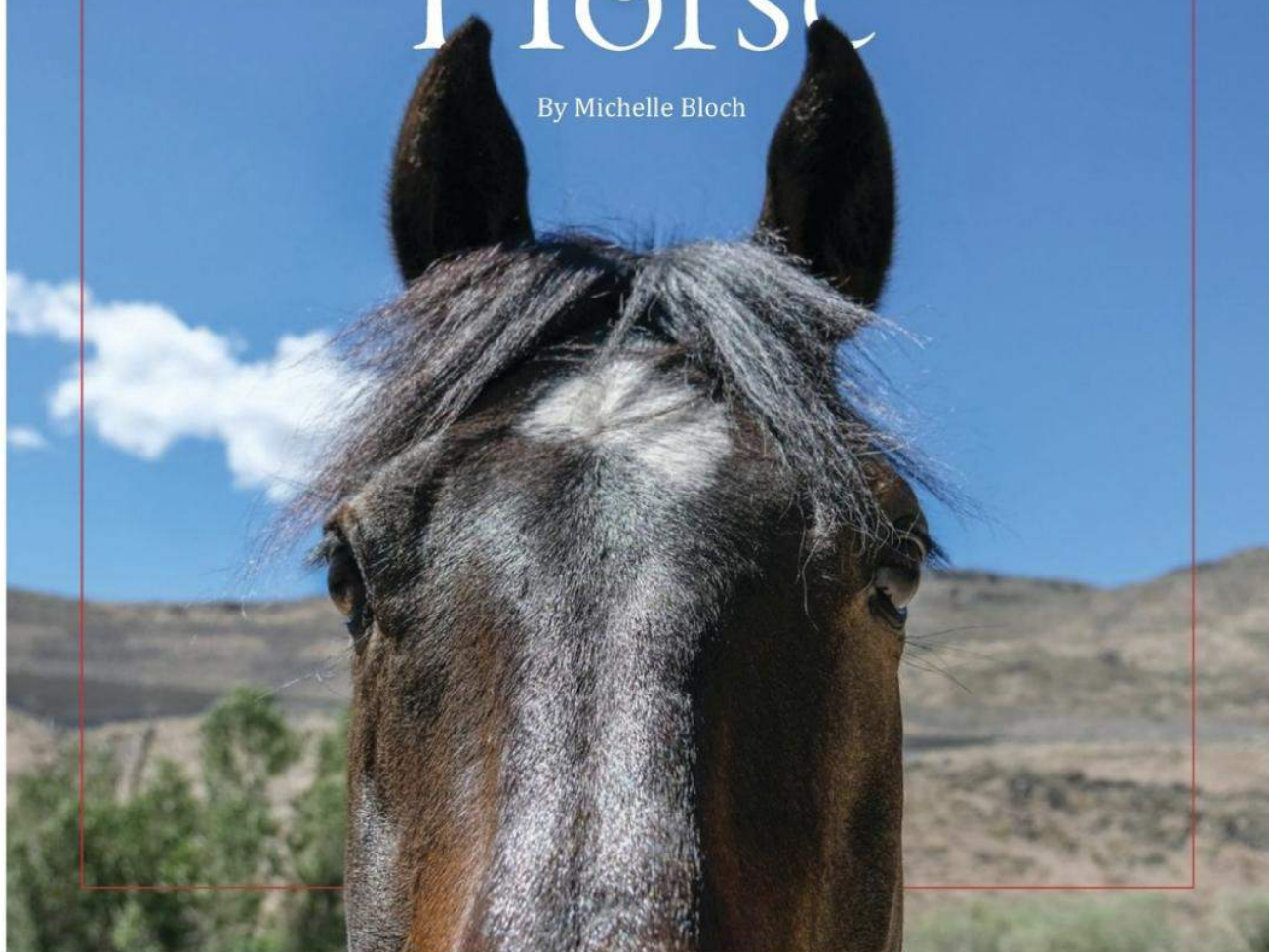


Take the time to immerse yourself in the language of the horse to become fluent and ultimately better care for and communicate with your equine partner.

