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## *"Horse behavior – reading the signs"*

The key to safety around horses is to understand their behavior. Horses are not humans. Their instincts to behave like a horse are genetically embedded. To understand horse behavior, you must first recognize it. You do this by "reading the signs". What does that mean? Read the signs, what signs?

Watch any talented rider. They appear to ride effortlessly. Their cues are invisible, in total harmony with their horse. How do they do that? By continuously reading and assessing their horse's every reaction. They communicate when the rider evaluates the horse's responses and makes adjustments.

Communication is the exchange of information between individuals. In your case the individuals consist of you and your horse. Riding is more than just giving the appropriate cue. It's giving the cue and evaluating your horse's response to the cue. That's reading the signs. Are you feeling some resistance? Resistance where? Find that resistance by observing with your eyes and feeling with your body.

Keep in mind, this series is about safety. You can prevent accidents from happening by simply reading your horse's body language. They give clear signals when there is going to be a problem. Physical signs of agitation include, pinned ears, wringing of the tail, a raised head, tensing up or holding their breath. There is a reason behind these behaviors. You need to find out what that reason is. Missing warning signs can be dangerous. Horses are keen at reading human body language because they pay attention. You need to tune into their signals as well as they do yours.

How do you learn to read your horse's signs? You learn by observing your horse with all your senses. Start by watching them in the pasture. Horse behavior is fascinating. How do they look when relaxed, nervous or anxious? What do they do when challenging another herd member? Where is their attention focused? Where are





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they looking? What are they listening to? Spend extra time grooming your horse. It's a great opportunity to observe them relax when you scratch that favorite spot. Rub those hard muscle knots until they loosen up and relax.

**Focus.** Every time you handle your horse ask yourself, 'Where is his attention focused?' It should be on you. If it's not, recapture their focus. You can do this by speaking a word or making a request. For example, verbally say your horse's name, request him to lower his head, break at the poll or step sideways.

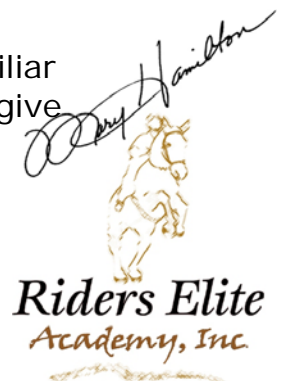
**Relax.** Now that you have regained your horse's attention the next question should be, "Are they relaxed?" If the answer is no, your job is to relax them. Tension inhibits your horse's performance. It can also be a sign danger is looming ahead.

There are many ways to relax your horse. You can relax him by a reassuring word or pat on the withers. Move to an area your horse feels safer. Or change to a riding exercise they are more comfortable doing. Try different relaxation techniques on your horse to see which is the most effective for them. Rubbing places like the gums and poll releases endorphins which relax and calm your horse.

Whatever your goal, reading your horses body language, recognizing behavior and replacing resistance with relaxation will make you a more effective and safer rider. Know your horse's limits. If your horse's resistance and tension are increasing he's communicating, "I can't take much more of this." Back off and reduce his anxiety before someone gets hurt.

I spend all day reading and relaxing my horse. I need him attentive and relaxed or I can't do my job. My horse Major was the herd boss. Although he was a gaited fox trotter, he would spend hours piaffing along the isolation pen whenever a new horse was brought in. His boldness made him a great police horse when I was working alone. But formation riding with unfamiliar horses could spell trouble.

At a police funeral we stood in formation for the two hour service. Major didn't like standing boot to boot next to an unfamiliar horse. Every so often I would see him slowly lower his ears and give





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the horse a look. Now this took about 5 minutes because he tried to lower them in increments so slowly he thought I wouldn't notice. Just before he would reach out to bite, I would flick him on the neck with my finger. This refocused his attention back to me. I would scratch him on the withers until he relaxed. Then we would start all over again.

Pay attention to horse behavior and see how much safer and more effective you will be.

