

OUR EXPERT

Justine Harrison



Justine is a qualified equine behaviourist who uses the science of behaviour to help owners better understand and resolve issues with their horses.

Expressing yourself

In our second feature on body language, equine behaviourist **Justine Harrison** shows you how to understand how a horse is feeling through observing his body posture. Read on to find out what he could be trying to tell you...

The horse is a prey species that has evolved to live in social groups. Using sounds to interact with each other could mean drawing unwanted attention to themselves – potentially putting the herd at risk of being noticed by predators.

Instead, they have developed a range of sophisticated body language signals and behaviours to communicate with each other silently and safely.

Of course, horses do sometimes use vocal signals, but their primary method of communicating is through body language.

Last month (December issue, 'Learn a new language') we looked at the horse's facial expressions to help you understand what messages they could be trying to convey.

Here, we consider how horses use the rest of their body to communicate.

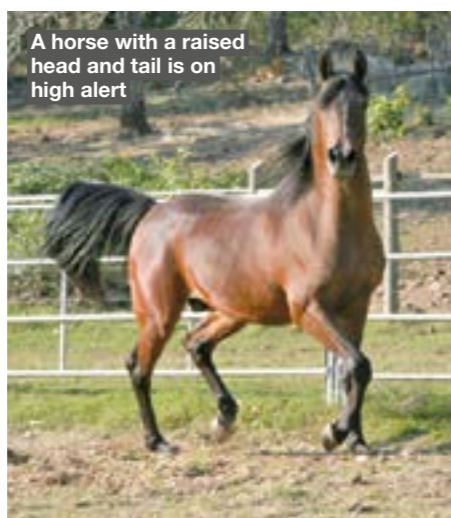
The big picture

A horse will use the whole of his body to communicate. His overall posture can give you a lot of information about how he is feeling:

On high alert

When a horse is anxious or sees something new he is unsure of, his posture becomes upright and the head and tail is raised.

Take for example a grazing horse that notices a dog in the hedge. He may immediately alert his field mates to this potential threat by looking straight at it, pointing his head or



A horse with a raised head and tail is on high alert

body in its direction and adopting a very upright posture.

His head and tail will be held high, with ears pricked tightly forward and muscles tensed. His movement may be stiff and jerky, to signify to his friends he is anxious about the intruder.

These postural signals could even be seen by other horses a long distance away and are clear indicators something threatening is nearby that requires their urgent attention.

On closer inspection we may see the horse's eyes are open wide, clearly showing the sclera (whites of the eye), and that he has a tense neck and facial muscles.

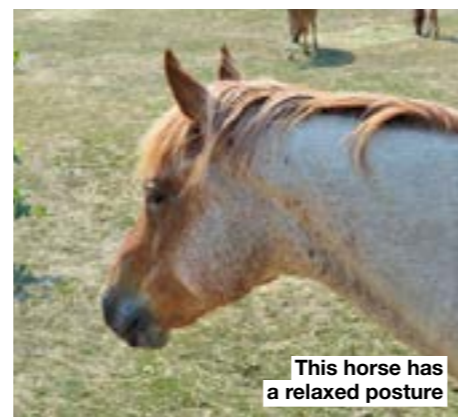
His nostrils are likely to be flared, sniffing towards the source of interest and the horse may blow or snort. If he is very frightened, his muscles may be quivering or trembling.

And relax...

A calm, relaxed horse will usually slightly lower his head and neck and his body posture and muscles will be soft overall.

Lips and muzzle are relaxed and the ears will be in a 'neutral' position – lowered and rotated to the side.

Often, one hindleg may be resting on the toe if he is standing still – if the horse is moving, there will be a loose swing in his stride.



This horse has a relaxed posture

Tensing up

If he's worried about something, muscles will be tense and the skin appear to be tight and taut. His movements are likely to be jerky, which could indicate he's nervous, frightened or even in pain.

Trembling

Usually a sign of fear, young or inexperienced horses may tremble when taken to a new environment or shown something new.

Horses use their whole body to convey a message – both to humans and other equines

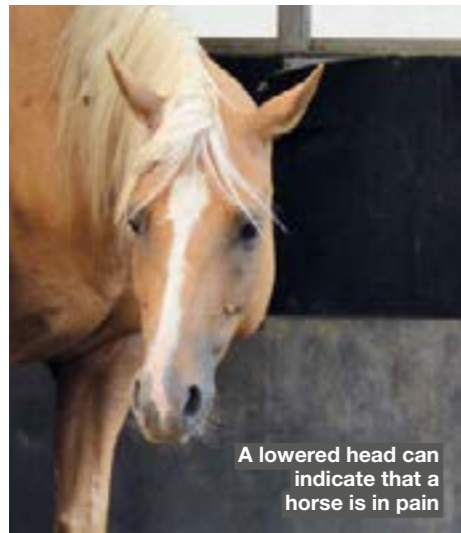
Sleeping standing up

When a horse is asleep or dozing, his eyes will be closed and the head and neck lowered below the level of the back. Usually, one hindleg will be resting and we will see relaxed facial muscles and a drooping lower lip.

Heads up

The position and movement of a horse's head are easy to see and can tell you a lot about how he is feeling.

Lowered: A lowered head can be a sign your horse is relaxed, resting, in pain or even depressed. Taking his overall body posture into account can help you differentiate between these emotional states.



