FEAR IN THE HORSE

Robert Cook

Congratulations to Kathleen Hentcy for her observations on the relevance to the training of horses, of research carried out by Dr. Joseph LeDoux ('Of Mice, Men and Horses' a recent article in Equus). It is important for us to recognize that the fear-processing system in horses can be reprogrammed to modify the instinctive freeze, fight, or flee responses.

But, much as it is of value to understand more about the treatment of fear, we should also consider its prevention. Removal of the cause, rather than its management, is the ideal solution to the problem of fear. For the last four thousand years we have, I discover, overlooked the fact that the most frequent cause of fear in the domesticated horse is the bit. Occasionally, horses are frightened by scraps of paper blowing across the trail and by other external monsters. But a much more constant fear and one that most horses have to contend with every day is internal; fear of the metal rod in their mouth.

By dispensing with the bit (sometimes two bits and a chain) and using a new bitless method of communication that causes no pain, horses are far more likely to become calm and confident. Free from bit-induced fear, horse and human can now become true partners. Communication is enhanced because the crossover design of the bitless bridle does not permit the use of force. Being incapable of causing the oral pain that a bit causes so readily, the new method of communication cannot be misused and, unintentionally, trigger a flight response. Neither can the signal be 'jammed' by the horse putting the signaling mechanism between its teeth. As Hentcy remarks, "the goal [of any technique of natural horsemanship] is to communicate with the horse in a 'language' he understands." A pain-free bitless bridle supplies this language. Accordingly, it achieves the objective of natural horsemanship that is, as Hentcy also states, a "harmonious [interaction] … free of tension, anger, frustration and fear."

"To the man who is afraid" said Sophocles "everything rustles." The same applies to the horse. A horse is much more likely to spook, rear, buck, bolt and exhibit fifty other evasions that endanger its own health and welfare, and that of its rider, if it faces the perils of the day in a pre-existing state of bit-induced fear.[1] Conversely, a horse in a comfortable headstall and with nothing in its mouth will

[1] For the detailed evidence, visit www.bitlessbridle.com

face any peril, real or imagined, with less initial upset. It will also recover from the scare much quicker.[2]

"All higher vertebrates" LeDoux reports, "share the same fear-processing systems." LeDoux has shown that, with man as the trainer, the system can be modified in rats. Pioneer trainers such as Tom Dorrance, Ray Hunt, Pat Parelli, John Lyons and others have shown that the system can also be modified in the horse. Yet another twist is that not only can man modify the fear-processing system in man but so also can another higher vertebrate, the horse. A bitless and, therefore, pain-free, calm, and confident horse will modify its rider's fear and train a calm and confident rider. The first half of this last equation is achieved by not frightening the horse.

[2] As I am currently Chairman of The Bitless Bridle Inc. these observations might be read with skepticism. But I would ask readers to bear in mind that whereas I have been a businessman for only three years, I have been a veterinarian for 50 years. The observations arise from a lifetime of research into diseases of the horse's mouth, ear, nose and throat.