

InSights

Taking the time to understand how horses learn and see—through their eyes—will give you the ability identify and respond to issues as they arise in a positive way.

Until I saw this month's reader's question (see page 26), we were going to look at how the awareness, feel and balance we've looked at in earlier articles come together to give you that elusive skill known as timing—but that's now for a later time!

The question that Alice raises goes to something much more fundamental—how horses learn and how they see. Since understanding that is crucial to setting you and your horse up for success, I thought it was the perfect topic for this month's article.

Horses learn in four primary ways. Pressure and release is perhaps the most discussed, but they also learn by watching other horses and mirroring our actions and emotions, the herd pecking order and the reinforcement of patterns (conditioning). What is often overlooked is that learning is also inseparable from the fact that the horse is a prey animal and as such, is governed by his natural fight or flight instinct and the way he sees and interprets what he sees.

A horse needs the opportunity to calmly look at his environment and the elements within it. He needs time—and by that I mean however much time he needs—to understand what he sees. Enough time for his natural cautiousness and curiosity to be satisfied and turned into confidence.

It's obvious that horses' eyes, like most prey animals, are on the sides of their heads. As a result, they can see nearly 360 degrees when their heads are level, giving them the ability to quickly spot predators. That leaves small blind spots directly behind the tail, perpendicular to the forehead and directly below the nose, for which they compensate by slight shifts of the head.

This placement also means that things may look different to them depending on whether they see it with their right or left eye. That's why you must always work both sides of the horse. When I'm working with a horse, I can easily tell whether the owner has been doing that, because the horse will have more difficulty accepting spooky objects or indeed approaches from the off side since we tend to spend so much time working from the near side.

But because horses' eyes are also slightly to the front, they also have a small area in which their vision overlaps, giving them, I believe, the ability to perceive depth, much as we do, depending on the placement of their head. There continues to be much disagreement about this, but how else could horses navigate rocky and uneven ground (sometimes moving quickly), judge a well-placed kick to a paddock mate, accurately gauge the height of a jump or even pull up at the last minute before connecting with the edge of a puddle or a fence? It

follows, then, that depending on circumstances such as colour, placement, light or other distractions, they (like us) could also misjudge that depth.

In relation to Alice's question, solid white jumping poles, for example, could be just as difficult for the horse to judge as all-blue or all-green. If those poles are placed horizontally (as opposed to crossed), it becomes even more difficult for the horse to see and judge.

That's why jumping poles are often painted in stripes, to provide an easier target for the horse to judge the height and his distance from the jump.

That leads me to yet another reason that I believe horses are best able to achieve their full potential when we give them the opportunity to work bitless, on a loose rein with only very light contact and in proper 'self carriage' as opposed to a set 'collected frame'. This allows him to move his head and use both his vision—and body—more as nature intended.

When a horse approaches a jump on a tight rein, in a 'collected' frame, he is essentially working blind. His vision is directed towards the ground and he must rely on the rider for an appropriate cue. If the horse is unable to change the angle of his head to what is most comfortable in order to judge the height of the jump and his distance from it, chances increase dramatically that he will either misjudge the jump or avoid it.

When you consider all of these issues, the fact that our horses are willing to jump for us makes them all the more courageous and generous.

There's more than another article in the proper exercises that you should ensure you and your horse have mastered before you begin jumping. Things like plenty of leg yielding and yielding to the reins, half pass, self-carriage, and



This mare is breaking almost perfectly at the poll—bitless and on a loose rein. She is also working from behind, able to bring her hind leg well under herself. This is critical not only for the horse's long-term soundness in general riding, but also for his or her ability to achieve maximum power in a takeoff.



This mare has correctly judged both the distance and the height of the jump (in this case even though it is solid white!), bringing up both forelegs more than adequately to clear, using her head and neck properly, and getting a solid push off her hind and, holding them high and evenly, easily clear the pole. Again, I'm riding bitless and have given her the opportunity to place her head and neck where she can use them most efficiently

transitions, not to mention ensuring you have a good understanding of how your weight is affecting your horse's gaits and movements, let alone poles and small jumps. Exercises that are good for many things, not just jumping.

