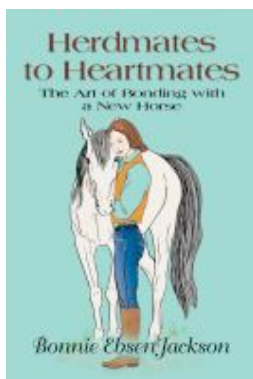


# Herdmates to Heartmates

The Art of Bonding with  
a New Horse



*Bonnie Ebsen Jackson*



*Your dream horse has finally arrived, and is turning out to be more of a nightmare. Good news! This book will help you solve the mysteries of any new horse by examining his prey animal fears and concerns, and answering the question, "What does my horse really want from me?" Author and coach Bonnie Ebsen Jackson will lead you through steps designed to build a solid and safe relationship with your equine partner.*

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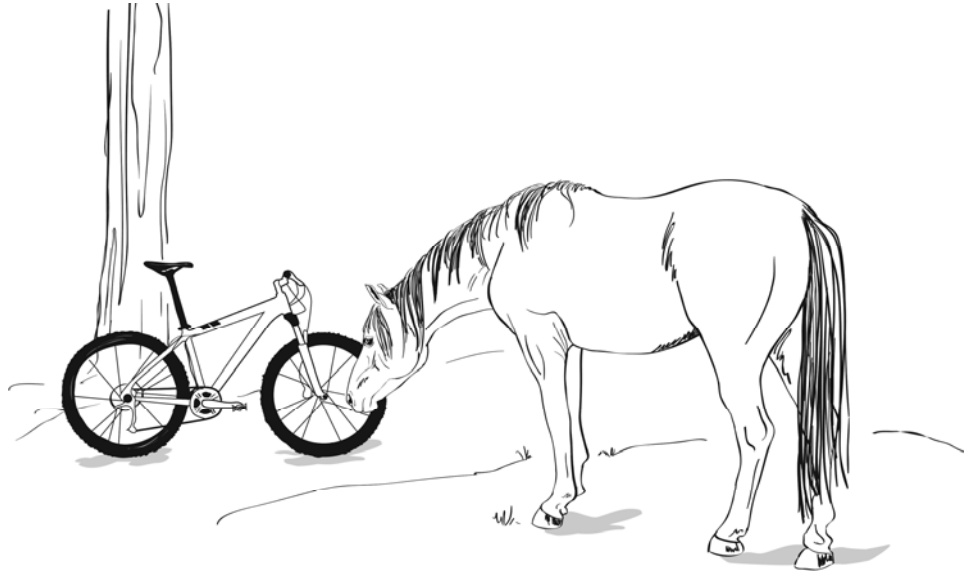
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## **Introduction: Your Horse is Not a Mountain Bike**

*“A horse is the projection of peoples' dreams about themselves—strong, powerful, beautiful—and it has the capability of giving us escape from our mundane existence.”—Pam Brown*

*“Horses can't talk but they can speak if you listen.”—Anon.*

**H**ave you ever bought a mountain bike? You see the bike in the store, all bright and shiny and new, and you buy it. You take the bike home, set it in a corner, still shiny and new. Every once in a while, you take it for a ride up that pretty mountain trail with all the scenic views. At those times, you are at one with the bike, working all its gears and zooming down the straight-aways. Then you bring it home, wipe it down until it's

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bright and shiny again, and put it back in its corner until the next ride.

*Although they may both go down the same mountain trails, a horse and a mountain bike are not the same.*

To illustrate what I mean, contrast the above scenario with this one:

You see the horse of your dreams at the sale barn, all freshly bathed and shiny, and being put through its paces in a calm and relaxed way. What a beautiful horse! What fun it would be to own and ride that horse! You buy and bring the horse to its new home. Suddenly, the once calm and steady mount you rode at the sale barn is replaced by a prancing, lathered, beast of the Apocalypse, with doomed and hollow eyes. Still, you now own your dream horse and you can't wait for your first ride together. On the first nice day, you race to the stable all set to saddle up and ride your shiny new horse on that pretty trail with all the scenic views. You arrive at his stall only to find that he's had a dust-up with his neighbor overnight and is now sporting a huge bite mark on his withers, where the saddle goes; a deep oozing sore where his back leg kicked at the fence panels in retaliation; and, to top it off, he's missing the shoe on that hoof.

Once the vet and farrier have been called and he's been put back together, you saddle up and go for that long anticipated ride on your new horse. More like "Mr. Toad's Wild Ride," as your mount executes a series of swerves from horse "monsters" that appear much larger in his brain than in real life. He alternates between spurts of adrenaline-fueled speed, during which the bridle reins seem to have the efficacy of Maypole ribbons, and short pauses to mow the grass by the side of the road. Finally, you slip off and trudge back home, wishing your new horse had come with an operator's manual.

