

THT Bloodstock Services

Emotional Conformation Profiling

Blinkers: The Game of Hide & Seek

A Position Paper by:

Kerry M Thomas

Over the course of the last several years of profiling patterns of motion of race horses in various forms, from film profiling in the same context as we at THT have put forth for the Kentucky Derby the last three years, to personal inspections and when possible, combining both forms of evaluation for our clients, a great part of my investigation focuses on any Behavioral Overcompensations the horse displays. This is a vital piece of the equine puzzle, for how a horse interprets their world and translates the information into either action or non-action (no physical reaction of note) has a tremendous influence on their pattern of motion, energy burn, focus, distance ability from a mental standpoint, overall ability to manage situational chaos. All this information coming in must be translated into action/non-action and the avenue is communication, or, the translation of information/stimulus.

I have profiled race horses and film footage from around the globe at one time or another, and regardless of the environmental differences, every horse is equipped with the same essential tools of communication and translation, and every one of them interprets their world with these tools overlaid with “learned behaviors & experiences” which are a part of the assimilation process, Mother Nature’s gift for survival. This process of assimilation parlayed with full sensory use; vision, hearing, smell, *feel*, creates an *egg* of comfort around each horse. Of course, there are as many different size and shaped eggs as there are horses and some horses much like us being right handed or left handed, have tendencies of dependency like eye dependent, or ear dependent, for primary use of interpretation during high stress situations; racing chaos being among these. With this in mind, during investigations into performances, the one thing that to me stands out, blinkers create and cause more *Behavioral Overcompensations than any other human applied physical tool. **At the end of this piece I will include the glossary of terms we use at THT.*

For any horse even slightly eye dependent for mental balance in their everyday world, (and we must always keep in mind that as a grazing animal their vision is quite circular by nature) the application of blinkers creates a natural necessity to overcompensate. Horse’s higher on the #HerdDynamic scale are, generally speaking, less affected and learn to manage themselves in space regardless because of their elevated skills in other areas of environmental interpretations,

Thomas Herding Technique
Equine Athletic Psychology
stablemaster@thomasherdingtechnique.com
610-593-4889 - Office
www.thomasherdingtechnique.com

www.pineknollfarm.com

THT Bloodstock Services

Emotional Conformation Profiling

these higher level horses will even learn to *assimilate* to blinkers and seem outwardly unaffected; however roughly 85% of all horses fall into the “mid-level” range of the #HerdDynamics and thus their assimilation process carries more physical compromises. A horse’s assimilation ability is based purely on the principles of survival; if *this happens* I then must do *that* in order to survive.

So how does this shift of the senses, this *overcompensation* impact physical motion... and most importantly for race horses; speed, pace and the ability to shift gears in motion?

There are many ways this happens with some being more profound than others, again this is a very individualized circumstance, but I can assure you, if you live your everyday life and have lived your everyday life with full use of your vision and then I place a vision impediment upon you and ask you to perform those everyday tasks, you will be impacted.

When there is a shift in the sensory perception where say, 65% of your normal vision is blocked, that 65% housed in your sensory balloon does not *disappear* it shifts into another area, say, ears or feel... overloading their acuteness in order to allow them more responsibility over your safety. This may well cause what I see in horses as *emotional drag*, often times making a horse float laterally in small bits when information is being processed; impacting forward motion and pace and awareness of the self in space.

Like a game of hide and seek for the senses, Behavioral Overcompensation ability is a primer that makes assimilation functional; in good ways and bad ways, when we consider performance.

Here are some examples of how a shift in the interpretational avenues affects physical motion in the name of *survival*.

*In my home there is a stairway that leads to the basement, the steps are steep and older but no problem, I can go up and down them with very fast efficient pace because one, I have the use of all of my senses working together and two, because it is a very familiar environment to me that doesn’t change. However, on wash days I must carry my laundry basket down these otherwise familiar steps, but because with the basket in my arms in front of me, my normal full range of vision is blocked and thus, I shift more of my sensory perception into *feel* at my feet so as not to slip or misstep and fall... I complete the task successfully, but always at a slower pace; but, I survive!

*If you enter a room that has little or no light, compromising greatly your vision dependency, but you still need to enter to say, *grab something* off the dresser perhaps, you will most likely have a

THT Bloodstock Services

Emotional Conformation Profiling

tendency to *feel* your way... touching the walls maybe, feeling for the bed or even feeling for that light switch... the bottom line is, you automatically shift your sensory interpretation and very probably slow your *pace* of movement in order to adjust (assimilate) in a way that will not get you a twisted ankle or a stubbed toe!

