

Confident or Conflicted?

Knowing techniques is not enough; we must understand them.

The presence or absence of these characteristics in us are flashing neon lights that a horse sees and by which he forms his impressions of what we are all about. Confidence is not arrogance or foolish bravado. They are “noisy;” confidence is quiet. Confidence enables us to persevere, which in turn makes possible the results we anticipate and hope for.

The conflicted person, on the other hand, is either tentative or brash because what, why, when, and how are not clear. The confident person is both cautious and careful. If you see a horse owner relating to a horse like a bull in a china shop, that handler is not confident but is not really conflicted because he/she hasn't given much thought to anything. This type of handler is simply focused on being a bully.

When the bully horse handler begins to consider some solid philosophy, he/she becomes conflicted. The conflict is the struggle created by the clash of new ideas with the old. When the bully begins to function in a balance of being as kind as possible and as tough as necessary, he/she becomes less and less conflicted and more confident.

The same is true of the soft, gentle and permissive horse owner. All is well with feeding carrots and pampering until somebody gets bit, kicked or run over. What they thought was confidence was really naiveté.

Now that type of horse owner is conflicted. They can't believe their horse would do that when they have been so nice to him. They are discovering how a horse regards confused people. Horses like carrots but they don't appreciate them the way they appreciate strong, clear leadership. That alone gives the horse the opportunity to become confident. His confidence in the quality of our character can never be developed by feeding carrots and apples. He likes carrots because it strokes his sense of entitlement. He may *like* carrots but he *needs* leadership. He may *want* to lead but he *needs* to be led. Treats may give a shy, conflicted horse some good feelings about you, but for a horse to develop confidence there must be positive engagement. That is the only way a horse can work out his conflicts and become confident in a way that is solid and lasting.

When we establish a code of conduct and enforce it, we give the horse a path to travel on in his relationship with us. For a horse to confide in us, we have to be consistent, reasonable and clear in the various ways we relate to him. For us to be really confident in a particular horse, that horse must be consistent, reasonable and clear in all the various ways he relates to us.

For all this to happen to the highest degree and fullest extent we must provide confident leadership. What gives us confidence? What do we put our confidence in? Let's look at knowledge, understanding, experience and connection.

We can't be confident in something without the necessary information. Knowledge gives confidence a place to be. Our understanding of that knowledge gives our confidence a chance and an opportunity to grow. When we apply the knowledge we have, more knowledge will come. In that application we start to understand concepts and principles. The result of all that is experience. Our experience confirms and adjusts our knowledge. If we spend considerable time engaging our horse in these pursuits we will begin to experience connection.

We make a mistake when we completely trust any of the above. We can never be perfectly confident in any of this. Like driving on the freeway, we are constantly observing and assessing our situation and its relationship to factors pertinent to our survival. Horses and humans are not always consistent. They are subject to their own misgivings, preconceived ideas, and the ever present possibility of misjudging each other. The variables are limitless so we may not always be sure that what we see is what is there. Many horse wrecks are described as “He never did that before.” When the unexpected is not anticipated, we have no defense. Things happen too fast with horses. There usually isn't any time to think and consider. Our connection is all we have left and even though it may not prevent a scary situation, it may prevent it from becoming as bad as it could be.

Sometimes we fall victim to a pure accident. Something happened that could not be foreseen and for which we had no defense. When these unfortunate events are serious our confidence is shaken.

When we become satisfied in assuming that nothing will go wrong we will most certainly be ambushed by Murphy. To restore shaken confidence we must retrace our steps, look at why and how the accident happened and learn every lesson possible. If we let the incident be a teacher, we will be wiser, not so quick to assume, and our confidence will begin to return. If a wreck is bad enough, our confidence may never be the same again.

Some horses become seriously traumatized from a wreck and may take a long time to return to normal. The traumatized person or horse has a better chance of having confidence restored if they start on the road back by staying in their comfort zone until they are ready to go forward. If the steps are increments that are manageable they will be steps that have a chance to succeed. However, the marks left by the incident may never be completely erased.

This again shows that green people and green horses do not belong together. If you have a horse that you just can't trust or feel good about, get rid of it. That horse will threaten your confidence without which you will be no good to the horse. We need to set ourselves up for success in all aspects of managing, handling or training our horses. It is sometimes said, "But I want to give him a chance." On your tombstone it may say, "I gave him a chance."

The ultimate in a horse-human relationship combination is a confident horse ridden, driven or handled by a confident person. That relationship is marked by peace and quiet. On the other hand, the cocky horse ridden, driven or handled by a cocky person will show a relationship that is adversarial and marked by some degree of chaos, and both parties will be conflicted.

One time on RFD TV I saw a woman riding a horse with no bridle or saddle. She was in a coliseum doing patterns and jumps. It nearly brought tears to my eyes. I was spellbound. Now most of us common horse owners will never reach that level but we can still enjoy our horses with confidence.

When we mix knowledge, understanding, experience and connection, confidence will be our reward.

If you are not confident find out why not, diligently hunt down the reasons, face them and resolve them. Confidence can be yours or you can be continually conflicted. Don't search for the perfect technique, it doesn't exist. Sound philosophy is the life blood, of any technique. Knowing techniques will not establish confidence. Understanding what they

should accomplish and how to apply them will bring confidence.

Perfect confidence can only be had in absolutes like the law of gravity. Here are some absolutes for us horse owners to consider. Their face value is absolute but the ways they give form and function to our horse-human relationship is filled with variables. This should help us to see that knowledge can cause us to do some high flying but understanding will get our feet back on the ground where they belong.

1. Horses are intelligent and are capable of making decisions based on the information given to them.

2. Horses have a value system.

3. All horses are wired to dominate if they can and submit if they must.

4. Horses need strong and clear leadership.

5. Horses are not as concerned about what we do to them as they are why it was done and how they are expected to respond.

6. If we do something to or with a horse, we owe them an explanation as to the what, why, where and how.

7. Ongoing confusion will push a horse into the fight or flight mode.

8. When suddenly presented with new material a horse needs his own amount of time and space to process that material.

9. The amount of time and space the horse needs will depend on his immediate ability to focus, his own personality, and the degree of clarity in our own intentions and actions.

Managing and resolving the conflicts in our horse-human relationship is our own responsibility. Conflicts can serve as reality checks or wake-up calls and in that sense they are good. Unresolved, they are like a little stone in our shoe. We can get by but it's no fun. It's no fun for the horse, either.

When a conflicted horse meets a confident person, he will, in his own way, try to tap into that confidence. When a conflicted person meets a confident horse, good things could happen but not necessarily. When both horse and human are conflicted, disaster is certain.

Conflict and confidence are forever in opposition but if they are well managed they will bring more knowledge and deeper understanding. That, in turn, will contribute to a stress-free relationship.

Enough said,

— Warren Bengtson