral response, *pushing* or *pulling* forward as the case may be. In developing an equine athletic program, *layering* the racehorse and building up to race relevant speed and conditions allows the mind to be ahead of the body so that it better controls the ship, so to speak. It is important to build upon the horse's natural aptitude for assimilation; being able to assimilate smoothly to ever changing *herd in motion (race)* conditions is founded in the development of mental fitness.



A properly developed program is creating a wave of motion, freeing the horse to move with speed, endurance, focus and power. Emotional Conformation unlocks the true potential of the horse's physical ability.

There are many times when horses are seemingly done. They are physically sound but for some mysterious reason they just lose their edge, drive and settle-in, *mid-herd*. In many cases this lack of apparent *will* comes from a lack of mental ambition. If there is no need to *push* up or *pull* up the horse becomes aloof. Chasing your tail in the same circle only confines the horse more and is baseless training when in truth, there is so much more to the horse than meets the eye.

In closing I would also like to say that unless the human factors involved are as smooth, efficient and consistent as is feasible, you've added more incline to the uphill endeavor of actually building an athlete. This entire process is not naturally designed to be swiftly accomplished; it is not a concept that fits well into the microwave society. A properly built race program is, in my opinion, a small one able to recognize that each horse deserves to be seen as its own team. Attention to the smallest detail is vital to a horse's stress management. Success of the team is made up of selfless individuals working together for a common goal, for an important part of manifesting a nurturing environment involves the herd of humans too.

At Thomas Herding Technique we work hard to develop innovative technologies for the betterment of the horse. *Narrow-minded thinking can kill or make stagnant any industry. If we think we know all that needs be known, we accept average for greatness...* KMT

For more information on THT's Thoroughbred Racehorse Management and other forward thinking equine consultation services such as Racing Profiles, Maternity Band Profiling, Breeding for Behavior & Pre-Purchase Sale Evaluations, please visit our website at www.thomasherdingtechnique.com.

Let us help coach your horse, forward.

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