



Bringing Experienced Owners Together - Joining Forces to Buy Better Horses - Campaigning for Change

**BEST OF
THE BLOG**

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Happy Horses Make Happy Owners: But Happy Owners Also Make Happy Horses

“There are few things more relaxing and enjoyable than standing with a horse and bonding with it. As humans, we tend to respond automatically to a happy horse, and it has now been shown that, in turn, the horse is doing the same with us.”

I have written this blog early today, ahead of going to the BHA Forum at Newbury Racecourse today with Nick Rust and Rod Street. They are reviewing the progress on implementation of the Strategy for Growth, together with an in-depth discussion around the issues and challenges facing racing such as the progress (or otherwise) of the Accredited Betting Partner status. I'll summarise the Forum on the next blog.

Because January and February turned out to be such wet months, we've had almost no horses running, but hopefully that will change very soon with better ground. My wife and I even managed to escape for a week, swinging the golf clubs in pleasantly warm Tenerife. On the flight out I read a really interesting article based on work done by psychologists at the University of Sussex who have been studying how horses react to photographs of positive and negative human facial expressions. Apparently when the horses saw photos of angry people, they looked at them more with their left eye, and their heart rates quickened. The researchers concluded that horses can definitely pick up on negativity, and that they have a "functional understanding" of the differences between happy and angry faces. Their reaction is also noticeably stronger to negative expressions than to positive ones. The researchers felt that this made sense from a survival perspective because horses need to be able to recognise any potential threats in their environment, and therefore angry faces become a warning system so that they can prepare themselves either to flee or to respond to any form of bad handling. The reason why they watch with their left eye is that the right side of the brain is used for processing such negative signs, and the eyes are linked to the opposite sides of the brain.

One of the leaders of the research, Professor Karen McComb, said that horses have adapted an "ancestral ability" for reading emotional cues in both other horses and also humans. Her research appears to confirm that the horse as a higher social species definitely has emotional awareness and apparently the research is going to look into this in much more detail now.

I don't know why, but just reading this article made me personally feel very happy. I find that there are few things more relaxing and enjoyable than standing with a horse and bonding with it. As humans we tend to respond automatically to a happy horse, but it may also be that in turn the horse is doing the same with us. I have also noticed over the years that horses always seem to be incredibly pleased with themselves in the winner's enclosure, and I always assumed that this is because of the satisfaction of beating the other horses. I now wonder whether it may also be that they are picking up on the delight of the owners, trainers and connections who are blissfully happy with their win.

I may have mentioned before in this blog that one of my favourite books, picked up in a second-hand bookshop in Hay-on-Wye, is entitled *How to Talk to Your Horse*. Over the years I've put this into practice. I'm now going to add "being happy" to my repertoire. As my wife is prone to saying, "Take him away, doctor"

