

Passive Leadership Challenging the Alpha Theory by Mark Rashid

While Mark gives much of the credit to the "old man" in his books for putting him on the right track with horses at a very early age, he remains dedicated to finding quiet and effective ways of communicating with horses on a daily basis.

One of the ways he does this is by a training idea he refers to as "passive leadership". Recently, Mark was asked to define a "passive leader", and how it effects horses during training.

Well, here it is in a nutshell...

There are two types of leaders in a herd situation. The alpha, or lead horse, that rules by dominance, and passive leaders that lead by example. The passive leaders are usually chosen by other members of the herd and are followed willingly, while alphas use force to declare their place in the herd.

Passive leaders are usually older horses somewhere in the middle of the herd's pecking order. They are quiet and consistent in their day-to-day behavior and don't appear to have much ambition to move up the "alpha" ladder. As a result, there appears to be no reason for them to use force to continually declare their position in the herd.

Alphas, on the other hand, are usually pretty far from being quiet and consistent in their behavior. They are often very pushy, sometimes going as far as using unprovoked attacks on subordinates for the simple reason of declaring their dominance. As a result of this behavior, the majority of the horses in the herd will actually avoid all contact with the alpha throughout the day.

The reason for this avoidance is that horses are designed to use the least amount of physical energy possible throughout their normal daily activities. A good example is a horse that spooks. A horse may jump at something that is unfamiliar, but he won't always run away from it. He will only run away if it is absolutely necessary. By doing this he is saving energy in case he really needs it. This is a "safety valve" that has helped the horse to survive for over 50 million years. By not using energy unnecessarily, they will be able to use the stored energy in case of a real emergency.

By following a passive leader who uses the least amount of energy throughout the day, (and that isn't constantly forcing the other horses to use theirs) the horses are not only able to stay quiet and content, but they are also helping to insure their own survival.

Passive leaders have "earned" that particular title with the other horses by showing them they can be dependable in their passive behavior from one day to the next. In other words, they lead by example, not by force.

This is the type of behavior that I try very hard to base my training on. Leading by example, not force, and by being as consistent as possible from one day to the next.

I guess when it gets right down to it, it's more of an attitude than a technique. It's being able to give the horse the benefit of the doubt that they will try and do things right for you, and not constantly reprimanding them for things done wrong.

Mark Rashid