

Thomas Herding Technique

Discovering the Communicated Equine

The Equine Sensory System

Position Paper by Kerry M Thomas

There are four main senses the horse uses to interpret and manage itself in its environment: sight, sound, feel and smell. The equine sensory system is designed to work *independently together* as a form of checks and balances; this being the fundamental base strategy for self-preservation and sustainability of the species and *herd* in variable and changing environments. In detail, this then is the foundation upon which the principles of adaptability are founded and allows Mother Nature to conceal her leadership in plain sight; vital for a species designed to live in the open country amidst predators.

The efficiency which each independent sensory system communicates, or as I often like to say *transitions* or *hands-off* stimuli like a baton, has a great impact on many things, including physical output, comfort zones/running styles, patterns of motion and herd dynamics. These things are pieces of the puzzle that are both the fabric of herd life and of the individual Emotional Conformation Profile (ECP). This overall efficiency or lack of impacts the individual's ability to interpret and react to the environment, thus defining them as individuals within the herd itself; different levels of communication allow for a chain of command in the social structure.

To offer an example of how you may envision a stimuli *transitioning* through the sequence of the senses, which is of great importance to a Thoroughbred Race Horse that needs to move and manage situational chaos while the body is moving with great energy, I ask you to think of a slinky and a staircase.

The slinky represents the stimulus (which needs to be both identified and interpreted quickly, so as not to impede an efficient physical motion); the steps representing the senses. As the slinky comes into contact with the step it is hitting, that sense requiring identification, which is the recognition of its presence on contact, and then its interpretation, which allows for it to be efficiently *handed-off* to the next sense as needed, if needed.

A smooth transition through the sequence allows for a smooth physical pattern of motion. However, if the horse is *sticky* in any one of the sensory areas, we will see an impact on the

Thomas Herding Technique

206 Homeville Road Cochranville, PA 19330

Telephone: 610-593-4889

Email: stablemaster@thomasherdingtechnique.com



Thomas Herding Technique

Discovering the Communicated Equine

physical motion of the horse. The slinky, once triggering a sensory avenue, is *identified* and there it will stay until *interpreted*. If however, the horse is experiencing any deficiency in that particular sense, be it from a physical issue or impediment or psychological *learned experience*, one end of the slinky will stick to that sense even while it is stretching to transition, to land upon the next step, until it hits the step the horse depends on for its primary form of interpretation. As the slinky then becomes identified it is finally released and snaps back into shape, if you will, causing a ripple effect in the body, that sudden knee-jerk reaction to stimuli we often see in horses for *no apparent reason*.

The sensory system's influence on the efficiency of physical distance for the race horse is also of great importance. There are two different horses that have to be considered; one is the physical horse and the other the emotional horse. The physical horse shows you muscle structure, correctness and the way a horse moves through itself, hits the ground and so on; body-type and functionality being vital players to overall performance, speed, stamina and distance of ground.

The emotional horse responsive to the information highway of the senses is the pilot of your physical airplane and responsible for efficiency of pace and mental stamina (grit) based upon both real and learned interpretations. From a psychological, *sensory* standpoint, 'distance' mentally is measured in the amount of time the horse is efficiently interpreting its world without it affecting physical motion; thus we have Time In Motion, as the true factor in distance aptitude. There is a big difference between running a great distance and running a great distance efficiently.

An easy example is to think about something as simple as walking a horse with halter and lead when suddenly your horse *spooks* in an eruption of body language or slows to ID something or altogether stops without your urging and/or despite it. If not from physical pain, then this alteration of movement comes from the emotional horse, the senses. Now imagine the impact this can have on the athlete in herd chaos in elevated stress and physical speed situations where a split second of hesitation can cost you a race.

It pays to know your entire horse which is why we profile them and monitor them. If the emotional horse had zero impact on the physical horse, *spooking* would never be in horse-lingo.

These idiosyncrasies of character, of Emotional Conformation, come in many layers and many forms, some an impediment to physical performance for the race horse, or any horse for that matter, and some not much of an impediment at all. A detailed understanding of the whole horse tells us a great deal about the comfort zones for the horse, offering up clues to their natural Pattern Of Motion and Mental Efficiency Zone. Using that knowledge, we can design coaching

Thomas Herding Technique

206 Homeville Road Cochranville, PA 19330

Telephone: 610-593-4889

Email: stblemaster@thomasherdingtechnique.com



Thomas Herding Technique

Discovering the Communicated Equine

programs to help the equine athlete become the best he or she can become at their physical talent level. After all, we must nurture the horse before we develop the athlete.

With the sensory system controlling movement with such alacrity, a study of this system should rightly be considered if not prior to a physical inspection, at least in collaboration with it. You're not investing in an automobile; you're investing in a complex system of mental and physical traits. For any equine athlete to fulfill their physical ability and talent, they must first have the Emotional Conformation to allow them to.

Kerry M Thomas/Founder of THT

Thomas Herding Technique
206 Homeville Road Cochranville, PA 19330
Telephone: 610-593-4889
Email: stablemaster@thomasherdingtechnique.com

