



KEN McNABB

HORSEMANSHIP

DISCOVERING THE HORSEMAN WITHIN

Safety In The Herd

By Ken McNabb with Katherine Lindsey Meehan

Doing anything in a herd of horses has the potential to be dangerous. If you don't have the respect of every horse in your herd, you can be run over or inadvertently kicked as your horses establish their pecking order. It is very important that you establish your leadership in the herd to maintain your safety. If one horse kicks or threatens another horse while you are in the area, every horse needs to respect you enough to watch where you are and move around you even as they quickly avoid confrontation with another horse. You will notice that the pecking order may shift slightly as new horses are introduced, but certain horses just have a dominant and confident personality. Those horses will always stay near the top of the order even if the actual top horse varies from time to time.

I like to start by spending as much time as I can watching my horses interact. If you only have one horse, watch how they interact with your dog or cat or any other living creature. Not only will it help you understand how to best maintain your safety and give you an idea of which horses are at the top of the line, but watching herd interaction is very valuable if you are purchasing a prospect and have the opportunity to choose a young horse out of a herd. On top of looking at their confirmation, watch how they interact with the other horses and with the objects in their space. Are they bossy and confident or timid and non-confrontational? Are they curious about new things or wary? When another horse tells them to move, do they leap out of the way or just calmly move over? You will be able to learn a lot about each horse's personality by watching these interactions and this knowledge will give you a good chance of ending up with the type of horse you enjoy the most. Make sure you look beyond a flashy color to how the horse is built and how they act.

A common misconception is that the pecking order in a herd is all about who gets the best feed. In fact, it has more to do with which horse is in charge of the herd's safety. If the horse at the top of the pecking order thinks there is something to be afraid of, all the other horses will follow suit. However, if a horse on the low end of the pecking order spooks, you will probably see the other horses ignore him. At the top of the pecking order, you become respected and in charge of the herd's safety. This is also very important when you are riding your horses. They need to feel that you are a capable leader so that you can be trusted to make judgment calls about the danger of any situation, and keep them safe through anything.

I like to carry a buggy whip any time I am entering a herd of horses carrying feed. This isn't to beat them off, but to be used as an extension of my arm to keep a larger bubble of safe space around me and to

even the playing field a little. My horses must understand that I can move them out of my space – if I can touch them with the buggy whip they are too close. Don't get hyper or panic and start swinging the whip in all directions, just calmly keep your space clear. One time I will get after my horses a little is if they show any signs of ear pinning or aggression towards me. If that happens I will drive them farther away. Any aggressive behavior cannot be tolerated if you are going to maintain your position as herd leader. Your safety is always your top priority. If you get hurt, you will not be there to care for your horses and feed them. So, you always need to place your safety above theirs if it comes down to a choice. That said, your buggy whip should not be used to beat your horses away from you. Like any other cue, it should be used as lightly as possible, and your horses should obey it out of understanding and respect, not out of fear. Any riding and ground work you have done with your horses should have laid a foundation of respect between them and you, so you will just build on that foundation as you interact with them in the herd and around feed.

Enjoy your horses and watching how they interact with each other and other animals and objects in their environment. See what new things you can learn about them! And until next time, may God bless the trails you ride.

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