Believe it or not, this horse really wants to connect with you, to be the well-behaved mount you rode at the sale barn. The problem is that he's a sentient being, a prey animal that needs to

be reassured he's not all alone in his quest for survival. With the change of ownership, what used to give him assurance, comfort, and companionship has now changed. Without the familiar sights and sounds of his old environment, he has no idea where he stands in the "food chain existence" that is the life of any prey animal. For instance, he used to know every inch of his home territory—vastly important in figuring out from where the tigers and bears will emerge. Now, he's in a new stable, possibly confined to just a box stall with no view of his surroundings. The adjacent horse is unfriendly, or worse, he might not have a neighbor at all! You come to his stall with halter in hand, but you look different, smell different, and sound different from his last owner. In short, you don't really register with him yet; he has absolutely no confidence that you have his best interests at heart or are resourceful enough to keep him safe when predators come calling.

The good news is that while your horse may never be as convenient as your mountain bike, he can become just as enjoyable if the two of you can learn a common language. Since *his* knowledge of spoken language will be mostly limited to words like "whoa," "cookie," and commands to walk, trot and canter, communication can improve vastly when you begin to tune into what your horse is saying with his body. Learning to read your horse's behavior and understand his needs will eventually help you to decipher all horses' behavior.

Having a sentient being for transportation can have its advantages; while a mountain bike will never alert you to a cougar lurking in the bushes, your equine partner will give you plenty of warning, which might just save your life!

### **Why You Should Read *This Book***

When I first started to write a book, I thought about all the books on horse care, horse behavior, and horse training that already existed and wondered what would make mine different. What did I have to say, and to whom exactly did I want to say it?

In reality, there are trainers, clinicians, “gurus” and “whisperers,” who have covered a great deal of how-to horse information. It is quite nearly information overload for someone who is new to horses! Because new horse owners, future owners, and those who are just getting interested in horses are in the reader audience I want to address, I decided to present a more personal account of what I’ve learned about getting to know a variety of new horses. This gives me the freedom to speak my mind from my own experience. Others might have different experiences that brought them to different conclusions on the topics covered here. As we say in experiential education, telling your story “is what it is” and no one can dispute your telling of it. Saying that, I have taken great pains not to lead anyone too far astray in my ruminations, advice, and suggestions.

Much of what I say is informed not just by my experience as a horse owner and enthusiast, but also as a horse professional for the last two decades. Thus far, my experience has covered:

- Horse magazine writer/editor
- Boarding facility manager
- Trail ride outfitter
- Riding instructor
- Life skills horsemanship teacher for at-risk youth
- Equine-assisted mental health facilitator.

The constant theme through most of these occupations is, of course, gathering and communicating useful information about the horse. In most of them, I’ve had a chance to update my knowledge, skills and procedures through the experience of others and my own hands-on experiences. You see, I’m still a student at heart and always will be.

Your new horse, or the horse you will be getting sometime in the near future, will not care if you read this book from cover to cover (but I heartily recommend you do so) as long as you get its message. Your new horse is mainly interested in how skilled and knowledgeable you are as a fellow herd member. That’s right—



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you will be seen first as a predator, then as a friendly predator, and finally as a herd member. Whether you win his heart and become the leader of your “herd of two” will have to do with how and what you communicate.

Are you a brave and resourceful leader?

Are you a low-status herdmate?

Are you just another predator lurking in the bushes?

In reality, you have potential to be all three. Together, we are going to attempt to shift away from the latter and toward the former by paying attention to your horse’s behavior and learning to respond to all respectful offers to form a partnership.

There is something else I want to share with you before we start. It concerns one of the reasons I didn’t choose a career in horses earlier in my life.

When I was showing horses as a youth competitor, the horse community seemed dominated by feisty and opinionated professionals, who espoused only one way of doing things; it was their way “or the highway.” I didn’t think I could get along well in such a dogmatic environment; it seemed too oppressive to follow along blindly without the ability to question and innovate.

In recent years, there has been a shift in the way we view horses and our relationship to them in general. We look to the horse to teach us by giving us feedback on how we’re doing as partners. In fact, this very honest and precise feedback is what makes horses so valuable as psychotherapy co-facilitators.

What I want to do with this book is to empower you to be a better partner by pointing out and explaining both what is going on with your horse and why it’s going on. I don’t pretend to have met every quirky horse on earth, but I’ve been a student long enough to have a working knowledge of horse behavior. That is what I want you to have as a new horse owner.

Occasionally in this book, I’ve given some examples of horse keeping and horsemanship gone wrong. In many cases, I have tried to present an incident or scenario from my own history. To be sure, I was once new to horse ownership—and have been the owner of a new horse numerous times. I learned much of what I

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know by realizing what I was doing wasn't working, seeking better answers, and then changing the way I do things. By exposing some of my own blunders and how I overcame them, I'm hoping that it will inspire and encourage you to create a special bond with your new horse.

