NOTES FROM THE FIELD
EQUINE BEHAVIOR

By Cindy Sullivan

**PREFACE:** The purpose of “Notes from the Field” that will appear in some classes, is to offer you my personal insights on a particular topic based on my experience in the field. For the most part, these notes are the types of things I encounter and how I handle the situation. Some of these “Notes from the Field” may have examples of something I am particularly fond of doing – something I call “Round Penning the Human” which is a way of bringing the person to an understanding without telling them anything directly. It is a series of questions that guides them through a thought process which ultimately results in their reaching the answer on their own. The point at which realization dawns, they will suddenly stop trying to answer and the “look” of realization crosses their face as they stare at me, eyes wide, mouth open. THAT is the moment similar to, in the round pen with a horse, when it stops and turns to face you, eyes on you. It is a yielding. It is a moment when the realization hits that to keep running is getting you nowhere.

Remember, these are my experiences. Yours may not be the same. You may not run into all of these scenarios or types of people and horses. But I am willing to bet that if you stay in this business long enough, you’ll see every one of these at some point!

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**CAN’T CATCH THE HORSE** – Consider this from the horse’s perspective. The horse is happily out in the field with its herd mates, except when the owner wishes to ride, or the horse is to be shod/trimmed, or for a veterinary visit, or some other event that requires the horse to DO something, or submit to something not-so-pleasant. Sometimes the horse is brought in to eat every day and if the incidents of coming in to eat out number the incidents of “I’m going to ride you”, generally the horse is not hard to catch.

The behavior of the human going to catch the horse contributes a great deal as to whether or not the horse will happily approach the person. It’s important to understand that WE are the ones with a clock and a schedule…the horse has neither, and couldn’t care less that you only have 45 minutes before you must leave for work, or other pressing engagement. Such a person approaches the horse with purposeful intensity…just like a hunting predator.

**SUGGESTION:** spend more time with the horse in the field just being with him, asking nothing from him. Make an effort to bring the horse in only for a grooming and a treat, and nothing else, much more often than bringing him in for work. If your time is limited, leave your horse alone and find something else to do.

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**NATURAL HORSE-MAN-SHIP ZEALOTS**
Most often these are novice horse people stuck in Level 1 of the Parelli program. This is not an indictment of Parelli, rather it is a very common situation I run into with people new to horses and/or new to Parelli. The “Seven Games” of the Parelli system is very alluring to novices. It is relatively easy to gain success in ways that seem to be astounding to the casual observer and to those who do not really understand horses. There is a certain romantic “horse whisperer” attraction that hooks people from the get-go. The problem is that they get “stuck” in that small area of success. They haven’t really learned the underlying principles of why it works and thus are not successful (or are fearful) when trying to move on to more challenging lessons. These people mean well and certainly this is better than people who beat the horse into submission, but they pester their horses mercilessly with a never ending stream of “Playing The Games.” The horse knew these “games” before the human ever heard of Parelli…it’s a horse thing. But the human is addicted to that small measure of mastery!

How does that affect me in the field?

1. When I ask the owner to walk the horse away and toward me so I can evaluate its foot fall, the owner seems completely incapable of just casually walking and letting the horse follow. Every few steps they feel the need to “do” something…drive the hindquarters over, drive the horse ahead, twirl the end of, or shake the lead rope to reposition, or alter the speed of the horse. The horse is edgy in anticipation of being asked to DO something. There is NEVER just a quiet unencumbered walk away and toward me, until I intervene and specify such to the owner.

2. Horse is being held by the owner and fidgeting all through the trim. This is due to that hyper-awareness/over conditioned response of a horse that has been “Gamed” to death and is always expecting to be told to do something. Every time the owner moves, or shifts, or tries to look around to watch what I am doing, the horse shifts too. In this case, I will either ask the owner to drop the lead rope and move away from the front of the horse. I might suggest they come around and stand by me so they can “watch”, or I will ask the owner to leave the barn all together. Both scenarios universally elicit a deep sigh and immediate relaxing of posture by the horse.

I end a visit such as this with a recommendation that they work with someone to help them break out of Level 1. Its funny how many people will call me to ask if I will take them on as a customer and think it gives them points with me to proudly proclaim that they are “into Parelli”….quite the contrary!

**HERD BOUND HORSE**

You will notice this horse as the owner brings it up from the pasture. It’s always a good idea (especially on the first visit and/or until you are very familiar with the horse) to be there to observe the horse being brought up to the barn. This type of horse becomes noticeably more frantic the farther away it is taken from its herd mates. If you had not been there to observe this escalation of anxiety, you would likely not know the source.

The simple solution is to ask the owner to bring up another horse to stand by as a buddy, or to simply take the horse back down to his field and trim him next to the fence where he can at least see his buddies.
STALL BOUND TICKING TIME BOMB - Some horses rightfully resent being locked in a stall, even for a short time. My Percheron will angrily dismantle my barn within 15 minutes of being locked in a stall and I have big holes in the walls of my barn to make my case!