# The Unspoken Language *of the* Horse

By Michelle Bloch



TRICIA BOOKER

Horses in the wild “talk” to each other continuously with subtle shifts of hips and shoulders, as well as more aggressive movements such as pawing, head snaking and rearing. They can instruct other horses where to direct their attention. With a simple turn of their ears, they can indicate food sources and where predators are hiding.

This non-verbal communication isn’t limited to wild equines, however. Our own horses also use it to communicate with us. In Part I of this two-part article, we’ll explore how and why “listening” to our horses improves our relationships and performances with them.

When humans domesticated the horse it became our responsibility to learn their language in order to better care for and train them. Understanding the horse is an undertaking no different than learning any other foreign language, only theirs is unspoken—a rich and nuanced vocabulary of body language.

### A Sixth Sense

Good horsemen can appear to have a sixth sense about horses. They see things the average person’s eye doesn’t, such as the subtle signs of discomfort or tension in a horse. Because of this early detection,

they’re able to anticipate problems and avoid confrontation. This “horse sense” results from their immersion in and awareness of the horse’s language. Over time and through experience, these humans have become fluent. They don’t need to think about what their horse’s body signals mean. They simply *know* it and are able to stack multiple cues in a moment, understanding the more complex sentences the horse is communicating.

When a person embarks upon studying a new language the journey begins with learning words and their meanings. They can then progress to sentence building. When someone isn’t fluent, listening to a foreign language requires work, putting meaning to each word in order to understand the sentence. You need to translate. But when you’re fluent, you only need to listen, and you know.

### Building a Vocabulary

One of the foundational cues in the body language of the horse is ear movement. The ears reflect nearly every emotion and are an easy gauge for many situations. A horse’s body is able to tell us his mood or pain level, as well as a distaste for something or his level of aggravation. Each body part, depending upon how it’s used,

can communicate multiple meanings. In addition to ears, the tail, hind legs and eyes express multiple emotions. These “vocabulary words” and more are listed in the accompanying sidebar.

While it’s good to familiarize yourself with common body language meanings such as those listed, one of the best ways to build your vocabulary is through observation and awareness. Spend time with your horses, watching their behavior and body language in the field or the stall and on the cross-ties. Take note of the way they communicate with their ears, eyes and bodies. How do they react to different things? Once you know a horse’s behavior and reactions to stimuli, then you’ll better understand his “normal.” Then any change is a red flag, and behavior missing from normal is just as important to note.

Putting context to signals will help clarify their meanings. When a horse tells you something and his meaning isn’t clear, ask yourself: What was I doing when the horse reacted? Was there any outside influence? Most importantly, what other body language is the horse exhibiting?

For example: Imagine you’re in a mare’s stall, and your back is to her. She suddenly nips your shoulder, grabbing your shirt. You turn, surprised. What did the mare

Wild horses communicate using a rich and nuanced vocabulary, and learning their language is a part of being a good horseman.



TRICIA BOOKER



Working in a round/square pen offers the opportunity for you to learn your horse's vocabulary, such as relaxed (top), attentive (middle) and alert/watchful (bottom).

just tell you? In order to know what that bite meant, look for another signal. Are her ears pricked forward or flat back? If they're forward and her eyes and facial muscles are soft, chances are she was just wanting to get your attention to play or was begging to get scratched. If her ears are pinned, her muzzle is wrinkled and mouth open, it was an aggressive bite and you'd best leave her stall. Building context and looking for other body language helps avoid misunderstandings.

### Learning Dialects

The subtle differences from horse to horse can be thought of as different dialects. By thinking this way we can be open to and aware of the nuances. For example, one horse laying down all of the time might be normal, but if a new employee came on staff at the barn he or she might be concerned on the first day of work that the gelding is flat out in his stall.

Knowing your horse's "normal" isn't limited to his vital signs, either. It's understanding his behavior and body language and recognizing when it changes. If your horse whinnies every time you enter the barn but one afternoon he's quiet, that change should cause you to question whether he's OK. It should create in you a hyper-awareness of his body language. What are his ears doing? How is he standing in the stall? He's given you one word: the absence of that whinny. It's up to you to build the sentence from there.

People who have been around many horses in their lifetimes build bigger vocabularies. They've experienced the body language for different ailments and behaviors and are able to swiftly recognize the word patterns. A barn manager who has managed 100 horses has had the opportunity to experience 10 times the number of dialects, problems and solutions than the one who has managed 10 horses.

