

## Horse Misconceptions by Bonnie Martin

For those of us who grew up years ago without but desperately wanting a horse, a lot of fantasy and dreams colored our idea of what having a horse would be like. Many of us grew up on the standard fiction fare of books like *The Black Stallion*, television shows like *My Friend Flicka* or *Mr. Ed*, and the once-popular weekly westerns like *Roy Rogers*. In those scenarios, the horses were always very well behaved, kind, attached to their humans, and ever so willing to comply with every request as well as sometimes even protect their human. They would come running when called, and were more interested in their human than grass.

Those fictional horses certainly didn't step on their humans' toes, bite, bump, or kick them. They didn't move off before their humans could get mounted, didn't buck or run away, and you never saw or read about them grabbing a bite to eat as they moved down the trail. It seemed like they could run all day and never even get sweaty, much less tired.

Needless to say, the dream was certainly fiction! Many new horse owners have their bubble burst when they finally do get a horse because they think all horses will be like the fiction version. That is probably why a lot of new horse owners don't do their research and they may end up with a horse that is not at all suited to their needs and abilities.

Misconceptions about horses can turn the dream into a nightmare or at the very least wake the new owner up with a start. Many people misunderstand the nature of horses. Horses are not overgrown puppies and should not be treated like dogs are. They are not children and do not have human thought patterns or the same emotions. Horses are quite simply horses, a unique and fascinating species in their own right. They deserve and need to be understood for what they are instead of fantasized. They are wonderful creatures as they are, and we shouldn't try to make believe that they are something different.

I heard of a man recently whose family purchased a bred mare because they wanted to have a baby horse for their daughter to "grow up" with. When the colt was born, the man liked to go out and play with it. He would pick up the colt's front feet and put them on his shoulders, and they would "dance". Picture that same scene when the colt grew to be a yearling of around 700 pounds. All the sudden, it wasn't nearly so much fun for the man when he got knocked down and had a gash in his head from a hoof. Suddenly the horses were no fun any more and were sold for whatever they could get for them. All because the owner thought of the colt as a big dog and treated it that way.

Oftentimes people act as if horses think the same way people do. That's a big mistake. Horses are prey animals—in nature prey animals are hunted for food by predators, and their survival may very well depend on running away or fighting. People are predators. Predators are the hunters. It makes no difference that we have taken the horse out of its natural environment and put it in ours where there aren't that many predators that will actually hunt and hurt the horse. In their minds, they still know they are prey animals and

vulnerable to predators. We have to understand that and prove to them that we are friendly predators who can be trusted to keep them safe. They aren't going to understand that with words, so we have to demonstrate it with our confidence and actions.

Prey animals and predators do not see the world the same way and do not think the same way. For example, an upturned tree may look like a horse-eating monster to a horse or at least a perch from which a mountain lion might leap, whereas the rider sees it as a harmless upturned tree to which the horse should not react.

Often the human gets frustrated with a horse that is afraid because the human knows that the scary object isn't anything to worry about and doesn't understand the horse's perspective on the matter. Or they might get the matter worked out with the horse finally accepting the scary upturned tree going in one direction, and then on the return trip, the same thing happens again. The rider may think it's ridiculous for this to happen since they worked the issue out going the other way. What isn't taken into consideration is that the horse sees things differently than people do. Passing something on the left is not the same view as passing it on the right. Horses have to learn something from both the left eye and also from the right eye. The knowledge does not automatically transfer just because the object is the same.

The best way we can overcome our misconceptions is to study horse psychology through lessons (particularly Natural Horsemanship), reading, clinics, DVDs, and observation of horses together in a field. There is a wealth of information out there, it's just a matter of wading through it and sorting it out. Just be careful not to ascribe human or canine explanations to what you see horses do. Think about things from the horse's perspective.