

The Better We Listen...

By Lynn Acton

I was currying Shiloh's side, her shedding winter coat making a chestnut carpet on the floor when, for no apparent reason, she hoisted the hind leg closest to me and waved it around. I opened my mouth for an indignant, "How dare you?!" Then I noticed that the leg was waving under her belly, not swinging out at me. Her ears were radared toward me, not pinned. OK, not a threat. Was she trying to tell me something?

"Put your foot down," I said quietly. She did.

Cautiously, I reached under her belly and rubbed my way back to her udder. Crusty gunk completely encased her teats and the area between them. As I gently picked and rubbed it off, Shiloh sighed, stretched her nose out, and began to wiggle her upper lip. Yes, she had been trying to tell me something. "I need help!" Now she was plainly saying, "Thank you!"

There was a time when I would have seen nothing but the raised leg. In the name of safety, I'd have come down on her hard. Then, when she rubbed her tailbone bald in desperation, I'd have wondered why. It's nice when a horse's problem is obvious, like the time Bronzz limped over to me and held up his lame foot, or Sapphire put her head down right in front of me so I couldn't miss the burdocks tangled in her forelock. Unfortunately, equine communication is usually more subtle than that of dogs, who can wag their tails and dance around when they're happy, yelp when they're frightened or hurt, whine when they're distressed, or lean in and lick our faces when they want to comfort us or show affection.

Horses don't announce pain or fear as dogs do, because prey animals instinctively hide vulnerability. We teach them to stand still on command, keep their feet to themselves, stay out of our personal space, and go only the speed and direction they're told. That doesn't leave them much latitude to communicate their needs, so we have to watch for subtle signs even when the horse is behaving properly.

The first time I went to blanket Shiloh, I gave her the command to "stay", and she stood. Not a foot moved. But as I held up the blanket, I saw that she was practically vibrating with tension. I set the blanket aside, and let her relax. Then I folded the blanket and laid it very gently across her withers, spreading it out slowly from there. She soon lost her anxiety about being blanketed. Had I overlooked her tension and flung the blanket on her, the reaction I provoked would have been entirely my own fault.

A magazine article on how to clip your horse showed the demo horse standing with back hunched, ears back, and eyes rolling. Apparently no one

saw his distress. Not owner, author, photographer, or editor. This shows how readily even people accepted as authorities overlook important communication from a horse.

When subtle signs are overlooked, the horse may escalate, just as we raise our voices when we feel ignored. I once watched a small dressage rider taking a lesson on her large warmblood, bouncing on his back and yanking his mouth as she vainly tried to sit his trot. The instructor's sole input was to tell her the horse needed to be "more forward", so she added kicking to her repertoire. The horse grew increasingly tense, back hunched, ears laid back, tail wringing as round and round in circles they went. Finally he let out a little buck.

"Where did that come from?" asked the shocked instructor.

"I have no idea," replied the mystified rider.

Another area where communication often breaks down is affection. Few people doubt that their dogs love them, but many doubt that their horses do. Horses show affection when they nicker hello, nuzzle our hands, leave a hay pile to stand beside us, or watch for us when we let someone else ride them. They show it when they trust us, cover for our mistakes, behave extra well when it really matters, and anticipate our wishes before we consciously give a cue. The significance of these actions is often downplayed or misinterpreted. When horses are seen as commodities, it is more expedient to ignore the bonds of affection.

We don't have to be skilled professionals to understand our horse's body language. In fact, a recent study showed that the people most attuned to a horse's emotions are owners who have a strong bond with them. They interpreted their horses' moods and bodily discomfort more accurately than professional observers. This is because we know our horses better than anyone else does, and have the empathy that is a critical part of recognizing someone else's needs.

Sometimes our intuition goes beyond even what we consciously see in our horses' body language. When Bronzz had a flexion test a few years ago, he was polite as always for the vet, but when she got to his left hind leg, he turned to look at me, and something in his face said, "It really hurts." That turned out to be the hock with the worst arthritis.

The better we listen, the better we understand our horses, the more trouble we head off, and the more reason they have to trust us.