

A Primer in Horse Behavior with Dr. Fitch

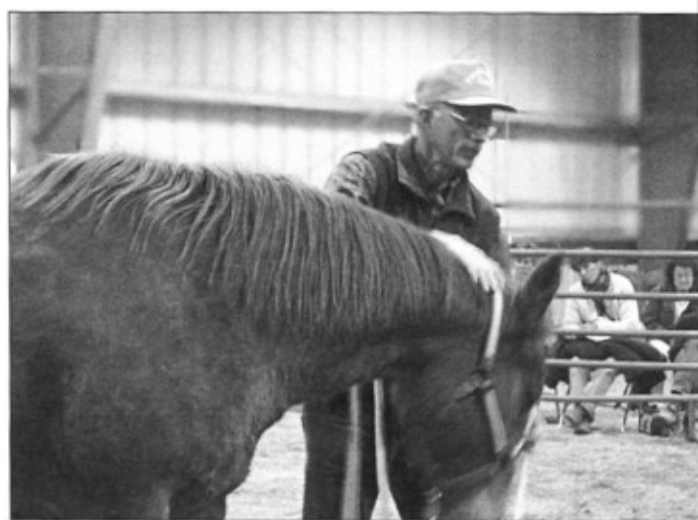
TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ALLISON SCHULTZ

On the chilly evening of November 8, over 70 members of the Boulder horse community gathered under the glowing lights of the indoor arena of Colorado Horse Rescue to watch and listen as Dr. Mark Fitch explained how to deal with behavioral issues that could arise in horses in regards to handling them for veterinary treatments. Perched on benches or bales of hay, the large and curious crowd faced the two horses in the round pen – the first subjects for the night's demonstration – where a 6 year old sorrel mare named Star who needed to be wormed wandered around the ring with her 17 year old pal Cherokee, a bay mustang mare who was sweet, but hard to catch, and needed to be vaccinated.

As the mares walked around, Dr. Fitch talked about the basics of equine behavior in terms of equine body language and what those silent messages mean for us as human handlers. He discussed and demonstrated some basic examples of how to think like a horse in order to work with them in a manner that they will understand. Working with horses from this point of view results in a more harmonious interaction of horse and human.

Horses are ultra sensitive to changes so that they can perceive even the slightest change in their surroundings. We need to be aware of their acute sense of perception when we work with the horse. In order to understand their behaviors, it's essential to be aware of the instincts and preferences of equine nature, such as:

- Horses are interested in 1. safety, 2. comfort, 3. eating, 4. play.
- Equids have excellent memories. (i.e. A horse who has had bad experiences will take some time to unlearn those reactions.)
- Horses learn on the right and left sides independently. In other words, their brain is not wired to cross information over, so each lesson must be worked on both the left and the right side of the horse.
- Horses naturally don't prefer small spaces, (i.e. trailering causes some anxiety in some horses.)
- Dominant horses create dominance by pushing.



BEHAVIORAL ISSUES

Above: Dr. Fitch works on desensitizing Star so she can be wormed. Right page: Dr. Fitch talks to the crowd about equine behavior, as a curious mare comes to check him out.

"Most horses come more afraid than not," said Dr. Fitch. If left with the choice of fight or flight, when a horse senses fear, he will most often choose flight over fight. This is his reaction due to his natural instinct as a prey animal. When we work with fearful horses, we need to make them feel safe and comfortable so that they respond safely, rather than responding out of fear (which can be doubly dangerous). Horses with too much fear or horses that are too dominant (and therefore disrespectful) display behaviors that are undesirable to us, but those behaviors are also what has kept the horse safe/alive in the wild. We need to use comfort/discomfort to get the fear out, then (like the pecking order), we need to get the horse's respect. "Fear needs security. Disrespect needs discipline," shared Dr. Fitch.

Fear in horses is exhibited by wide eyes, hard muscles, tight lips, and wanting to flee the scene (flight). To resolve these reactions in the horse, we as humans need to be



passive, soft, reassuring, but firm. Behavior is a hard thing to change due to learned and instinctual actions and reactions, but we can work with the horse and show him another way to be. Dr. Fitch explained that many of these behaviors stem from trying to survive: "The longer they've lived that way, the more they think they're right. Because it's worked for them. They're still alive."

For example, mustangs selectively breed the characteristics that it takes to survive, but those survival techniques don't always work for us (i.e. they are afraid of everything and aware of everything in their surroundings). However, mustangs can learn to trust one person. Trust is like a reputation, analogized Dr. Fitch: "It takes a long time to get trust and a short time to destroy it." Cherokee, the mustang mare, demonstrated this in her interactions with Dr. Fitch. She would get close to him in the pen, but would not let Dr. Fitch touch her at first. But, by the time he was done working with the other mare in the pen, he could walk up and put a halter on her.

Star, the sorrel mare, needed to be wormed but didn't want her mouth touched. Instead of focusing on the area of her muzzle, Dr. Fitch focused on desensitizing other areas of the mare's body, slowly moving up her neck to her throatlatch and then her muzzle and eventually inside her mouth. He rubbed the mare until she relaxed, and then he would stop. The release was the mare's reward for her shift in behavior (relaxing) and gave her a sense of freedom and comfort by not being smothered. He would

make headway and then leave it (release, and shift his focus), so as to not press the issue with Star. He would often release pressure on one side and move to the other side or work on something entirely different so as to not fixate on any one area. The issue of the mare not letting him touch her mouth was also tied to other behaviors exhibited by Star, such as her pushiness and her desire to avoid the situation all together. Dr. Fitch worked on all of these issues with an ingenuity and calmness that allowed him to adapt his correctional know-how to this particular horse. In about 30 minutes, Star had been wormed successfully and without a fuss.

With every horse that he worked with, Dr. Fitch broke desensitization down into a million steps which kept the horse's peace of mind, as opposed to the alternative of barraging the horse with intense sensations until they 'got over it'. Each time he saw an improvement, he would release his touch, or pressure, and the horse would respond with recognition of that change, often by licking her lips, lowering her head, or by softening her overall stance. He stressed: "A well-timed release will give you all the headway you need." These well-timed releases for desired behavioral changes is one secret to effective training and is a technique that takes time, patience and a keen sense of feel to learn. But the payoff is great. Considering that a 6 year old horse will need to be wormed for 20+ years, an hour and a half of effective training upfront will ensure that worming is a stress-free event in the future.

Each of the three other successive horses that Dr. Fitch worked on displayed their own issues at the horse-human intersection. Dr. Fitch showed the attentive audience different techniques that would help each specific case, and performed whatever veterinary duties that were necessary for each steed. At the end of the demonstration, the horses were led back outside to their pens, and spectators lined up to ask the doc more questions. Both the horses and the humans walked away enriched.