Finally, in writing this book I have quoted and mentioned the names of some established natural horsemanship clinicians like Pat Parelli, Ray Hunt, and Mark Rashid. There are many other horse professionals who have touched my life and informed my instincts as well, including Dr. Robert Miller (my first vet), Monte Foreman (my first riding teacher), Linda Tellington Jones, Carolyn Resnick, and Ned Leigh. I am in no way proselytizing any particular approach to horsemanship, natural or otherwise. I believe that the horse in front of you will always be the supreme guide to how he thinks and behaves. Just the act of spending time with your horse will begin to educate you regarding not just the species and the breed, but also the unique individual. *Spend the time you need to learn your horse and let him learn you.* You can never go wrong if you always keep that in mind.

## Five Signs You May Have a Bonding Issue with Your New Horse

### **Sign #5 - Butterflies are Free But...**

You've had the horse for six months, yet each time you pull up to the stables you get a sense of being in the top chair on the Ferris wheel. Excitement—or anxiety? However you label it, your horse will pick up on that heightened energy. Some horses won't be affected much, but if your horse is reactive enough to become energized around you, take responsibility for the state in which you show up. Instead of proceeding in an anxious or tense condition, spend some time hand walking your animal, curry brush in hand, and letting him graze while you concentrate on breathing, dealing with ANTs (Automatic Negative Thoughts that transmit energy and imagery to other sentient beings) and being in present time. In short, practice mindfulness. In research studies of horse/human interaction, the human's heart rate can lower significantly simply by being with the horse in a non-demanding way. *Bottom line: Let the animal do his magic by resetting your autonomic nervous system; then proceed on with your plan for a relaxed and fun ride.*

### **Sign #4 - The Name Game's Gone Lame...**

If what you call your horse keeps changing, even after five or six months and several times through the alphabet, not to mention annoying all your friends and ignoring all the name suggestions on your Facebook wall, you need to look at what is keeping that name at bay. It doesn't matter to the horse what you call him, but continually selecting then rejecting a series of stable names over several months suggests that things just aren't settled in someone's mind. *Bottom line: The horse looks to you for leadership and stability. If he doesn't find it, you will lose value in his eyes and he will tune you out.*

**Sign #3 - Arrested (Trust) Development...**

After six months you are still spending a half hour to 45 minutes “warming up” your horse in the round pen or on a longe line. Really? Did you know that working cowboys and other professional riders mostly don’t do that? They catch, saddle, and get on. The “warm-up” happens on the way to the cow pens. If you are simply going down the trail, the warm-up can be the first mile of the ride. Why else would you need to exercise a horse before getting on? Is the chasing and harassing him into a lather in the round pen before saddling up designed to give you a false sense of control? Real control needs closer contact, either on the ground or in the saddle. Control means, for example, asking for just the left hind foot to move forward or backward on cue. Wearing down a horse into obedience is not control and ultimately will only result in a tired yet fearful horse. If your horse has become overly exuberant over the months since you bought him, do a nutrition check. Most pleasure horses can survive just fine on grass hay and vitamins. Poor keepers (those who can’t sustain their weight without tons of high calorie feed) should first have teeth and parasite checks performed before you pour on the grain. *Bottom line: Feed high calorie food only after a good relationship has been established and even then only if your riding program is rigorous enough to warrant it.*

**Sign #2 - Owner Gone AWOL...**

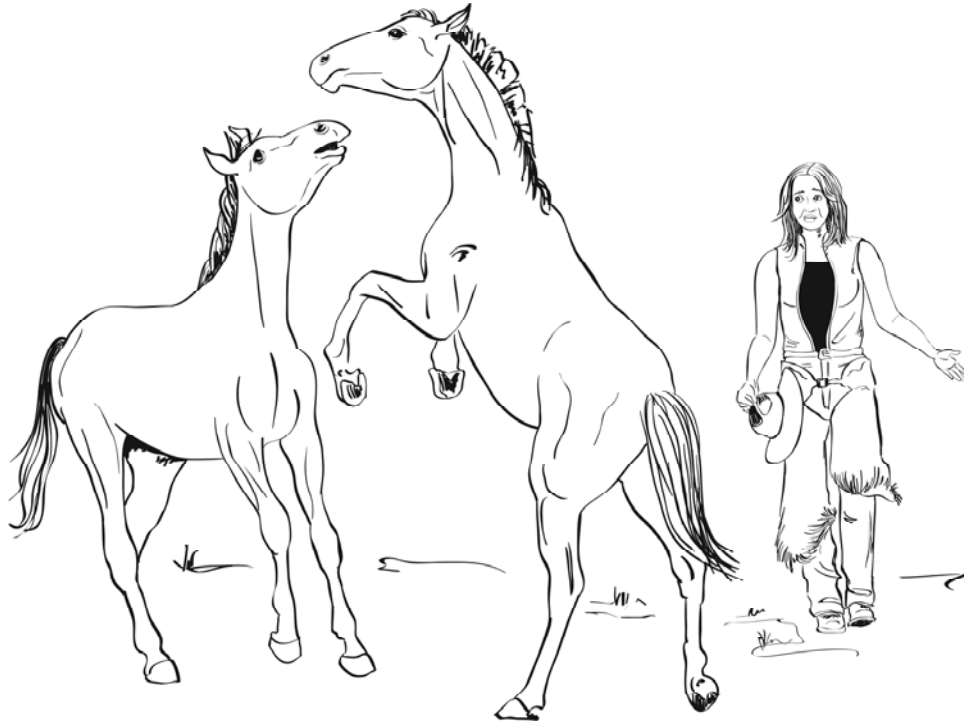
Horses don’t text, email, have smart phones, or even a snail mail address; they really can’t do Skype! Thus, all the things you use to communicate and make promises to spend more time with your human relationships are lost on your equine buddy. A horse relies on consistent, in-person contact in order to develop a trust bond with a human. If, after six months of ownership, you are still only spending about two to three hours per week with your horse, there is no mystery about why neither of you seem confident in your relationship. Consider taking a day off from work (they’re called “mental health” days) and spending it at the stable, just hanging out with your horse. Come early, bringing a

