

Do You DOMINATE or Intimidate Your HORSE?

By Tim Hayes

Having a good relationship with your horse and being successful in any discipline, whether it's Jumping, Trail Riding or Dressage requires leadership. To ride in true harmony without resistance a rider must become a respected and trusted leader for his horse. Many people are taught that to become the leader they need to intimidate their horse - "Show the horse who's boss!" This is what I refer to as "Traditional Horsemanship."

Alternatively "Natural Horsemanship" teaches us that to become the leader we must learn how to dominate our horse. This is how horses control each other naturally whether it's the stallion of the herd or the mother of a foal. The difference and the results it produces are remarkable.

Intimidation and dominance are both methods used to control humans and horses. They create, however, two very different relationships. In order to understand the difference let's start with a dictionary definition of both words.

Intimidate: To persuade somebody to do something or dissuade somebody from doing something by frightening him or her by means of violence or blackmail -To create a feeling of fear, awe or inadequacy in somebody. Synonyms: coerce - scare - threaten - bully.

Dominate: To have control, power or authority over somebody or something - To be the most important aspect or element of



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something. Synonyms: lead, govern, direct, control.

Just reading these definitions exposes the powerful difference between the two methods. *Traditional horsemanship* has used intimidation for thousands of years for primarily two reasons: lack of knowledge and expediency. Often anyone using "Natural" methods was thought of as controversial and scoffed at. Humans usually prefer the easier faster way of doing things.

Often they just do what they see others do. Force can obtain results and is easier to teach than communication. However it has an enormous negative impact on how the horse feels about the human and their relationship.

Communication is sophisticated and requires the knowledge and use of language. Force is simple; you either get what you want or add more force until you do.

Since horses don't speak English, French, German or any other human language, historically it seemed logical to control a huge powerful creature like the horse with force, fear and intimidation.

Probably the most influential contributing factor to the continued use of *traditional horsemanship* training was War. As men discovered they were stronger, faster and more lethal warriors when mounted on horseback it wasn't long before the prevailing armies were the ones with cavalry. Even so, there were great ancient horsemen, like the Greek General Xenophon* who wrote books promoting horse training with methods that today would be referred to as "Natural."

However it became obvious that creating an army of 50,000 soldiers on horseback, with men who had never even been on a horse before, would be best accomplished by the easier, faster and less complicated way of "Traditional" horsemanship e.g. "kick'm to go - pull'm to stop."

As time went on the horse as a means of transport for military, agricultural and personal use became extinct and was replaced by machines. Supported by one of man's favorite adages, "If it works, don't fix it" - horse training and horseback riding continued using the easier, faster and simpler methods of *traditional horsemanship*. The fact that there was another way that produced enormously better results and was far more beneficial for both horse and rider was, for the most part and until recently lost.

The language of the horse is body language, touch and feel. Within their herd horses always have a trusted and respected leader or "Alpha" horse. They chose their leader by exhibiting physical behavior - or games - of dominance. They threaten each other with bites and kicks, not to hurt or cause injury, but to cause the other horse to either move or stop moving (humans call it horseplay).

The horse that can control (cause or prevent) the movement of another horse wins the game. The horse that controls the most other horses becomes the leader of the herd. Most often this is an older mare that, in addition to being the most dominant, has over time acquired the most wisdom and experience in detecting predators and protecting the herd.

Horses have been establishing respected and trusted leaders amongst themselves, using these expressions of physical prowess or dominance, for millions of years. Learning how to playfully dominate our horse by using the "Groundwork" techniques of *Natural Horsemanship* (which replicates the prowess of the other horse in our herd of two) enables us to become that leader.

Horses are prey animals that fear they will be eaten by predator animals. When a human (predator) uses intimidation to control his horse, it often frightens the horse causing him to want to get away. Even if he stays, at the very least the horse develops a deep resentment and lack of respect toward his human leader.

Riders unwittingly often describe the way this shows up with statements like: "My horse bit me today. I can't believe it. He loves me, why would he do that?;" "When I go to ----- my horse, he always pins his ears;" "We were on a nice ride and all of a sudden my horse took off. I tried to stop him but he wouldn't listen to me. It was terrifying."

I teach all my students how to establish leadership with their horse mentally, emotionally and physically on the ground before they go riding. Without first using groundwork to establish positive leadership, getting on a horse that may have been previously intimidated and is either fearful or disrespectful often ends up poorly for everyone.

Interestingly one of the most challenging aspects of *Natural Horsemanship* I hear from some of my students has nothing to do with the horse. They tell me it's experiencing ridicule from their "friends" for not using "Traditional" methods. I suppose it's similar to what was said to Columbus when he said the world was round. Until Columbus was able to produce results that proved his ideas, he too was ridiculed. Everyone knew they had the right answer: the earth was

flat. That was the "Traditional" knowledge of the time.

Fortunately *Non-traditional Horsemanship* is no longer obscure. Just go to Google and type in *Natural Horsemanship*. It's not only becoming a worldwide phenomenon it's gradually becoming so dominant it may soon become traditional. ©TimHayes2012

Natural Horsemanship articles by Tim Hayes are at:

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DOMINATE and control your horses movement with body language.
Become your horses leader on the ground...before you get on his back. Photo by Tim Hayes.

* "To force a horse when it does not understand is like training a dancer by whipping and spurring." - The Art of Horsemanship by Xenophon - 350BC (still available today).