

The Wild Horses' Perspective

Part Two

Following on from the previous article, this writer's observations and experiences of wild horses over eighteen years would suggest that the introduction to domesticity and understanding how they tick is crucial for the wild horses' future development and well-being.

The advantage of getting a newly mustered wild horse is they have no baggage - they haven't had any mistreatment or have any vices that need to be overcome. They are, though, very fearful. For them it's like being dropped onto another planet. Everything is strange and frightening, so this fear has to be overcome.

The wild horses' first and foremost need, is to feel safe – it's all about self-preservation – in mind, body and soul. If they 'perceive' they are threatened, their instincts will be to flee, fight or freeze. These are normal horse responses. Horses think like horses, and wild horses' senses (sight, hearing and smell) are more acute than most domestically born horses, they react purely by instinct and some much more so than others. If they feel threatened they can become defensive, again this is normal behavior. They are wild horses and have absolutely no idea what is about to happen next. It's our job to make this transition as gentle as possible and to avoid adding too much pressure. This is when gaining their trust is paramount.

We have to continue to be mindful of what the horse has been through and how they are feeling. Since being mustered, they have been separated from their family/friends as well as uprooted from their home-range. The wild horses have strong bonds within their bands and are loyal to their home-

ranges, just as we have to our family and homes. Then, they are loaded onto trucks and often spend another night and day in distribution yards. All of this contributes to their trauma and sleep deprivation.

Apart from allowing the newly arrived horse to rest quietly (which is important for their well-being), gaining their trust is the first step. We have to earn and be deserving of their trust. Trust is formed gradually, from every single interaction we have with the horse or when we are around them.

teachers and have the ability to enrich your life if their needs are understood and met from the beginning...

Part of the excitement about getting a Kaimanawa is not quite knowing what you will be getting

The different personalities of the horses are as many and varied as our own. Some of the horses are much more switched on



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They pay close attention to everything we do, all of the time! This is part of the Kaimanawa's X-Factor, their acute senses. Once the horse finds he can trust you, this X-Factor is such an advantage. They learn very quickly and come to really enjoy all the attention and being with you. They are also very sensible and will try hard to please. The wild horses are the greatest

than others. The more intelligent horses, along with some of the more mature horses, are extremely suspicious and ultra sensitive, and are often much slower to adjust to captivity. They have a strong sense of self-preservation and are very wary and determined to keep their distance. In the wild, the lead mares and the stallions have always made the decisions for their bands – their opinions were taken heed of by their band members – they won't be less opinionated when in captivity. With considerate handling, and given the extra time and patience needed, these horses will well surpass all expectations – they can be awesome! The adage 'less is more' certainly holds true for these guys (and all the horses for that matter).

The horse will show you how he's feeling. Notice his expression – wild horses are usually very expressive – his face and body will indicate how he's feeling if you pay close attention. On the other hand, a shut-down horse won't be very expressive, but that doesn't mean he's not worried or unhappy. Treat him gently too; the adjustments for all the Kaimanawa horses are huge, some just deal with it easier.

Let the horse relax and settle into his



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surroundings, with the companionship of another horse or horses, before beginning to handle him. Make sure it's a pleasant experience when you're with him. Try to make friends with him by hand feeding, even if it's over the yard fence to start with. That way he will begin to look forward to seeing you, or at the very least, he will see you as the provider of food which is all you should really expect in the initial few days or weeks.

standards to make a smaller area. If this option is chosen, introduce the horse to the tapes in the safety of the yards so he understands that if he touches the tapes it's most unpleasant and to be avoided in future. The horses learn this very quickly.

And he must have a reliable companion to accompany him. Even if he's only let out into this area for short periods of time, and is put back into the yard overnight for the

his own time... waiting until he's hungry will often do the trick, put some hay/feed just outside his open yard to tempt him out if the paddock area doesn't contain grass. At this stage, just remember it doesn't take much to frighten him. Do everything quietly and calmly.

The time and commitment invested in the horse's initial period of adjustment leading towards their future handling pays huge dividends for the horse's emotional state and for paves the way for a happy well-adjusted animal and a great human/horse relationship. It's humans that have a time line, horses don't. We are impatient to see results, but often they are so small we don't even notice.

Some Kaimanawas adapt very easily, and become friendly quite quickly and it's hard to believe they were recently wild. Some will be confident although wary; some are timid or shy, and some aren't as bright as others, so are slower to learn - they need time to process new things. Some will explode at the slightest provocation - that's where our observations are so important - if we pay attention the horse's expressions, this can often be avoided. All are individuals and therefore respond differently.

They react as a wild horse, so understanding that they are different from domestic horses and their need for security is purely instinctive, is a necessity if the best results are to be achieved.

If we are prepared to take on a newly mustered horse, surely we have a moral responsibility to meet their needs and make their transition as easy for them as is possible.

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Work out a plan to get him out of the confinement of the yards as soon as it's safe for him. It's hard on a wild horse to be confined after having the freedom of the ranges. Also, most yards become very muddy so there's a likelihood of abscessed feet.

A small paddock adjacent to the yard makes it much easier. Ensure the fences are of sufficient height to discourage him from jumping out if startled. If necessary use electric-fence tapes with deer-sized

first few days, it's a good way for him to get used to coming and going. Obviously use the enticement of food as a reward.

Some horses find it hard to leave the yard - they're too frightened to venture out - that's when his companion will be helpful, to both you and your new horse. Usually he will follow his buddy when the buddy heads off to eat. Don't chase the horse though, if you do, he'll panic and probably attempt to jump/crash through the fence. Just let him pick his way out of the yard in



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