book and chair, and just inhabit his space. Take him out of his stall several times, sometimes for structured activity and then some for just grazing and sight seeing. *Bottom line: If you can't pry more time away to bond with your horse, then you may need to examine whether you have enough time to be a horse owner, or whether a leased or rented horse would better serve your needs.*

**... And the #1 Sign - That Faraway Look in His Eyes.**

If, each time you ask him to perform a task either on the ground or in the saddle, your horse's gaze strays over to his stable mates, the neighbor's green pasture, or the ranch dog walking by, it isn't because he has ADHD—he's just not impressed with your leadership. The next thing that happens is that he forgets he has YOU at his side or on his back. Then chaos arises as he finally wakes up on the trail, thinks he is alone and develops "happy feet" trying to get back to safety. *Bottom line: YOU are his safety and you need to make every attempt to let him know that, as much as possible and as early as possible in your relationship.*





## Chapter 1: What Do These Horses Want, Anyway?

*“A horse does not care how much you know until he knows how much you care.” –Pat Parelli*

**W**hat is important to a horse? What are his needs? What do these horses want, anyway?

Nearly all college students are exposed to the idea of a hierarchy of needs somewhere in their first semester of Psychology 101. Abraham Maslow developed a theory of human need in the 1940s that explained a person's struggle toward higher awareness and fulfillment. This is illustrated most prominently by Maslow's pyramid, which shows the most basic

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requirements at the bottom and the most elevated or ethereal needs at the top, i.e. self-esteem and self-actualization.

Self-actualization

Esteem

Social belonging

Shelter, safety, protection

Physiological (health, food, sleep)

Similarly, horses have their own hierarchy of needs that culminate in what I call “herd-happy” behavior. This behavior is most often seen in groups of horses at pasture that start spontaneously running in various directions, often breaking into a series of bucks out of sheer exuberance. It is a *joie de vivre* herd behavior that differs quite a bit from herds that are responding to predator threat. There, the goal is to move efficiently and as one unit in a direction away from danger.

A horse’s hierarchy of needs can be viewed as follows:

Herd harmony

Play drive/Dominance

Companionship (herdmates)

Comfort (food, rest, freedom from pain)

Safety/Security (assurance they won’t get eaten)



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Your horse's most basic need is to be safe from predators. If he feels safe, he'll seek out comfort in the form of food or rest. If his comfort needs are met, he'll seek companionship from his stablemates. If he gets accepted into the herd (more about that later), he'll test out his dominance and play drive on his neighbors. When all needs are met and the herd is in harmony, spontaneous acts of group exuberance will occur.

Most readers of this book will have horses that have already had their needs met up to the companionship level. This means that they are not really in imminent danger of becoming predator food (though they might try and convince you otherwise) and they are not wanting for nourishment, water, or rest. The exception to this would be if you have rescued a horse from an animal rescue or neglectful situation. While it is rewarding to give such a needy horse a better home, these animals often require care that is beyond the knowledge and abilities of a novice horse owner. There is also a great chance that, as the horse improves and moves up the scale of needs, he may not prove to be the best beginners mount. (For my own account of the consequences of such a rescue, read the story of "Bandy" in Chapter Six).

So, where do you fit into the horse's hierarchy of needs? The ideal and short answer is, on every level. From the moment your horse arrives in his new home, you will strive to be the B.O.S.S. of everything that is important to that horse. Now, I don't mean you are going to "show him who's boss" in a fierce battle of muscle and spirit. That belongs to the old paradigm of horse handling. You are simply going to take every opportunity to demonstrate that you are the **Beneficent and Omnipotent Source of Supply** for all things that are important to him.

In a feral or wild herd, a horse's survival depends on the actions of the leader of that herd, usually a dominant mare. This mare operates instinctively, regulating the herd's survival activities, including when and where to eat, when and where to drink, when to breed and, most crucially, when to get out of the area. Ever vigilant, it is she who raises her head up first at the

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smallest stirring of trouble. Depending on her nature, she may be actively dominant or a more beneficent leader, guiding by example. Either way, she is the-one-with-the-good-ideas, the Beneficent and Omnipotent Source of Supply, and woe to any lower status herd member that doesn't heed her communications!