It's no different than one solitary person speaking English using a limited vocabulary while another has a rich and varied vocabulary that was built through years of exposure to many different people. The person with a richer vocabulary may be difficult to un-

PHOTOS BY TRICIA BOOKER

## Equine Vocabulary List

### Ears

- Swiveled to the side—relaxed
- Swiveled back—listening
- Pointed forward but relaxed—interested
- Pointed forward but stiff and tense—alarmed
- Pointed stiffly back but not pinned—annoyed or worried about what’s behind him
- Pinned back—angry
- Swiveling back and forth—a heightened state of awareness and/or anxiety

### Head Carriage

- Lowered—relaxed (most often paired with ears relaxed and hanging to the side; very low to the ground, it may mean depression)
- Raised—alert and focused on something in the distance (paired with a hollow back when ridden, it could be a sign of a back problem)

### Eyes

- Wide—with more white showing than usual for that horse, it could mean he’s startled, alarmed, nervous, upset. Be on the alert to avoid a spook or a bolt.
- Soft—the muscles around the eye are relaxed and the lid is soft; indicates relaxation
- Rapid darting—frightened and in flight mode, looking for a way to escape

### Front Leg Position

- Splayed—sign of discomfort (paired with head down or coughing, could indicate choke)
- Legs out in front, leaning back, weight shifted to behind—pain and could indicate founder/laminitis

### Hind Leg position

- Resting, cocked leg with hoof on the ground—relaxed and resting
- Raised off the ground—sign of irritation, but handler should be on alert, as it can also be a threat before kicking

### Mouth and Muzzle

- Chewing—(such as when under saddle) relaxed and thinking
- Curled lip—the horse is smelling something he’s unfamiliar with (called the flehmen response). Flehmen can also signal that colic is developing, and the horse may be experiencing low-level gastrointestinal discomfort.
- Flared nostrils—startled, nervous, breathing hard while exercising
- Licking lips—relaxed, submissive
- Teeth exposed—aggression
- Wrinkling of the face—angry or bossy; be aware of biting or kicking

### Pawing

- Begging, bored, stressed, impatient or gastrointestinal distress (must be paired with other cues to decipher intended meaning). May also be a sign of aggression; be alert if paired with other indicators of anger, because it could be the precursor to a bite or strike.

### Stomping

- This indicates irritation or frustration. Can often be seen in response to flies.

### Tail

- Raised—excited
- Clamped—nervous, stressed
- Forceful swishing—irritated; a warning sign

derstand because unknown words are like holes in the sentence you’re trying to decipher. You don’t quite get the full meaning.

Some of the most fluent people are veterinarians and other equine healthcare professionals who have seen and interacted with thousands of animals.

Jesslyn Bryk-Lucy, DVM, cAVA, of Leg Up Equine Veterinary Services in Blairstown, New Jersey, includes acupuncture and chiropractic in her veterinary practice and regularly reads horses’ body language to assess her patients’ reactions to the work being done.

“If I’m doing acupuncture and they like it a lot, I’ll see the licking and chewing or the yawning,” said Bryk-Lucy. “What I see the most is a long, slow blink. They get sleepy, and their lip will hang and their ears will be out to the side.”

Bryk-Lucy will also use the horse’s body language to help with the assessment and care.

“When I’m doing chiropractic and I pull or push on a vertebra [in] the direction that I’m going to adjust to put it back into alignment, they will lean into me,” she explained. She also noted that conversely, if a person attempts to pull the vertebrae out of alignment, the horse will move away or duck their haunches. Knowing this, Bryk-Lucy is able to use the horse’s instinctive knowledge and body language to assess situations that are not clear.

Carolyn Christenson, certified equine massage therapist of Peak Performance Therapy, also witnesses daily how horses communicate their soreness. Horses will often position themselves where they need to be worked on.

“They will stand the way they stand for a reason,” said Christenson. “Often, they will lower their head so I can work on their neck. They know instinctively where they need me, and when I run my hands over them and palpate the situation, they will move their body accordingly. Sometimes they will stretch out their back leg or they will bend their back in.”

Christenson will begin her assessment as soon as a horse walks out of the stall. While the body language can be subtle, after 15 years of bodywork experience, Christenson is attuned to gait and muscle movement.

