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## HORSEPLAY

By Tim Hayes

**H**ave you ever gone to a public swimming pool and seen a sign that says: “NO DIVING, NO RUNNING, NO HORSEPLAY?” What is “horseplay?” With horses you might say it’s “Equine Roughhousing” or the way horses play with other horses. With humans it also means playful roughhousing. Why is it forbidden for humans? Often when we engage in horseplay someone gets hurt.

Horses play with each other physically. It is usually very fast and often very rough. It can involve running, biting, kicking, rearing and striking. Usually no horse gets seriously hurt. When humans engage in horseplay with other humans it is also physical and can be fast and rough. It can involve running, wrestling, pushing and hitting. Sometimes someone gets hurt. If, however, horses engage in horseplay with humans, not only can humans be seriously hurt, they can be unintentionally killed.

Play is an important part in the development of all animal species. In fact it is not only fun, it is often the way many animals, including humans, practice their survival skills, i.e. killing for food, defending and protecting themselves and their families. When we watch dogs play with other dogs it is easy to see that if they weren’t playing, they could be seriously hurt or killed. Roughhousing with our own dog is great fun. It is also easy to see that if we had not already established a relationship of love, trust and respect, our dogs’ “pretend biting and growling” would be terrifying and possibly dangerous.

All play no matter who is playing requires rules. Without rules players get hurt. If you’re playing go fetch with your dog, you throw the ball; your dog runs

and brings it to you. The rule is no biting allowed when you take the ball from your dog’s mouth. If you’re roughhousing with your dog the rule is only “pretend biting” allowed. Playing with horses however is very different than playing with dogs or humans.

Horses are prey animals. Their survival depends primarily on running away from danger. They will fight only if they can’t run away or escape. Their play (practicing their survival skills) is therefore made up of games of controlling the movement of each other. They use their physical prowess (biting, kicking, rearing, striking) to cause their playmate to move, not move or completely run away.

The horse that controls the movement of another horse is the winner of the horseplay. The winner wins increased standing in the pecking order of the herd with all its accompanying perks, i.e. eats first, etc. The loser gets to practice his survival skills, e.g. running away before he gets kicked or bitten. His standing in the herd decreases e.g. eats last.

Horses love to play and do so constantly. Even when he loses, a horse knows he can try again, play another day, win, and regain his leadership. In this respect horses are much like human teenagers; constantly challenging their leader (read: parent).

Although it can look extremely rough when horses



play there are two primary reasons they rarely hurt each other seriously. First, they are usually of equal size. A 1000lb horse that kicks another 1000lb horse produces a different result than if he kicks a 150lb human. (This is why Featherweight boxers don't fight Heavyweights).

Second they always warn their playmate with one or more warnings before they strike. It usually goes something like this: Horse #1 says to Horse #2: *"If you don't move I'm going to kick you, but first I'll pin my ears, then I'll lift my leg, then I'll kick the air. If you still haven't moved I'll make contact and kick you."* Most horses move before physical contact is made.

Knowing how and why horses play is extremely helpful for humans. First and most important, we can keep from getting hurt by making rules that prevent our horse from playing with us as if we were another horse whether we're on the ground or on their back. The rules must be no biting, kicking, bucking, rearing or striking allowed with any humans, anywhere, anytime. We do this with using the tools and techniques of Natural Horsemanship. This establishes us as the Alpha in our herd of two using horse psychology, understanding and communication instead of force, fear and intimidation.

Second, we learn that sometimes what we think is "bad" or disrespectful behavior is actually our horse just wanting to play with us. Instead of punishment, which does not exist in the world of horses and therefore is always ineffective and counterproductive, we reestablish our leadership with groundwork, rules and boundaries.

Finally, we discover that even though we can become our horse's leader, it doesn't mean that our horse won't want to play another time and try to win again. In fact by understanding that this is natural for horses we can come to expect it. This understanding helps us to become more forgiving, more confident and a better leader. Our relationship with any horse will always improve when we stop blaming or making them wrong for being and acting like, a horse!

Natural horsemanship teaches us to look at play from the horses' point of view. Riding horses is not something horses consider play. If they did we would see them riding each other. Riding horses is "humanplay" invented by humans. Having a predator sitting on it's back is quite unnatural for the prey species of horse. If we want our horse to look to us as his leader in our herd of two, it's our responsibility to first show him we care about and understand his world. We do this by first playing with him on the ground before we get on his back. This allows both of us to create a friendship and a pecking order founded on love, trust, respect and not force and fear.

Understanding and knowledge of horses not only helps us both to be safer by eliminating bucking, kicking, rearing and striking from our mutual horseplay, it shows our horse that when we finally sit on his back, we're just playing the way humans like to play. Then riding truly becomes play for both of us that's safe and fun. ©TimHayes2013

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Natural Horsemanship articles by Tim Hayes are at:  
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