

# Knowing Your Horse

A Guide to Equine Learning,  
Training and Behaviour

Emma Lethbridge, BSc (Hons), Dip PEB,  
BHSPT, EET, Cert CP

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# Foreword

It has been said that empires have been won and lost on the back of the horse, and perhaps man owes a greater debt to the horse than any other species for assisting the spread of his culture between nations. Integral to this important relationship has been man's ability to ride the horse and, in so doing, get an animal to accept something extremely unnatural. The natural response of the horse to something on its back is resistance, because from an evolutionary point of view this has only ever signalled bad news in the form of a predator. While we have been riding horses for more than 5000 years it is important to remember this is not something that comes naturally to the horse, but is something that needs to be learned by every horse. It is testament to both the horse's trusting nature and its ability to learn that horse riding has been such a success. Indeed I never cease to be amazed at how well horses often seem to be able to pick out the correct intention of the confusing and often contradictory signals given by many a novice rider. However, we should not take this skill for granted, but rather we should accept our responsibility in this relationship. Part of this responsibility involves us not only understanding the nature of horses but also understanding the principles that allow us to help to shape this nature towards meeting our needs in as compassionate a way as possible.

There is no shortage of books trying to tell owners what to do, with a new name given to established techniques in order to generate a new product; sadly there are far fewer texts explaining the basic principles which are so often recycled into these methods, unfortunately sometimes with a confused understanding of the underlying

science (Mills 1998). That is why this book is so important. As you read the text, you will soon become aware that Emma is a passionate horse lover, who genuinely takes the welfare of horses to heart, and she is also a scientist who understands both the theory and practice of learning and training. Perhaps what is less obvious is how rare it is to find this combination of characteristics in an individual who can write so clearly. She has brought together a wealth of knowledge with some of the latest research findings, to create an easy-to-read text. However, it is to be hoped that with this book, some of her skills will be less of a rarity and that many more will see and learn the value of understanding principles first and discover how much fun can be had simply training your horse. This can only be good for the horse and horse–human relationship. The importance of understanding the principles rather than applying techniques as if they were cooking recipes was brought home to me many years ago by an e-mail I received from a distraught owner who had just seen her horse break its neck and die after she did what she was told to do in order to control its pulling on the rope. No-one who cares about horses should put him or herself at risk of that situation and so this book is for owners who not only care about their horse, but also are willing to make a little effort to discover the true potential of their relationship. I can assure you your efforts will be more than rewarded.

This book blends good science effortlessly with practice, so that the reader can soon become a more skilled trainer. Simple scientific principles, like good record keeping, when applied to training, will teach you so much more as you apply what you read to your own horse and watch its response. If you understand the principles, then you are only limited by your imagination, and as you discover the many joys of training you will inevitably develop a deeper appreciation of horses. They do not lie and so you will also learn more about yourself. Horses are animals of immense beauty and grace and perhaps if we all took more time to appreciate these characteristics, we may find not only are we less stressed, but also our horses are less stressed. Don't rush, but rather savour the experience.

Daniel S. Mills BVSc PhD CBiol MIBiol ILTM CCAB Dip  
ECVBM-CA MRCVS  
Professor and RCVS Recognised and  
European Specialist in Veterinary Behavioural Medicine  
Department of Biological Sciences  
University of Lincoln

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Mills, D.S. (1998) Applying learning theory to the management of the horse: the difference between getting it right and getting it wrong. *Equine Veterinary Journal*, Suppl 27 (Equine Clinical Behaviour), 44–8.



# Dedication

Many thanks to all the people who kindly offered their horses to be part of this book. A further thanks to all of my teachers, including my parents, my animals, my friends and my family. I can never repay you for the knowledge and support you have given me over the years, but as a small gesture of thanks I dedicate this book to you.





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# Introduction: From White Coats to Rosettes

Since the 1800s, scientists have been discovering how animals of many species both learn and adapt to their surroundings. The insights we now have into the mind of every species, including the horse, are astounding. The learning abilities and mechanisms of the mammalian brain are being documented in detail to the best of science's ability. This knowledge of learning has been applied thoroughly, in practical situations as well as in the laboratory, leading to the development of training theories which are both reliable and effective. This knowledge is used extensively, with great success, in the training of dogs and of animals in many of the world's zoos and sea life centres. In fact, today you would struggle to find a modern dog or animal training manual which doesn't use 'learning theory' as its basis. Learning theory has revolutionised not only the methods used to train dogs and other animals, but even the way *we* think about the way *they* think.

Horses actually learn in straightforward and predictable ways. This is why we can train and communicate with them so effectively; attempting to ride on the back of an animal with no predictability of behaviour would be a formidable task. Many would think of this view of horses as cold and simplistic. However, I do not think the removal of the anthropomorphic myths about horses is cold: it allows us to view the true nature of the horse. They are still beautiful, sentient and interesting creatures, who are prepared to be our companions. The only truth we have about the horse's mind and the way they learn is that which can be predictably tested and applied in training. It is this truth which allows us a deeper understanding of our equine friends and to forge a relationship with them.

Understanding these laws of learning can help horse owners and trainers work with their horses in a way that maintains the horse's welfare as paramount within a training programme. This is not because learning theory is inherently an ethical theory, but because knowledge of the theory can allow us to apply it to the horse in a way that makes it as easy as possible for the horse to understand and succeed during training. Furthermore, it allows us to avoid any behavioural side effects, such as fear or aggression, caused by the inappropriate application of training.

Why are these techniques and ideas not used as the basis of training in the horse world? The honest answer is, I don't know. Learning theory is as effective when applied to horses as it is to dogs and other animals. All training which is effective, from happy hacking to circus training or eventing to classical dressage, is so because the training has worked within the laws of learning theory. However, often trainers don't realise exactly why a training technique has been effective. A study by Warren-Smith and McGreevy (2008) found a lack of understanding of learning in horses, and the application of learning in training, by horse training coaches. It was found that 79.5% of the coaches thought positive reinforcement was 'very useful'; however, only 2.8% explained its use in horse training correctly. Interestingly, when the coaches were asked about the usefulness of negative reinforcement, only 19.3% of coaches considered it 'very useful', with only 11.9% correctly explaining its use. Punishment was considered 'very useful' by 5.2% of the coaches, although only 5.4% correctly explained punishment.

If a trainer applies a technique without true knowledge of why the technique works successfully the training cannot progress as quickly and mistakes or problems cannot be identified and corrected. This is exactly where a basic knowledge of learning theory can be critical to training. If a trainer knows why their training is effective, they can train faster, more ethically and more sympathetically and can analyse why any failures of training may occur – therefore having a much higher chance of correcting mistakes when they first appear rather than allowing training to break down.

Gradually, more of the horse world is embracing learning theory. Many new trainers use and teach learning theory and understand the many opportunities it can offer horse trainers of every discipline. Some horse training manuals now include chapters on learning theory. The aim of this book is to define learning theory and how to train using this knowledge, simply and clearly, to all people whether they