“Just like people, when you’re in pain you tend to be a little stressed,” she said. “There’s a range of motion with a muscle, and if you don’t have that range of motion, you’re going to come out short-strided or just not quite your normal gait.”

According to Christenson, one of the mistakes people make is confusing pain for behavioral issues. Another is misunderstanding when their horses have back soreness and thinking they are just sensitive to the curry comb.

# THIS

# IS IT



PHOTO ALDEN CORRIGAN MEDIA

**TAYLOR, HARRIS**  
**INSURANCES SERVICES**  
WORLDWIDE EQUINE  
INSURANCE SPECIALISTS  
— FOUNDED IN 1987 —  
**THISHORSEINSURANCE.COM**  
**800.291.4774**



TRICIA BOOKER

"If I'm doing acupuncture and they like it a lot, I'll see the licking and chewing or the yawning," said Jesslyn Bryk-Lucy.

Christenson can't stress enough how important awareness is when it comes to listening to what horses are saying.

"You may have a horse who exhibits something as subtle as a tail swish, but it's not fly season. They are telling you something," she said.

### Training Benefits

Trainer and grand prix rider Sloane Coles, of The Plains, Virginia, grew up with parents in the horse business and has been immersed in the world of horses since birth. Like the equine healthcare professionals above, she, too, is fluent—so much so that Coles initially struggled to point out specific instances when she reads her horses' body language, because it's constant.

In order to explain, Coles had to deconstruct her natural process. As with most professionals, reading horses is an instinctive part of her day-to-day interactions with them. "There's a point when you're around horses so much you can almost sense that something is going to happen," she said.

Whether a horse is alert and is about

to spook or has a glassy eye and looks like he's not feeling well, Coles is a step ahead. Her day begins and ends with listening to what the horses are telling her at her farm, Spring Ledge.

"As soon as you get the horse out of the

You may have a horse who exhibits something as subtle as a tail swish, but it's not fly season. They are telling you something.—

Carolyn Christenson

stall in the morning, you can read if they're bright or if they're wild," she said, "Every horse is different. Some horses are always a bit on edge; other horses are old souls."

Coles emphasized that the moment you see them in the morning is the time to as-



“There’s a point when you’re around horses so much you can almost sense when something is going to happen,” said Sloane Coles.

sess their health. She said, “When they aren’t feeling well, they hold their head a little lower and look at you like ‘please take my temperature.’ They don’t walk as fast or don’t whinny when you come into the barn.

“I think the signs might be different for each horse, but when you see something that’s off, that’s when you need to take the temperature, check their heart rate, check how much manure they have in their stall. Even though they can’t talk to you, there are ways you can see what’s going on,” she added.

Knowing the signals for a health problem is just one benefit of being fluent. Understanding a horse’s body language is also an integral part of training. Groundwork is a great way to build vocabulary, communication and the relationship between horse and rider. Coles learned the benefits of working horses in the round pen from her father, John Coles, who is a veteran horseman and foxhunter. Working in a round pen strips away everything except for the pure communication of horse and handler.

“When I can, I like to get in there and learn about the horses,” said Coles. “You learn about their aids more on the ground. You can see and feel more when you’re on the ground with them.”

Coles will use the round pen to learn a new horse’s vocabulary as well as to work through problems. “If I have a horse I haven’t quite figured out or one that’s a little green, it’s really good for them,” she said.

The round pen learning goes both ways for horse and handler. Coles explained how some horses can hardly take any pressure (the closer you are to the horse, the more pressure). “It shows how sensitive some of them are. It’s amazing what you can do with a horse and what you can learn from them on the ground. Reading body language... it’s part of everything you do with horses.”



## EQUINE UNDERWATER TREADMILL SYSTEM

Through the control of warm and cold water temperature, water height (to control buoyancy and resistance), speed and duration, equine trainers and veterinarians can better treat, train and condition equine athletes:

- Improve performance
- Prevent injury
- Recover faster

**AQUAPACER** **AQUAPACER+**  
by HUDSON Aquatic Systems

**HUDSON**  
AQUATIC SYSTEMS, LLC  
YOUR PARTNER IN AQUATICS

HudsonAquatic.com • 888-206-7802