### **A Good B.O.S.S. Creates a Herd Happy Environment**

While there may not be the same threat to the herd in domestic situations, horses are left with the instinct to seek out and follow the-one-with-the-good-ideas, or the B.O.S.S. Creating situations that demonstrate to your horse that you are the person for the job takes some ingenuity and creativity. Still, the result will be a horse that trusts your judgment—one that believes in your leadership, no matter what the environment may be telling him.

Ironically, in our endeavor to make domestic horses more useful, we often make horse keeping choices that further distance the animals from their needs. Wild horses are survivors, having adapted to the various terrains and climates in which they live. Except for the quantity that are captured by the Bureau of Land Management and destined to live in pens until they are auctioned off, wild horse herds roam freely 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in all four seasons. They don't graze on lush pastures, but instead browse through acres and acres of inedible or undesirable vegetation in search of sustenance. They are constantly on the move, traveling over rocks and other terrain harsh enough to grind their hooves down to sharp, flinty nubs. Rarely do they visit the same blade of grass or even patch of ground that was grazed in prior weeks or months. This means they have a slim chance of parasite infestation and virtually no need for chemical deworming. However, should they feel the need to purge internal invaders, there are indigenous plants they can actively seek out for that purpose.

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In the wild, herd harmony is often maintained with a rigorous vigil by the lead mare. This results in little need for artificial barriers between feuding animals. A rude or misbehaving horse, often a young male, is ostracized from the group until he learns some manners (or manages to steal a mare or two and set up his own herd). The remaining horses enjoy the easy companionship that communal living affords. *There is no such thing as social phobia or mental illness in a wild horse heard.*

We have moved our domestic horses away from this model. We erect barns to house our animals and in doing so often seal out fresh air and seal in the toxic fumes created by their excrement. In those barns, we isolate our horses, sometimes not even allowing them to see each other. Living in cramped quarters means the horses learn to litter where they eat, thus ensuring they will re-infest their system with the same parasites they expel. It also sets them up for contracting thrush, a chronic fungal disorder of the hoof.

Lacking pasture or acreage for our horses to graze on, and desiring a horse that is “in good flesh”—meaning, plump and shiny—we feed cultivated legume hay that can be overly rich in calories, carbohydrates, and protein. We supplement with carbohydrate-rich grain products that have been sweetened and laced with vitamins. While feeding vitamins is a good idea, particularly for young and growing horses, the extra calories supplied by the starch and sugars can create metabolic and behavioral problems in many horses. Diseases of the hoof, such as laminitis and founder, are also commonly related to an overly rich diet.

In the interest of keeping our horse’s coat sleek and manageable, we start keeping a blanket or sheet on him at night, and sometimes even during the day. Once winter has arrived and he’s grown used to the extra protection, we must continue the ritual of covering him daily, thereby diminishing his ability to keep himself warm. Because he spends his days on soft sand or shavings instead of natural terrain, the feet of the domestic horse

aren't worn down properly and start to lose their shape as they grow out.

All this explains why we need the regular intervention of various specialists like farriers and veterinarians in order to keep our horses healthy and functioning, while their feral counterparts need none of them.

When I first started keeping my own horses as an adult, I committed many of the horse keeping faux pas I've just described. I fed alfalfa hay, which was cheap and plentiful, stuffing it into a feeder that hung on a wall, high above ground level. I put shoes on my horses because that's how I was used to handling hoof issues. I stabled my horses separately, blanketed them daily, and used a dewormer six times a year, all out of habit. (Did I mention that all these practices add up to a lot of manual labor, not to mention extra expense?)

In the last two decades, I've had a chance to assess and revise my horse keeping; I've modified practices to better address my horses' needs and preferences as well as my desire to labor less. For instance:

- Their turnout is almost exclusively the decomposed granite that exists in their high desert environment. I have built some rocky sections on which the horses can wear their feet down.
- I feed grass hay, supplementing calories for the two older horses in the form of a pelleted product designed for seniors. I spread the grass over a large area, including on hillsides in order to approximate the browsing they so enjoy.
- Before using a dewormer, I get their manure analyzed by a veterinary lab to determine the existence of a parasite infestation. There is no point in spending the money and adding chemicals to my horses' system unless it's absolutely necessary.

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Like many individual horse keepers, I don't have large acreage set aside for my horses. In fact, the entire horse operation covers only half of our five-plus acre property. This isn't a lot of space for a browsing animal. Truthfully, I would need a pasture that was at least four to five acres for each horse in order to sustain them 24/7. So, in my "modified plan" I let my horses out of their pens to meander around the stable area for about 10 to 14 hours a day. This not only allows the horses to graze on the hay I've spread around in many small piles, it also satisfies their need to associate freely. I watch them pair up or walk around from group to group and it seems that they are better able to manifest their own temperament and status. In choosing who they want to hang out with, they are less apt to pick the kinds of fights that lead to vet bills. In short, they are beginning to display signs of "herd harmony."