*Experience and learned behaviors from a psychological aspect also are very weighted, acting like pinions to pace hidden within, only to manifest when deemed necessary. For example, I am a somewhat clumsy fellow and have been prone to twisting my ankles on the smallest of holes or depressions in the ground. The painful memory of this experience carries with me anywhere I go and yet only erupts to slow my pace in areas where I associate the environment to be similar; this is the Anticipatory Response Mechanism, a value tool for survival and learning. One day years back I was playing football with friends and upon running down the field to make a tackle, I stepped on a sprinkler-head embedded in the turf and twisted my ankle badly. Indeed, the physical pain healed and subsided, but the emotional, the *associated* scar never has. To this day, whenever I walk in a yard or jog a field or even see an environment that *may have hidden sprinklers*, this environmental association pops up mentally and creates a shift of focus. I walk slower, more carefully, because it *could happen again* owing to a *similar environment*. Even though I am removed from the scene of the crime if you will, and physically long since healed, the emotional impact, though hidden, rises up whenever even the perception of a similar environment is in play. I don't care how many times you whip me; I am going to do it my way because I aim to survive!

Indeed, the work and research into the overall impacts of sensory inhibitors on physical motion is for me far from over. The individual's sensory strengths and weaknesses and mental ability to associated and assimilate governs so many things. This is why during our profiling the *Emotional Intelligence/ a horses *Emotional Conformation*, every case has to be treated and investigated on its own standards. The general laws of nature are applied with different influences and accents from individual to individual, so every inspection is ultimately unique to itself.

But this is my own opinion, and you can learn more about the work we do in the book: "Horse Profiling; The Secret To Motivating Equine Athletes" and by visiting our website. www.thomasherdingtechnique.com & www.pineknollfarm.com

Contact THT Director of Equine Services, Pete Denk at peterdenk@yahoo.com and on Twitter @petedenk for more information. You can follow me on Twitter too: @thomasherding

Thomas Herding Technique
Equine Athletic Psychology
stablemaster@thomasherdingtechnique.com
610-593-4889 - Office
www.thomasherdingtechnique.com

www.pineknollfarm.com

THT Bloodstock Services

Emotional Conformation Profiling

THT's Glossary of Terms

Behavioral Overcompensation: Occur when one sensory avenue either by physical limitation or psychological aberration is overcompensated for its inefficiency by the use of another sensory avenue.

Buddying-Up: Occurs when a mid-level herd horse seeks the comfort of movement with another horse. Buddy-up horses are dependent on another horse for safety, direction and rhythm of motion.

Emotional Conformation: the mental and emotional psychology of a horse, that makes up who they are. It includes the way they communicate, interpret stimulus, and almost everything they do, including compete on the on the racetrack.

Group Herd Dynamic (GHD): a horse's awareness of the group around them. It goes hand in hand with the ability to interpret multiple stimuli. A horse with a good group dynamic can see/feel the big picture and where the horse itself fits into that picture. A healthy group dynamic is integral for a horse to run well through traffic or from far back in a race. Many horses with big group herd dynamics will prefer to be near the back of the field early in a race in order to read the other members of the group's intentions. They are in fact sizing up the field and determining where they want to go. The U.S. champion mare Zenyatta is the classic example of a horse with a big group dynamic (she also had a big individual dynamic, which she could turn on when needing to fight for space and pass horses).

Herd Dynamic: a general term we use to describe a horse's overall herd level (its group and individual herd dynamics combined).

Individual Herd Dynamic (IHD): the dynamic that involves just the self and a singular target. Example: a horse engages in a pace duel with one other horse, not thinking about the rest of the field, the length of the race, or anything else but that one-on-one struggle. Horses that rely too much on individual herd dynamic will get lost if they have too much stimuli to interpret. Front-running horses that only run their best races when they are near the front of the herd, where there are limited stimuli, are usually very high on individual herd dynamic. A high individual herd dynamic is integral to being a good racehorse, but the best horses are strong in both dynamics. When you're only operating on one dynamic, it's easier to have the rug pulled out from under you. And when things don't go their way, individual dynamic horses tend to fall apart.

THT Bloodstock Services

Emotional Conformation Profiling

Space Infraction: When one horse infringes upon another horse's comfort zone. Picture an invisible egg surrounding each horse. The size of that egg is dependent on the individual horse. Some horses shy from space infractions, some feed off of close contact.

Principles of Adaptability: When physical change is necessitated by environmental conditions and stimuli. Mental interpretations of these happen prior to the physical response; in place so a species can survive, learn, and evolve. Ultimately, associations evolve into perceptions which precede anticipation, shortening the time between action & reaction.

Anticipatory Response: Principles of Adaptability allow associations to become perceptions which can be seen as anticipation... leading to an anticipatory response prior to actual physically or emotionally driven stimuli. In a properly functioning sequence this allows for learning and social/psychological growth, in an improperly functioning sequence this allows for aberrations.

Egg: The horse's egg is an invisible space around the horse varying in actual foot-distance from them that is the comfort zone of space around the horse. Shaped much like an egg is shaped, with the more pointed part being forward owing to the area of binocular vision; the egg of comfort is the area where stimuli are efficiently interpreted in any direction. It is directly related to the herd dynamic of the horse; that area around them that is managed by them. Some areas of the horse's egg can be rigid, hard shelled, or absorbing/cushiony or soft shelled.

****Emotional Conformation Profiling** is the study of Emotional Intelligence & Ability in three key areas; Trainability, Behavioral Genetic Traits, Aptitude, with Communication being the primer.