A lowered head can indicate that a horse is in pain

Elevated: If your horse raises his head, he may be focusing on something in the distance, and deciding whether to flee, ignore or investigate it.

If he raises his head while being ridden, it could be an early sign of pain. Further indicators would be hollowing the back, putting his ears back, shaking his head or tail swishing.

If any of these behaviours occur, have your tack checked by a master saddler and book a vet to examine your horse for any potential physical problems.

Turning away: A horse may turn his head away when you approach as an indicator that he is worried about you or what you are about to do. It's something that often happens when an owner arrives with tack or travel bandages, as the horse is anticipating the stressful event that is about to happen.

Head tossing: This is telling you the horse is frustrated, irritated or in pain. He may grind his teeth, toss or fling his head, open his mouth or elevate his head to avoid a rider's hands or the bit when ridden. There is usually an overall stiffness to the body. If your horse performs any of these behaviours, have your tack checked by a master saddler and a vet look at your horse for any potential problems.



In the field a tail swishes slowly to keep flies away...

At the tail end

What a horse does with his tail is often overlooked, but it can be a great indicator of his emotional state:

Raised: A tail raised straight up is a sign of arousal, often seen when a horse is playing or when something has caught his attention.

Swishing slowly: The slow swishing of a tail is usually to get rid of flies, but can also be seen if a horse is becoming colicky.

In this case, you would also see the horse stamping their feet, kicking at their stomach, dropping their head, looking at their hindquarters or attempting to get down.

Tail swishing when ridden can be a sign of anxiety or discomfort.

Swishing rapidly: When a horse's tail is swishing quickly from side to side or up and down, he is irritated, in pain or aggressive. This may be a warning sign that he's about to kick, buck or bite.

Clamped down: A fearful or stressed horse will clamp his tail down tightly and may lower the hindquarters. If your horse clamps



...if it happens when being ridden, it is a sign of tension

his tail down when you are riding he may be fearful or in pain. Assess the situation – you may have punished him or asked too much and frightened him and you will need to build his confidence back up.

Ensure his tack fits well and call your vet if the behaviour continues.

Held to one side: This can be a sign of back pain. Ask your vet to check your horse over for any physical problems.

Sexual differences

Mares and stallions have different postural displays in some situations (especially their sexual behaviours), but generally speaking their body language is very similar.

When we geld a stallion it often reduces some of his expressivity. Stallions can be far

more expressive in their body language than geldings.

Many advanced dressage riders would prefer to ride a stallion as their power and exuberant movement can be an advantage in competition.

Gelding a stallion means they may display far less sexual and herding behaviours.



Observe your horse in different situations so you learn what is his normal behaviour

"Noticing early warning signs means you can prevent a behaviour issue escalating"

Watch and learn

The best way to learn about your horse's body language is to simply to watch him as often as you can.

For example, notice how he reacts when he is in the field with others, when he is taken to a new environment, or when other people are around him.

Watch his facial expressions and his body language, notice his overall posture and how he reacts in different situations.

Learning to recognise early changes in your horse's body language and behaviour can help you quickly recognise when your horse



Resting one hindleg is common and not usually a cause for concern. Resting the front legs is not normal, so call your vet if you see this.

is becoming anxious, fearful, frustrated or aggressive.

This puts you in a much better position to avoid potentially dangerous situations or behavioural problems escalating.

Changing what you are doing or removing yourself and your horse from a difficult situation when you've spotted those early signs could keep you safe.

Noticing the warning signals that your horse is irritated or fearful and acting accordingly can stop them from resorting to bigger more dangerous behaviours like bucking or biting. ■

A breed apart

Cold-blooded horses like cobs and Shires are often considered to be more relaxed than hot-blooded Arabs or Thoroughbreds.

However, study results show they all have the same levels of the stress hormone cortisol in stressful situations – cold-blooded horses just behave differently.

They seem to be more likely to hide their fear responses and may 'freeze' rather than run about or fidget.

Sadly, as a result of this they are often thought to be 'stubborn' and 'difficult', when in fact they may be too frightened to move.



Cobs may hide the fact they are afraid

Can horses experience depression?



Some horses in the study adopted a "rigid stance"

A team of French researchers looked at whether they could use horses as an animal 'model' to evaluate depression. They assessed the posture, behavioural responses, and cortisol levels (a recognised indicator of stress) of 59 riding school horses.

The project recorded the horses' reactions to unusual objects, how they behaved when someone entered the stable, their response to touch and their posture.

Twenty four per cent of the horses showed a 'withdrawn' posture. This body position is recognised as an indicator of pain or depression.

The horse adopts a rigid stance, with an outstretched neck and a low head carriage.

His gaze may be fixed on one point, and his head and ear position locked.

According to the researchers, this profile suggests an expression of "behavioural despair".

When compared to the other horses in the study, the withdrawn horses appeared to be indifferent to environmental stimuli but were more reactive when presented with challenging situations.

"Our observations of horses in their usual domestic environment have led us to spot individuals displaying a particular behavioural and postural profile that presents strong similarities with a 'depressive syndrome', report the researchers. "These characteristics "present strong similarities" with some aspect of the depressive states of humans.

'Towards an Ethological Animal Model of Depression? A Study on Horses'; Carole Fureix, Patrick Jégo, Séverine Henry, Léa Lansade and Martine Hausberger.