This freedom also seems to make them more sociable with people. It's not uncommon for one or more of the herd to greet my guests and me as we come through the stable yard gate. Even Travis, a socially phobic retired show horse, has taken to wandering up to take a gander at the array of human clients and students who come through the gate.

Periodically in this book, I'll mention more ways in which you can increase your horse's awareness of you as the B.O.S.S. in his environment. For instance, the very simple act of grooming is a great way to establish yourself as a valuable source of both comfort and companionship. We normally think of grooming as a human construct, i.e., something done with specific brushes, combs and rags that tidies up a horse and makes him presentable for competition or exhibition. However the idea of grooming was born out of feral herd behavior, where horses stand and nibble or massage each other's withers and backs, often for hours. Walking around a pasture of horses, you might see mutual nibbling as well as single horses rubbing on trees, or rolling in bare, sandy areas. All of these qualify as "natural" grooming behaviors, which release a steady supply of endorphins into the horses' biochemistry.

This may account for why most horses willingly stand still to be groomed. In fact, the only horse I ever met that didn't like to be groomed had some back issues. The nerves in his spine and hip area were so aggravated that the slightest touch on his side would elicit a defensive response from him; it was not unlike the human condition of fibromyalgia. Eventually, the gelding was helped through some sessions of equine therapy work, including acupressure, acupuncture and chiropractic. Today, when I go to visit him, his back problems have long since subsided and he sidles up to me for some grooming, the same as any other horse.

### **First Bonding**

What a delight it is for a foal to discover that humans come with flexible groomers at the ends of their arms! When they get their first taste of "scratching," you'll see the little noses stuck in the air with pleasure, the top lip quivering in rhythm to your scratching fingers. This discovery that humans can provide something of value, which far exceeds what an equine can offer, is often the first step toward bonding.

With the two Premarin fillies I adopted, the art of grooming became not just a game but also the single means of communicating with them initially. After some rude handling and an abrupt departure from her mother in Saskatchewan, Canada, not to mention the brutally long trailer ride to Arizona, Twinkle—the first of my fillies—came to me as a hostile and suspicious six-month-old. I would sit inside her manger as she alternately approached to nibble some hay and retreated to stand eyeing me with a look of profound distrust.

After weeks of talking and even singing to her, one day she let me put a hand on her neck for just an instant. The next day, it was a few instants, and the next, I able to gently rub on her shoulder before she stepped off to stand haughtily in the corner. Eventually, I was gently scrubbing her neck and shoulder area with my fingernails, paying attention to where she responded most. This one action of providing comfort and companionship

began to unlock the sweetness and innocence that was hiding just beneath all that hostile suspicion. It is a terrible thing to witness a weanling who has already developed such a strong negative opinion about people. Quite honestly it still informs some of her behavior today, almost a decade later. However, learning how baby Twinkle liked to be groomed became the first step toward winning her trust in me as her B.O.S.S.

Like all good things, there is a dark side of grooming that must be addressed. Some horses will become so comfortable with humans grooming them that they turn it into a domination game.

In the herd, the horse whose idea it is to be groomed is usually the more dominant. She will approach a beta, or less dominant horse, and say “Okay, you’re it. Let’s groom.” The same dominant horse may deflect an approach by a beta horse with sounds and body language that say, “How dare you presume!” Thus, if you are with your horse at liberty and he approaches you and insists on grooming by stepping into your space and bumping you with his head or shoulder, you might consider whether that horse is being respectful of your status in your “herd of two.” In such cases, I usually ask the horse to swing their back end away from me, disengaging their hindquarters, or step backward from pressure applied to the chest or nose. Then I reward their response with the desired grooming. This establishes what a B.O.S.S. should always strive to possess—an attitude that is kind but firm.

### **On Naming Your Horse**

Horses don’t really care what you call them, as long as you refer to them consistently. This is part of my own addendum to their hierarchy of needs—the need for a horse’s human to develop a consistent way of handling him. A name is the first step in creating that consistency. This is true even with a horse that seems to thrive on variety in his activities, requiring you to be very creative in your arena work to combat boredom. You still

need to commit to a name for that horse before you will truly start to bond. Nothing communicates better to a horse that “Hey, you’re not going to be here for very long” or “Hey, you’re not any more special to me than this dirt clod” like not deciding on a name.

I recently shamed some good friends of mine into finally selecting names for their trail horses—a lovely matched pair of bays. I did this in a very sneaky way. They dropped them off at my place for boarding and went off on a 10-day trip. Before they left, I asked for the horses’ names. Tom—a cowboy in his sixties—said, “Well, we don’t really have set names for them.” I was taken aback, as they’d had those horses for years. While they were gone, I promptly gave the horses—a mare and gelding—the names “Tristan” and “Isolde,” and told Tom so when he came to fetch them. He screwed up his face like he’d bitten into a lemon, but said nothing about my audacity. The next time we rode together, Tom made a point of referring to the horses by their new names, “Luke” and “Stella.”

