



Mark Langley horsemanship

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What signs do you look for to tell the difference between a horse that is deliberately avoiding what you are asking and a horse that simply doesn't understand?

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This is a great question and I'm going to examine it by looking at 2 characteristics of horses - if you can work out which one your horse has, you may be able to work out what they are doing.

The 2 characteristics: I have come across horses which at times are very good at not paying a lot of attention to me ("evaders") and other horses which at times are very attentive towards me and what I am doing ("aware horses"). One horse can have both tendencies in different situations.

Evaders: Horses that are very good at mentally blocking out a rider have quite a strong focus to be elsewhere, perhaps in the paddock or with their mates. These are the types of horses that can be very good at avoiding you and in some ways they can seem very quiet and bomb proof; sometimes in conjunction with a confident and pushy nature. I think that they are able to "zone out" from us because there has been no need to be acutely aware of us and our ideas. I don't see this "evasion" as malicious; more that their thoughts are just elsewhere.

Aware horses: I have found that some horses which are more alert or horses which come to me that have had little prior contact with people, are far more aware of me. This is the reason that I prefer horses which have had little handling to start rather than ones which have been *over-humanized* (horses which only consider people as providers of food, shelter and scratches). These nervous, unsure, but attentive horses are more responsive to people and training purely because their attention is on you. However, there are times during training where they might feel trapped or perhaps can't cope with not understanding and they try to find another way out. These attempts to escape can also lead to "zoning out".

Is your horse with you? When your horse is "zoning out", it is not with you. This is one thing that we have to be very aware of when we are working horses, whether we are working on the ground or riding. We have to look for signs to indicate whether our horse is with us or not. By this I mean is the mental focus of your horse with you? So before you even go into any sort of lesson – whether it be on the ground or ridden with your horse – assess your horse and work on gaining their calm, attentive focus. I sometimes see people gaining focus in quite abrupt ways, but this doesn't always help. **Calm focus will give true mental softness and body softness.** We have to draw our horses focus to us and reward when it comes.

So, if I want to assess if a horse just didn't understand or if it was avoiding the task, the first thing I want to know is if my horse is with me.

There are simple ways to tell: Does it walk a straight line on a loose rein? Does it walk a nice circle if you pick up one rein or is there a fair amount of resistance on one side? Does the horse stay with the circle or push out? Does it look for ways out? More often than not, if you give them space – riding them in a paddock for an example, they are quick to zone out and become oblivious to the fact that you are up there. If they are loose in a round yard and you walk off, watch what they do – do they quickly switch off and look elsewhere or do they keep their attention on you? When they trot a circle around you, are they consistently focussing to the outside or to you? These are all signs which indicate that the horse has focus on something else - not the task, and not me. Quite commonly, I drop the reins to see what direction the horse takes me and to find out where they are thinking.

If this horse was treating me like this on these simple things, then under pressure, I would be pretty sure that this evasiveness would be stronger.

If however, my horse switches on to me in these simple situations; if it comes with me when I pick up a rein; if it focuses with me on a circle, etc.; if it can do all of these 100% then I can make an assessment that my horse switches onto me fairly quickly and focuses with me. If this horse then showed evasion at a task, that evasion is more likely to be due to a lack of understanding or nervousness rather than avoidance.

Get your horse with you: So, if it is common that your horse's mind is elsewhere, your task is to get it with you.

Pick up a rein: pick up a brain. People often send me horses to re-educate a hard mouth. Most of these horses suffer not from a hard mouth but a hard mind. They have learnt to think against pressure because people have rewarded them for a half physical response and not waited for a mental change. This makes them become better at holding out on us. So we are just laying another brick in the wall that separates us from them.

A quiet brumby (wild horse) that I once started was very reserved in her energy in the beginning. Even though she seemed an easy horse to train, I could always feel that she was blocking me out through her strong instinctual tendency to be elsewhere (with her friends). At the same token, she had a high level of intelligence. Training was difficult because she wasn't with me mentally. So before we could advance in any way, I spent weeks of just riding her out & doing basic tasks, till she was able to focus with me.

Once you gain your horse's focus, everything else comes together. Your horse will move a lot more freely. They pay attention to the things you are asking so they unlock their softness and body; and are much more helpful and more pliable to train. Get your horse to focus with you in a trusting relationship. Gain that focus through feel and not force. Then you are preparing your horse's mind for body control. When a horse's mind is going in the direction of its body and which is our chosen direction, shape will mostly naturally fix itself.



This photo shows a horse happily & softly focussed into this basic circle that I am riding. A lot of inconsistency in lateral bend is usually due to the horse being focussed elsewhere.



This horse is starting to focus towards me & unlock laterally. He is maintaining good forward rhythm with upright shoulders.



At one of my clinics, this horse was giving her owner trouble due to her strong magnetic urge to be with her friend. Once she gained focus, I was able to demonstrate the mare being with my rhythm & direction.