

Introducing A New Horse To Your Herd

by Pat Parelli

While it is easy for us to understand the complexities of getting to know new people in the neighbourhood, or at school or work, a horse's needs may not be as obvious to us when changing his environment, as a result of being sold or even moved into a new pasture. There are actually many similarities to human reactions in this situation – it takes a little time for socialization and acceptance.

Respect the pecking order

Horses have a very strong social order. They are very clear as to who is in what position, from the alpha horse down to the last horse in the herd, and they are extremely territorial.

We need to be very aware that when introducing a new horse to our herd it may not go smoothly at first. Horses will duke it out to assert or maintain their position, and sometimes it's very rough.

Rather than moving your new horse straight into the pasture with other horses, take a moment to consider the situation: You're going to place him into a very structured environment made up of horses that have already claimed this territory, and they've already figured out the "pecking order."

To introduce a horse to this "cold" can have fairly serious consequences as they work their way into the hierarchy. The new horse will most certainly be picked on and injuries are inevitable, either from bites and kicks or being run through the fence. There is an easier and safer way to do this.

Preparing the horse

Play the Parelli Seven Games to establish a positive relationship between you and the new horse. This may take a few sessions. When you have achieved this relationship, at least you'll be able to have the horse relating to [you], should he get into any difficulties when introduced to his new herd.

It's important to know that horses tend to bond in pairs before they bond into a herd. They'll find a horse they want to be with and then find their place in the herd, often in relation to where their friend is. Therefore, you may want to first bond the new horse with a single other horse before introducing him to the rest.

One of the fastest ways to pair-bond horses is to take them on a trailer trip. Take them both to a location, spend half a day there and go back, put them in the same pasture, and you'll be surprised at how connected they are! Horses bond together for self-preservation. If you don't have this option, select one horse from the herd (one that is in the middle to low end of the hierarchy) and introduce him to the new horse in a large enough area to prevent them from cornering each other. Allow them to live together for at least two or three weeks before putting them in with the rest of the herd.

Introduction to the herd

There is really no way to make this uneventful unless you have pair-bonded the horse first and you have a large area for all the horses to run in.

If a horse cannot escape because the area is too cramped then he's sure to be kicked and chased by the more dominant horses for as long as two weeks before any kind of acceptance ensues.

The definition of a large area would be one big enough for two herds to live separate lives in, even if one of those herds is only one or two horses. This also means more than one water trough and several feeding spots, spaced well apart, so the new horse need not be faced with high level war games when trying to eat or drink.

Some people recommend having the new horse across the fence from the herd so they can get to know each other, but only do this if you have the kind of fence that will not injure a horse if he puts his leg through it! Many horses strike and kick at each other in a display of dominance and the last thing you want to have happen is a serious injury.

Again, success lies in pair-bonding the horse first, then introducing him to the rest of the herd in an area large enough to prevent him from getting cornered and beaten up.

While isolation may look like the answer to preventing injuries, it's important to consider the mental and emotional injuries that result from putting the socially-oriented horse into solitary confinement. We keep our own horses in groups and even stallions get to live with mares in a herd for the best part of the season.

Whatever way you choose, try to look at it from the horse's point of view. Horses have incredible memories and very strong powers of recognition, they know who is part of their herd and who is not, and there are rites of passage when it comes to new horses gaining acceptance.

Some people think that if they have already established themselves as alpha in the herd that there won't be any shenanigans once they leave the pasture. This is not so. The moment you leave the horses, the games begin to determine who's in charge.

Horses vote for their leaders every day, if not several times a day. If you are not there, the next in charge is quickly determined. Horses live in the moment, by the laws of nature and not by rules (certainly not our rules!).

One last thought. While bites and kicks and swellings and pieces of hide missing tend to bother humans, these things do not bother horses in the least. It's all part of being a horse. So, try not to become too upset – but do your part in the preparation and layout of the pasture to ensure the injuries are not serious.

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