Some people think that changing a horse’s name is bad luck, or at least bad form. I want to assure you that lightening will not strike you down if you decide to change your new horse’s name. How you refer to a horse is important in both how the name sounds and what it signifies...both to you *and* the horse, strange as that seems.

Of the horses that came to me with names, I’ve probably changed more of them than I have kept the original. I like to give a name that is a positive message to the horse and meaningful to me. For instance, the gelding I refer to as “Goodman” in this book came to me with the registered name “Badger’s Commission,” shortened to just “Badger.” I got a sense from his owner that he was already a handful. (Maybe it was the hand-scrawled message “This horse is crazy!” across his vet records.) So, I thought about having to say the word “bad” every time I summoned the gelding or referred to him in conversation and knew that name would have to go. Then it was as simple as saying, “I want a name that sounds positive like... good... good



*Herdmates to Heartmates*

boy...good... Goodman.” The name fit him (the runner-up was my five-year-old son’s choice of “Mr. Ed”) and it became his stable name for the next 20 years.

I also renamed my mare Nikki when she arrived at my stable. Her previous owner had gotten her at Mingus Mountain Academy—a residential facility for girls with behavioral problems. The man had been out in the paddock looking at the school’s young stock and a playful young Andalusian-cross mare had snuck up behind him and taken the wallet out of his back pocket. Since her registered name was “My Scooter”—and even he knew that was a ridiculous name for a beautiful Spanish-bred mare—he named her “Pickpocket.” Ye-es that’s right—Pickpocket. I’m sure it reminded him of the way they’d “met cute” at the home for wayward girls.

Since I don’t go in much for names with more than two syllables, I went searching for a nice and easy moniker that would retain some of the same sounds—for the sake of consistency. The mare looked sort of Mediterranean to me—pale body and jet-black mane and tail—so I happened upon a name I could envision an Italian pronouncing with a lilt in his voice, “Oh-ah Nee-kee, don-ta tawk like dat.”

My favorite name story happened just recently and shows the power that making a name change can have. Over the past few years I’ve increased my therapy herd to include two Falabella miniature horses. The Falabella strain was developed in Argentina by a family of the same name. For some reason, the diminutive breed (my two stand 26 and 28 inches) is referred to as a horse and not a pony. In recent times the Fallabella has found its way to the U.S. as a trendy novelty pet.

“Elvis” was the first to arrive at my place—a small grey and black spotted gelding with the stubby legs and lush mane and tail that are typical of Falabellas. I was told that he was a reject from a local horse therapy program and had also been in and out of several other homes. His current owners were desperate to place him.

“He’s just so full of energy and, well, high jinks—not a good match with a child, I’m afraid,” the woman explained. She lifted up the hair that hid a large bulge on his forehead. “See? That’s why they call him Elvis. He’s got a pomp-a-dour!” (Actually, we now like to refer to it as the “brain bump” where he stores his huge intellect.)

Once he was at my ranch, I soon saw what got the mini booted out of a children’s therapy program. Not a real respecter of personal space, he liked to try and crawl up the sides of people who had the misfortune to choose him for equine activities. He tried to ram into my lead mare, Nikki, who soon sent him flying. He got “fresh” with another mare, Twinkle, and she chased him around the pasture for a half hour. After he tried unsuccessfully to steal dinner from my towering draft-cross, Paloma, I sequestered him in a run at the far end of the stable and despaired of ever integrating him into the herd without him becoming a furry pancake.

That was when we got a second mini gelding to be Elvis’ buddy. Whimsically, I named the new mini “Arlo,” in homage to another musical talent, Arlo Guthrie. And so began the rockin’ duo of Elvis and Arlo.

A year or so later, I had taken on the mentorship of a high school student named Alec. At just 16, he was deeply interested in pursuing equine-assisted work, as it relates to experiential education and psychotherapy. I asked Alec—a strapping young man with a blond buzz cut—to exercise the miniature horses and my lesson horse Travis on a weekly basis. He was also to interact with them in many of the ways that my students and clients would. In essence, he would be helping the three newest horses hone their therapeutic skills.

One day, Alec sauntered up after he’d done a round pen session with the minis and casually leaned on the fence, scratching his close-cropped head.

“What was Arlo’s name before he came here?” he queried tentatively.

“Um, what? Oh, let’s see...Thunder?...Lightning? Lightning, I think. Horrible name,” I answered, distracted with tacking up another horse. “So...trite... just because he’s white, I guess.”

Alec cleared his throat. “Actually... he prefers that name.”

“...he *prefers* Lightning?” I asked, keeping my voice level and trying not to smirk.

“To the one you gave him. He doesn’t understand it when you call him that.”

“Oh.” I was caught off-guard by Alec’s earnestness. He was obviously committed to what he was saying.

