

# Understanding your horses' personality

by Vanessa Quartly ■ photos by Gigi Grasso

**P**lease allow me to introduce myself. My name is Vanessa Quartly. I am a certified "EC Level 1 Western Coach". I am also a certified "Equine Body Worker". I have owned, trained and bred horses for over 35 years. I now show in Arabian, Welsh, Dressage, and team cattle sorting and penning events. I possess a diploma as a "Rehabilitation Practitioner" (working with mentally and physically challenged people). Although I did not go into this field as a career, I did the extensive courses in psychology and behavioral training to be of great benefit to me and my current interests (Level 1 Coaching and horse training); especially when evaluating beginner riders and their horses.

One of my strongest passions is that of helping horses in need of rehabilitation (both physical and emotional) and new homes that suit them in both categories. Most of the animals that I work with have not been physically or mentally abused; they are usually just in the wrong profession or in an emotionally conflicting relationship with their owners. Most of these horse's current owners are not cruel or neglectful, they are simply frustrated with their relationship with the horses and their seeming inability to understand them.

What I have discovered over many years of dealing with both horses and people is that many of the problems encountered by owners and riders are a result of personality conflicts between them. Of course there are the usual problems such as training issues or the horse not being physically suited to that particular job, but most of the time the critical problem is that of two personalities being at odds with one another. People often ask "Does a horse (or any other animal) really have a personality"? I cannot scientifically answer that but I

believe, based on my 35 years of experience, that the answer is an unqualified yes!

Let us take a look at the two words most often used to describe personality when referring to the horse. First, we will explore the word "disposition" which is used by horsemen worldwide. As described in the Merriam Webster Dictionary, it means "tendency, inclination, or attitude toward things". In my opinion, this is too vague an explanation of why a person or animal is the way he/she is.

Next, we will look at the word "temperament". This word is described in the same Dictionary as, "characteristic, habitual inclination or mode of emotional response". This term is perhaps more accurate as it contains both scientific and nature/nurture elements but still leaves little room for individual qualities.

Now, let us look at the word "personality" which is described as "a personal character distinction of personal and social traits including quality, individuality, temperament and disposition". This, to me, is the most accurate, complete description when referring to either a person or a horse. Yet when looking at "horse for sale" ads the word "personality" is almost never used.

Just for fun, imagine that you were going to choose your human partner in this same manner as we look for horses. It would probably go something like this: "Oh look here.....I think this is a good one; good looking, pretty, well bred, definitely well trained in his/her field. However, should we also be asking these important questions: Does he/she have a com-

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*patible personality, can they do the things I like to do and can he/she cope with all of my personality foibles? Or, would we just say who cares about all that stu; he/she looks good on paper and I will train him/her to do what I want to do!*

*A person would be very foolish to enter a human relationship with that kind of a mind set, yet we do it with our horses all of the time expecting them to somehow magically conform to whatever situation we decide that they with our horses all of the time expecting them to somehow magically conform to whatever situation we decide that they should accept with no diculties at all. When you see it from this point of view, it seems quite amazing that these animals try so hard to do whatever we ask, regardless of how foreign it may seem to them.*

*Often, a prospective horse owner will get a picture in their head of their dream horse. This picture usually consists of the person sitting astride a beautiful, spirited, athletic young animal; often forgetting their own physical shortcomings and/or lack of experience. This is where the picture in their minds often does not reect the reality of their situations. We think we know what kind of horse we want, but we do not always know what kind of horse we need!*

*Horses come with a myriad of dierent personalities, as do people. They can be shy, aggressive, happy go lucky or worry warts. They can be neurotic and even on very rare occasions, psychotic! We must try to examine, with as much objectivity as possible, our own personalities; possibly with the help of a good friend, as it is very dicult to evaluate one's self. If we can form a somewhat accurate description of our own personality, then we have a distinct advantage when evaluating a prospective equine partner.*

*For example, a person who is nervous of horses should never purchase a young, green, or high strung animal; no matter how well trained that horse may be. You cannot fool a horse into thinking that you are condent when you are not! Case in point: Clever Hans! In Germany in the early 1900s, there was a mathematics professor by the name of Wilhelm Von Osten. Professor Von Osten had a theory that animals possessed intelligence far greater than we humans had previously given them credit for. He set out to prove it by teaching his horse, Clever Hans, mathematics. Von Osten did just that, creating quite a stir in the scientic community. It seemed Clever Hans could do a number of fairly complicated mathematical calculations. Von Osten would write on a blackboard as he asked Hans a question and Hans would answer by stomping out the correct numbers. Clever Hans never missed!*

*Von Osten himself believed that he had successfully taught his horse how to perform mathematical calculations. Von Osten and his equine savant were rigorously tested by countless scientists and psychologists who could not gure out how Clever Hans was continually coming up with the right answers. Finally, the truth was unveiled; the horse was not actually calculating the numbers, but what he was doing was equally as astounding.*

*It appeared Clever Hans was picking up on the subtlest of clues using the body language of not only his owner but of all the other people around him. This is why any other person (as well as his owner) could ask him a question and he would answer them with the correct responses. The only time that he got the answer wrong was when the person asking him the question did not know the answer himself! Hans was picking up on facial expressions, heartbeats and breathing*





*patterns; a myriad of signals that the people themselves did not know they were communicating to him.*

*Clever Hans is an astounding example of just how perceptive the equine species really is. This story is also a convincing example of why you need to know yourself and understand your own personality traits before beginning the search for your equine match. The more informed and honest you are about your own strengths and weaknesses, along with your own talents and abilities, the more that you know and understand your goals as a horseman/woman, the better chance you have of finding the horse that will provide you with the proper companionship and will assist you in achieving your personal goals.*

*The right equine partner with the right personality for you is available. It is a matter of taking your time with your search and focusing on the positive. Your equine dreams really can come true! □*



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