

Animal Management and Animal Welfare at the Snake River Farm PART 8

This letter is part of a series.

If you did not see the earlier letters, you can find them easily on Sarah's blog.

www.sandhillfarmsarah.wordpress.com

This letter is about horses.

We keep about ten horses. All geldings.

We have had mares and stallions but it is simpler and safer to have a herd of geldings only.

Safety is an important issue. Many inexperienced people and many small children enjoy our horses each year.

I train all the horses to ride and to drive.

They are ridden year around.

There is also a lot of wagon and bobsled work for them

I use them as much as I can for pasture work.

Harrowing the pastures in the early spring. Tilling, seeding and packing the pig pastures. Moving pastures in the summer.

Logging when we can find the time.

Most of our horses are Mustangs or of Mixed breeding.

I prefer mustangs.

Mustangs are significantly healthier and more durable than other horses.

They have terrific heart and put great effort into any work.

They are inclined to take care of their own needs.

They are proud and their sense of dignity shows in everything they do.

Perhaps most of all, I like the challenge of taming mustangs.

A domestic horse wants to know if it can trust you.

A mustang wants to know if you deserve its trust.

Two of our horses are gaited horses. Gaited means bred for a smooth saddle ride. Two are horses of mixed breeding that just turned up here. Well, maybe there is more to it than that but they were not planned.

We have never sold a horse. I have considered it but Gail will not part with a horse once she comes to know it.

Why we keep only geldings.

Mares are moody when they are in estrus.

Worse yet, when there is a mare around, the geldings tend to be aroused.

Stallions, like bulls can be dangerous. So can geldings who think they are stallions.

The greatest danger is not that a horse will intentionally hurt a person but rather that someone will get hurt by being between the wrong two horses.

The worst horse kick I ever received was intended for another horse.

Gelded horses are not like steers.

Cattle are typically castrated very young. Horses cannot be castrated until they are more than a year old. Because of that, geldings frequently retain some stallion-like behaviors throughout life.

Training a horse is different from training any other large animal.

The nature of a horse is different from the nature of a dog or a cow.

The fundamental difference exists between a dog and a horse because the dog is a predator and the horse is prey.

Cattle are prey animals too but cattle have horns.

The primary defense for a horse is to run.

People like horses, so the intuitive response is to be kind to a horse.

That is nice, but horse relationships are not based on kindness.

Horse relationships are based on dominance.

Not dominance based on fear and pain. Fear and pain produce spooky, dangerous horses.

But, dominance based on leadership, consistency, trust, protection and calm.

This letter is not about horse training. I know a few things about horse training but so do many others, including some of you.

There are thousands of books on horse training but all horse taming and training is based on understanding the unique nature of horses.

I will give an example or two.

1. A round pen of about 30 feet in diameter works exceedingly well for basic training. It works because that shape and size makes it easy for a knowledgeable trainer to teach the horse to start and stop on cue. Starting and stopping movement is exactly what a stallion does with horses when it forms them into a herd. By conveying the message of control firmly and calmly, with minimum movement, the trainer fills the role of herd leader.

If you have ever watched a "horse whisperer" or celebrity trainer work horses, this is what they are doing. Things are not always that simple but there are many other key techniques that can be used to tame, train or correct a horse.

A good trainer understands those keys.

No doubt there have been countless humans with unique insight (whisperers) around at all times over the history of horse domestication.

2. Horses will give a handler credit for helping (protecting) them. If done correctly the horse will not blame the trainer for getting them into a jam in the first place. For example, even if well prepared occasionally a horse that I am training to drive will have a bad experience and get entangled in the harness. When I calm the horse down and untangle the tethering harness, the horse will give me great credit for saving it. When such a situation occurs in the future the horse will stand patiently while I free it from the bind. It does not blame me for putting the harness on in the first place.

Horses spook.

It is the nature of a horse to run from any threat. A run-away or a bolting horse is very dangerous. The reason for this is based in horse nature, of course. In a flight situation, as prey, the slowest horse was the one that got eaten.

Horses have developed the ability to take flight to a fine edge. They are so well adapted to flight that many "spooky" signals never reach their brain.

Everyone who trains horses trains them to be as spook resistant as possible. Some horses are incredibly spook resistant. I trained my boyhood horse for hunting jack rabbits. I could shoot a 12 gauge shotgun over his head at a full run. (I do not recommend this by the way.)

Nevertheless, every horse will spook at something