

Pat and Linda Parelli, founders of Parelli Natural Horse•Man•Ship. Photo: COCO.

When you get bitten say “Ow!”

by Linda Parelli

BRACE YOURSELF...

not for the bite, but for a very different perspective on why horses bite and what to do about it.



When horses play with each other they rear, buck, strike, kick and bite. Photo: COCO.

HORSES WITH A TENDENCY TO NIP USUALLY HAVE A HIGH PLAY DRIVE.

While watching horses play with each other, you'll notice they do things like push with their bodies, rear up, strike and kick, and BITE. Of course it's all in fun and grabbing a bit of skin in their teeth is no big deal, unless the recipient is a human. It hurts! A horse that wants to bite you is usually expressing his desire to play, but he doesn't know that human skin is not quite as tough as a horse's. On one hand it's a compliment that your horse wants to play with you; on the other hand, it's a clear sign that he doesn't see you as alpha.

HORSES NEVER BITE THEIR ALPHA!

Do you know how to recognise the alpha horse in a herd? He or she is the one without any bite marks! Horses don't bite their alpha. In the game of dominance, those who 'bite best' win. When horses play and nip at each other they are basically developing their dominance skills and rehearsing takeover strategies.

PEOPLE TURN PLAYFUL HORSES INTO MORE AGGRESSIVE BITERS

Most people smack a horse for biting, which doesn't work because prey

animals don't understand punishment. They think you are biting back and now the interchange becomes all about who will 'win' the dominance game.

In horse-land the bravest, smartest and quickest horse wins. The alpha horse is calm, self-confident and totally unemotional. He's also ready to do whatever it takes to maintain the alpha position. So when a horse goes to bite and you try to smack him, the horse just gets better at the game – he gets quicker at taking a nip and dodging the slap.

As time goes on the nips turn into bites because the horse gets more serious about dominating you. Also, when a horse can evoke an emotional reaction from you – surprise, anger, fear – he knows you have no chance of being alpha. You obviously aren't calm, smart or brave enough!

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

What does Pat Parelli do when he gets bitten? "I say 'Ow' and rub it until it stops hurting!" What else are you going to do? Slapping the horse doesn't work and it definitely doesn't improve the relationship. If you got bitten it's your fault for not thinking, being and behaving more like a horse!

SATISFY THE PLAY DRIVE

Many biters live in very restrictive environments, like stables and pens, and are isolated from other horses. Of course they're going to feel pent up and lonely as their need for social interaction increases. Then you may be all they have!



Play a lot of 'Friendly Games' and indulge his need for oral interaction by playing with his mouth. Photo: Coco.

The Seven Games teach you how to interact with your horse in a constructive and playful way and at the same time allow you to exert your leadership in ways that horses understand. Dominant horses move other horses around and that's what

the Seven Games teach you to do. The game is 'who moves who'. If your horse can make you move your feet, he knows it's just a matter of time before he can knock you off your perch. Horses are persistent in their quest for dominance and they are not in a hurry!

When playing the Seven Games, use them creatively as opposed to playing the games the same way every time. Always playing them the same way turns the Seven Games into the Seven Jobs, and bored horses start to get pretty inventive. Try playing the games with an obstacle where the horse has to do lots of different things, from jumping the obstacle, to stepping on it, to straddling it, going sideways over it, backing up to it etc. The only limit for you and your horse is your imagination.

INDULGE THE TALENT!

A horse who is mouthy and nippy is also showing his need for oral interaction. Play with his mouth a lot, and do more than he really wants. Rub vigorously with your hands, pull his lips around (playfully of course!), rub his tongue and even teach him to lead by the tongue (very advanced!). Teach him to pick up your cap or a stick or a bucket – put this obvious talent to good use.

STAY OUT OF THE NIP ZONE

Most horses nip because they are too close to you. Learn to move your horse out of your personal space with rhythmic driving actions – use your elbows and even do jumping jacks!). Horses with a tendency to nip also tend to crowd you – they are over friendly, pushy and self-confident. Simply asking the horse to stay at a respectful distance can make a big change to his nipping behaviour. Remember, if they can't

reach you, they can't bite you!

DON'T SMACK 'EM – BACK 'EM

If you feel a nip coming on, back your horse up quickly and intentionally. This changes their mind because it's a dominant move on your part. Give up the smacking. It doesn't work, and it can actually turn a nice horse nasty. Put more backing into your daily interaction with the horse and, above all, don't let him barge into your space.

Important: Keep YOUR feet still and cause the horse to move HIS feet, and do it without any emotional tension. It even helps to not look at the horse directly. As soon as he's backed away, smile and relax. Another hint: if the horse is really aggressive, don't be on the same side of the fence as him! Play with him through the fence or over the gate or a stable door. You need to get his trust before getting any closer than that.

HORSES ONLY BITE PEOPLE THEY DON'T LIKE, DON'T RESPECT OR DON'T TRUST

Remember, horses are prey animals. They are most concerned about safety. Some horses bite because they are scared or unconfident (right brain); others bite because they are trying to dominate (left brain). In both cases, improving the relationship works. Just like people, horses need to feel liked and respected.

Success with horses relies on knowing how to develop and maintain friendship and respect. It's a balancing act. You can't make a horse respect you by punishing him – in fact, it does the opposite. Aggressive people may successfully cause a horse to stop biting but they don't win the horse's heart.



Teach your horse to respect your space - horses don't bite their leaders! Photo: COCO.



Horses who want to bite you, are often telling you they want to PLAY! Photo: COCO.

BECOME THE KIND OF PERSON A HORSE LIKES, RESPECTS AND TRUSTS:

- Play a lot of 'Friendly Games'. Get your horse to like you and have positive thoughts when he sees you. Bring him apples and carrots (as gifts, not bribes!). Understand life from his perspective, understand how he develops respect, and consider his needs.
- Develop your leadership skills. Teach your horse to move around you, not the other way round! Remember, horses need an alpha, or they will assume the role.
- Prove to your horse you are not a predator, and that he can trust you no matter what. There's a delicate balance between getting your horse to do as you ask and preserving his confidence.



Don't Smack 'em ... Back 'em! Photo: COCO.

The Parelli Home Study Programme is all about 'Love, Language and Leadership' in that order, and in equal doses. It's the key to preventing and solving problems so you can have the relationship you've always dreamed of with your horse. For more information, call Parelli Australia on 1800 460 988.