Dear Carlos

I got my horse Buzz last year in April. We have done a few competitions and camps every school holidays until now. I have been jumping E Grade in competition and I have been practicing with a range of 50cm-80cm. I tried to jump a 90cm jump the other day, which was a pole on two barrels but Buzz just ran straight through it! I was wondering why he does this and didn't shy away, refuse, or run out. That is what he normally does when he jumps new heights and different jumps. Is it possible he couldn't see the pole? I tried it a few times, each time he ran through it. I am getting nervous when I jump him and I am so worried he is going to hurt himself somehow. Please help me!

Alice

Dear Alice,

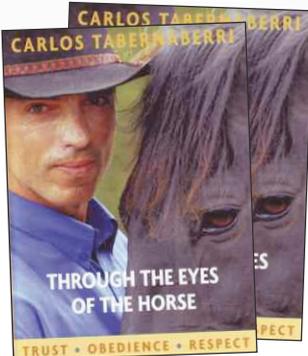
It is extremely important that you have a veterinarian properly assess Buzz to ensure that there is no physical reason behind his problem. That is always the first place to start. Another consideration is conformation. Since I have not seen either you or Buzz, let alone the two of you working together, it is difficult to assess whether Buzz is, in fact, built

for the task that you are asking of him and whether you, as the rider, actually interfere with Buzz's ability to complete the task. But if you have a true partnership, you do not push your horse to do something he is unsuited for. Again, this is something that a professional trainer may be able to help you with and perhaps something you should think about.

Besides going back to basics, getting your groundwork exercises (mentioned above) right and ensuring that your riding technique is not interfering with Buzz's ability to respond to your requests (independent seat, cues, balance, releases), I would suggest you work outside of the arena, if possible. Go back to some small logs and obstacles in the bush to rebuild Buzz's confidence in himself and his trust in you—and your confidence and trust in both him and yourself. You must find a way to break this new, conditioned pattern that he has learned (running through the poles) in a positive way.

Finally, you need to become aware of how your thoughts and beliefs are affecting your relationship with Buzz. If you are nervous when jumping, so is he. It's that simple. Why should we expect our horses not to be anxious or scared if we are? Chances are, if you're worried about the jump you'll be looking at it or, worse, down at Buzz trying to work out if he's going to refuse or run through. Try focusing on the quality of the canter after the jump instead of the leadup. Look to the other side of the jump, to where you're going. I hope this helps. And good, safe riding to you and Buzz.

Carlos Tabnaberri—2009 Clinic Dates



Join Carlos at his riding and theory horsemanship clinics on the last Saturday of each month. Topics include: horse psychology; body language; trust and unity; partnership; developing feel, balance and self-carriage; bitless riding and more.

You are welcome to raise your own issues, such as trailer loading, bucking, rearing, handling feet or fear of riding. Regardless of whether you are new to horses or experienced, whether you currently own a horse or not, these clinics emphasise the importance of understanding between you and your horse in order to form a lifelong partnership based on trust and non-violence.

June 21-22 – Boonah, QLD

Contact: Nicole,
info@nobitbridles.com.au

June 27 – Whittlesea, VIC*

July 25 – Whittlesea, VIC*

August 29 – Whittlesea, VIC*

September 19-20 – Boonah, QLD

Contact: Nicole,
info@nobitbridles.com.au

September 26 – Whittlesea, VIC*

October 2-3 – Perth, WA

Contact: Leureen Marcuzzi,

d.marcuzzi@bigpond.com

Tel: 045 0099 859

October 24-25 – Perth, WA

Contact: Jan Carter

info@savethebrumbies.org

Tel: 02 6655 2224

October 31 – Whittlesea, VIC*

November 28 – Whittlesea, VIC*

December - TBC – Whittlesea, VIC*

**For all Whittlesea clinic information, please contact Carlos: whisperingacres@bigpond.com*

Get Carlos' book & DVD's "Through the Eyes of the Horse"

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