If the horse is in a stall when you arrive to trim, ask how long he has been in. Take careful notice of his body language in the stall (pinned ears, tense muscles, tight lips, pacing, etc.) before he is brought out and as he is being brought out (bolting out the stall door),

The body language of this horse should alert you right away that he may need to go have a run in a paddock or round pen to blow off steam before being asked to stand for a trim. If you ignore the signs, someone will very likely get hurt!

It may seem logical that a horse like this would also benefit from having a buddy horse tied next to it. Be careful with that. Sometimes it works just fine, but some horses have been stalled so much and are so starved for contact with another equine that it may become very excitable and thus more dangerous.

ANGRY MARE - Mares are so misunderstood, I really feel bad for them. Nine times out of ten, the mare that is described to me by the owner as cranky, or angry, is neither. In my experience, mares are way smarter (in the horse sense) than geldings. As such, I believe they are more discerning about what they will put up with from a human.

I try to determine the cause (or causes) of her annoyance keeping in mind that she is a mare and will require some different considerations than a gelding. For example:

- Is she trying to establish dominance over you? This is more likely if she clearly has dominance over the other humans in her life, so pay attention to how she is with her handler and how her handler acts around her.
- Has she recently been separated from a foal?
- Is she the dominant mare in her herd and now her herd is left vulnerable in her absence?
- Is she PMS-ing? Oh yes, mares can get painful “cramps” just like we do. If I suspect this I will gently feel around in the area of the kidneys and watch for a give – avoidance of pressure in a painful area, I will check her udder for tenderness (be careful with this, go careful and watch for signs of impending kick or bite. Some mares do not appreciate having their udder touched even if it is not sore), sometimes wacky hormones will cause false milk to be present even if she has not had a baby in a long time. I will look at her posture and notice whether she has a “sucked up” posture in her flanks, sometimes it’s very subtle.

Chances are very good that her “problem” is not that she is “cranky”….and I will take time to gain her trust and work with her in ways that minimize aggravating any body discomfort she most likely has, before I trim her. I stay “tuned in” to her mood at all times and will give her frequent breaks if she needs a rest (mental or physical) from my “meddling.”

WON’T PICK UP FEET – Usually this is not “won’t” – its more of ten “can’t” because there is pain. It is far less often a behavior issue than it is a body issue. In any mature horse that has
been conventionally kept (stalled and over-fed) and conventionally used (started too young and ridden too hard) for any significant length of time in its past, you can pretty much
guarantee there will be some body issues that range from uncomfortable to downright
painful. This is a case in point for getting a good history on the horse, as much as the current
owner knows or can find out.

In addition to the possibility that the feet hurt, there may be joint pain in the legs that make it
painful to bend the limb, or painful to bear the extra weight on the opposite limb of the one
you are lifting. There may be pain in the shoulders that make it painful to extend the leg
forward as you would to put it up on the hoof stand...in order to stretch the leg forward the
shoulder must rotate back and often in the ridden horse, that area at the wither is
damaged...significantly so. Arthritic or otherwise damaged knees will also cause resistance
in bringing the leg forward. Be sensitive to the difference between pain and attitude.

Babies, on the other hand, can be expected to resist having their feet picked up unless the
owner has diligently worked with them in ways that do not create resistance. Unfortunately,
the owner who properly trains a youngster for hoof care is rare indeed! When handling
babies, I am mindful that:

1. They have a short attention span and are naturally fidgety.
2. They have trouble keeping their balance when holding up a foot.
3. They are very oral and insatiably curious, so I expect my hair, ears, tools, chaps, shirt,
earrings, etc., to be snuffled or chewed.
4. I always keep my sense of humor and personally, I thoroughly enjoy the antics of youth

GOOD TIME CHARLIE – This is the horse that no matter how long he has lived, he is a
perpetual 2 year old. He is the clown of the herd, the one that opens gate, unties ropes, turns
over everything that can be turned over, ducking and weaving when the owner swats at him
to stop, then happily coming back for more. You can’t help but love this good natured
prankster, but he can and will make your job even more difficult than it already is.

- He will grab the back of your collar as you are bent over his front foot and pull you
  suddenly into a standing position.
- He will put his nose on your back and press down and let up, over and over seeming
to take great delight in “dribbling the human.”
- He will untie himself if not being held.
- He will unbuckle your chaps.
- He will bend all the way around to snuffle your face while you are working on his
  BACK foot and in the process lose his balance sending you and your tools flying.

Your only hope with this “party animal” is to give him something to occupy his busy mind
(and lips) while you work. I have no aversion what-so-ever of giving the horse food (usually
hay) to keep him occupied. For some characters, I have affixed a hard rubber dog toy to the
end of a lead rope so Mr. Good Time Charlie can happily play with (and chew on) the toy
while I work.

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