

Beyond Instinct By Lynn Acton

The most dramatic fall I ever witnessed occurred at a muddy ditch on a cross country course. As a young stallion hesitated on the brink, his feet slid out from under him, landing him and his rider in a heap in the bottom of the ditch. He scrambled up, fell again, regained his feet, and went down a third time. Onlookers from all sides saw his motionless rider trampled under his flailing hooves. When he finally shot out of the ditch, and people rushed to her aid, the rider sat up, announcing with great presence of mind, "I'm OK. He's a stallion."

As several people raced off to intercept the stallion at the nearest mare pasture, others queried the rider. How could she *not* be injured? She was right under his hooves; a dozen people had seen her trampled! No, she said, his hooves never touched her.

I thought I had witnessed a minor miracle until I saw a remarkably similar incident a decade later. My friend's mare lost her footing on a muddy creek bank and they landed on the mud flat beside the water. Like the stallion, Roxie scrambled to her feet and fell twice more, with her rider underfoot. When Roxie finally hauled herself up the slope, my friend stood up, assuring us that she was unhurt; Roxie had been careful not to step on her. When someone pointed out the muddy hoofprint on her jacket, she explained, "Roxie started to put her foot down, and picked it up again."

It is well known that a fallen horse is normally frantic to get up, often to the point of injuring himself in the attempt. Yet even in their desperation, these horses remained sufficiently aware of their riders to avoid stepping on them. When a horse does something contrary to such a strong instinct, presumably there is a compelling reason. To understand the reason, the logical question is, what did the behavior accomplish? Their riders emerged unscathed.

Why would these particular horses have acted contrary to their instincts when other panicked horses trample their riders? I believe it reflected their relationship with their people. Whether we characterize it as affection or a sense of responsibility, it might be compared to whatever would prompt a horse to protect a herdmate in danger. Although I didn't know the stallion or his person, I had ridden with my friend often enough to see that their connection was so close that Roxie seemed to read her mind.

Shadow, a therapy horse, routinely behaved in a way that neither instinct nor training explains. When her disabled rider gave clear signals, she obeyed. If her rider's signals were unclear, she took her cue from her

leadline handler. If the handler was distracted, she flicked an ear toward the instructor at center ring. The last thing Shadow did was the thing that her instincts would normally prompt her to do first: copy the other horses. Spending a season as her leadline handler, I saw Shadow's system in action with a variety of riders. It was clear that she took serious responsibility for her rider's safety and, unlike the people around her, her attention never wandered. Small wonder that therapy horses experience more stress than the most rugged equine athletes.

It is not unusual to see horses being careful with children, or with loving owners who are hampered by physical limitations. Sammie the appaloosa warmblood is a dominant mare who's pushy with everyone, except her owner's nine-year old niece. When Ashley's handling the leadline, Sammie lowers her head and walks as politely as any sweet old school horse.

My Grandpa once told me, "Trusting an animal means trusting him to be true to the instincts of his species." It was wise advice. It has protected me from injury and from the disappointment of unrealistic expectations. It has also made me pay special attention when horses act in ways that are not explained by instinct or training.

There are times when horses take great care to avoid harming someone who is vulnerable. It can happen in a crisis when the horse himself is panicked, and in everyday situations for which the horse has not been trained. When a child is involved, the horse's protective behavior may fade as the child grows and is less in need of special consideration. We tend to notice when the behavior is counter to the horse's instincts, or unusual for that horse. But I wonder how many other horses, like Shadow, go beyond their instincts and training to take care of people, yet do it so quietly that no one even notices?