“Well then...” I said, feeling like a heel. “By all means... call him... um, Lightning then. See if that helps.”

Not much had been known of the little gelding’s previous situation, but he seemed to carry a profound air of sadness with him everywhere. He was very protective of his body when being handled and his response to anyone approaching him in his pen was to run away and hide. When he’d arrived, I’d noticed his tail was ragged and short, ending just below the dock. The texture of the hair was coarse, frizzy and discolored orange...exactly what burnt hair or fur looks like. Since we don’t have much of his story prior to arriving, other than he belonged to a middle-school aged girl, I can only imagine what had caused such a condition.

Though reticent with humans, the white mini had no problem establishing himself in the horse herd. He counteracted Elvis’ aggressive first greeting with high screams and flailing hooves and soon got the upper hand in their relationship. Though Elvis quite possibly deserved them, the white mini’s angry explosions were painful to watch nonetheless. I had thought I was giving him a new start by renaming him, but maybe I’d gotten that wrong.

Some months later, I observed Alec working with the-mini-now-known-as-Lightning in the round pen. The gelding did look more energetic and confident; he seemed to carry himself a bit better. I decided it was a good call by Alec and went to do other chores. Before long, Alec was at my side again.

“You know, Elvis doesn’t really like his name, either.”

“Well, I didn’t give Elvis his name,” I retorted. “He came lamely named—or...well...that’s how he arrived...pre-named.” By now, I was feeling a bit defensive about the whole naming issue.

“The name’s too...”—Alec gestured wide with his hands—“big for him. A big rock star with a reputation for excess, right? I think it’s part of what makes him misbehave.”

“Oh, so that’s what’s doing it,” I quipped, trying to humor my protégé. “Well, I’ll take it under advisement.”

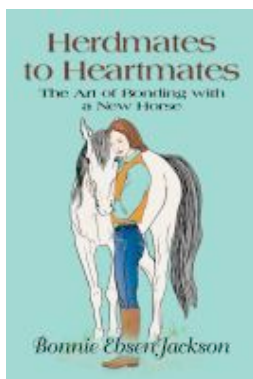
During that week, I happened to be grooming the little spotted horse one day and something dawned on me as I ran the brush down his feathery legs and over his grotesquely dished and spotted face. At only twenty-six inches tall, he looked like a horse that had stepped right out of a J.R.R. Tolkien book. He looked just like a hobbit’s mount! For a moment, I was lost in the vision of Frodo or some other Lord of the Rings character leaping on the back of this miniscule charger and racing off to capture the precious golden ring—the first of many adventures they would have...

“Elf,” I said to him, “that’s what you are. You’re a little elfin creature.” And that is how “Elvis the Puffed Up Rock Star” became “Elf the mini.” Elf has shown himself to be much better behaved than Elvis could have ever imagined. Elf is respectful with his peers and has turned into a gem of a therapy horse. He stands at a child’s side for lengths of time without ever feeling the need to sink his teeth into something. Elvis was fractious on the ground and dangerous to drive (another reason he was ejected from several homes) but as I sat on a stool and groomed his long fluffy mane, the mini-now-known-as-Elf leaned his side against me and sighed with contentment. Now with a label that fit, it seemed like the little horse wanted nothing more than to preserve the harmony of the moment. Indeed, there is no finer Elf in all the kingdom...

## Five Things to Do Right Now to Help Form a Closer Bond with Your Horse

1. **Reward your horse's efforts to get into a learning state of mind.** Whenever you see your horse licking and chewing, stop and reward his efforts to reduce his own stress and tension. A horse that is encouraged to relax will be more receptive to forming an alliance with a human.
2. **Resolve never let your horse approach you with his ears pinned back.** Some horses seem to do this "unconsciously," but it is still an attempt at dominating behavior. Keep sending the horse away, politely and without emotion, until his ears prick forward and stay that way as he approaches. Hint: If he seems less than interested in approaching in the first place, bring an empty feed bucket with you. Works like a charm.
3. **Learn to ignore the wrong response in addition to rewarding the proper one.** Again, don't put any emotion or attitude into the way you ignore the wrong response. Simply ask again for him to do something and wait for the proper response before releasing pressure and rewarding.
4. **Spend at least one hour desensitizing your horse to one of his "horse monsters."** This can be plastic bags, a tarp, the hose, etc. Even if his response isn't completely "flat" by the end of the hour, reward all licking and chewing behavior, and know that it is still better than it was. (See Item #1).
5. **Learn some stretching exercises you can do to help relax and release your horse's muscles before and after riding.** Equine masseuses will tell you that when they arrive at the barn for body work sessions, some of their regular clients call out to them like long lost lovers!





*Your dream horse has finally arrived, and is turning out to be more of a nightmare. Good news! This book will help you solve the mysteries of any new horse by examining his prey animal fears and concerns, and answering the question, "What does my horse really want from me?" Author and coach Bonnie Ebsen Jackson will lead you through steps designed to build a solid and safe relationship with your equine partner.*

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