

## HORSE BODY LANGUAGE

When handling a horse a handler must always be looking for body language cues and should be comfortable to know what to do when a horse's body language is showing discomfort, frustration, anger and aggression. Some equine body language isn't difficult to interpret. The meaning of a pinned ear and cocked hind hoof are pretty obvious. But not all equine communication is quite so clear. In any of the situations below, if you are not confident in what to do, advise the instructor that you need a "correction" and they will step in immediately.

### What His Ears Say:

*If your horse's ears are pointed backward but not pinned, it often means he's listening to something behind him.* When a horse's ears are forward he is alert, paying attention and/or interested in what's in front of him, and when his ears are pinned back close to the neck he is angry and about to bite or kick. But the ears have more to say than just that:

*Turned out to the side.* The horse is asleep or relaxed and may not be attuned to what's going on around him. Call his name or make some noise, and approach when he turns his head or otherwise indicates that he's paying attention to you.

*Rapidly swiveling.* Ears that are flicking back and forth are a sign that the horse is in a heightened state of anxiety or alertness. He may be trying to locate the source of a frightening sound or smell, or he may be overwhelmed by too many stimuli.

### What His Head Carriage Says:

*Lowered.* A dropped head is a sign your horse is relaxed and feeling good, and his ears will often hang to the side as well. If he's standing in his stall or pasture with a lowered head, he's probably either resting or asleep; call his name and make your approach obvious so you don't startle him.

*Elevated.* Your horse is focused on something in the distance, and he's probably trying to figure out whether he should flee, investigate or ignore it. As his handler, you need to realize that he is not paying attention to you so you must regain his focus. A horse who raises his head while being ridden may be in pain, especially if he also hollows his back, pins his ears or wrings his tail.

### What His Forelegs Say:

*Pawing.* A bored or impatient horse paws—he's saying that he's tired of standing around and he's ready to go! Stressed horses may paw at feeding time, and the behaviour stops when the source of the anxiety is past. Pawing to indicate anger is rarer. In these cases, the pawing is more forceful and is often combined with pinned ears.

*Stomping.* Unlike pawing, stomping is raising and lowering a foot forcefully in place. Horses stomp to indicate irritation. Usually, it's something minor, such as a fly they're trying to dislodge. However, stomping may also indicate your horse is frustrated with something you are doing.

#### What His Hind Legs Say:

*Cocked.* When a horse cocks his leg, he rests the leading edge of the hoof on the ground and drops his hip. When combined with a lowered head or ears hanging to the side, this is the sign of a horse who is relaxed and resting. A horse may also cock a hind hoof when he is irritated or defensive and considering kicking. In that case, he may also elevate his head and turn his ears back.

*Raised.* Your horse may lift a hind leg off the ground to signal irritation. The cause may be something as minor as a horsefly, or it could be that he's annoyed with a horse or person behind him and is threatening to kick (raised leg accompanied by swishing tail).

#### What His Muzzle Says:

*Drooping lip or slack mouth.* A horse standing quietly with his lower lip drooping may be relaxing or even asleep. If you approach him, do so cautiously and call his name to avoid startling him.

*Chewing.* It may look a little funny to see your horse chewing when you know he's not eating, but this is a good sign when you are training him. It indicates he's relaxed and thinking, and that in turn means he's learning.

*Flehmen.* Flehmen is another of those behaviors that looks humorous but serves an important function: When a horse smells something he's unsure of, he raises his head, curls his upper lip, breathes in and blows air back out.

*Flared nostrils.* A horse will stretch his nostrils wide to draw in more air as he exercises, and the flare may continue for a short time afterward. At other times, a horse's nostrils may flare and even quiver when he is startled or nervous.

*Tight, pinched or pursed mouth or muzzle.* This is a subtle sign and can be easy to miss. Tension around the mouth tells you your horse is worried, stressed or scared.

#### What His Tail Says:

*Raised or "flagged."* A tail carried above the level of the back is a sign of excitement. A horse who is so excited that he's flagging his tail isn't paying much attention to you so you may need to put him to work to regain his focus.

*Clamped down.* A nervous or stressed horse will press his tail down, and he may tuck in his hindquarters. This is a good time to reassure him and try to build his confidence. If your horse clamps his tail when you are riding, he may be in discomfort or pain.

*Rapid swishing.* Slow slapping of a tail is all about fly control. But when a horse's tail is jerking quickly from side to side or up and down, he is irritated or angry.

### What His Whole Body Says:

*Trembling.* Shaking is almost always a sign of fear. Extremely nervous horses may tremble when exposed to something new. If you see this, stop whatever you are doing and give your horse a few minutes to calm down. When he's relaxed, slowly reintroduce the thing that scared him. Be quiet and calm with him, and he'll pick up on your attitude.

*Touching you.* If a horse reaches out to touch you with his muzzle, he could be trying to nip or bite you. Or it may be that he's curious and checking you out. Another possibility is that he's nervous and needs a little reassurance. This is one of those times when you need to know your horse to distinguish the difference.

*Swinging hindquarters.* When your horse swings his rump from side to side, it can mean one of two things. Usually, he's warning that he's about to kick. In that case, his ears will probably be back, he may be wringing his tail, and his body will be tense. Move him away from whatever he's mad at and put him to work.

A mare in heat will also swing her rump slightly from side to side, trying to get the attention of any stallions that might be around. She'll also likely raise her tail and turn it to one side, and she may urinate a little.