

# *Craig Cameron*

## **Double Horn Ranch—The Making of Great Horses & Horsemen**

### **THE CALL OF THE HERD**

A common problem for horse owners is the herd-bound horse. They say, “Craig, my trouble is that my horse is herd-bound.” I’ve seen very few horses that were not herd-bound. I hope you know that almost all horses are herd-bound. Why? That is the nature of the horse. The horse is a social or herd animal and finds safety in numbers.

The horse’s instinct gives him an extremely strong herd mentality. Next to the instinct to survive, I think this strong social behavior is one of the most important to the horse. For most horses, the herd is everything. From day one, the herd mentality is formed. A foal’s mother is his security and the herd is the center of his universe. A foal learns from his mother as well as from members of the herd.

In the wild, horses have no “man-made” problems. Why don’t wild horses have trouble going down steep trails, negotiating obstacles, or crossing water? Why—because the herd teaches them how to survive natural obstacles! The herd creates “naturally” brave horses. The call of the herd is stronger than the fear of the individual horse. Consequently, the problems of crossing rugged terrain do not exist in nature. Younger, inexperienced horses have a trust of older, dominant, experienced and lead horses. In short, horses have a trust of the herd. Being within the herd is “a no-fear environment.” It is the herd that gives the horse security.

Within the herd there is a pecking order. A pecking order among horses is not about pride or ego as it is in mans’ world. In the natural environment of the horse, pecking order is about strength, keenness and experience. This social status is about survival of the strong, fit and smart. In human society, the power or pecking order, is about who you know, the car you drive, the size of your house, and of course, how much money you have. The hierarchy of the horse is not about material things, but more about natural status; a status in the herd. This is proven and re-proven on a daily basis. Like man however, in most horse societies or herds it is a female or older dominant mare who is the leader. The breeding stallions keep the herd together but make no mistake; it is more often a mare who is the leader of the herd. Pecking order is important and gives the herd just that—order. Lead or dominant horses teach and keep discipline in the herd.

As horse people, we need to understand the nature, the structure and the importance of herd mentality. This knowledge enables us to communicate and be better teachers and trainers of the horse. In the herd of two, you and your horse, there is just one leader and there is just one follower. If you are not the leader, you are the follower; if you are not the alpha, you are the beta. With millions of years of herd instinct, the horse picks up very quickly where you are in the pecking order. If presented correctly the horse will easily accept your role as the leader. With your understanding of the herd mentality, it is easy to see as a trainer why you do not want to destroy trust. If you are the type of trainer that works through force, pain or fear the horse will never look to you as his leader. He will only see you for what you are; he will only see you as a predator. Experienced and effective trainers develop trust between themselves and their horse. When there is trust a horse relaxes and when a horse relaxes he can learn.

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The best trainers consistently have good horses. Great trainers create a learning environment of trust with their horses. It's not that their horses are not herd-bound it is that the trainer is part of the herd. The trainer is the leader of the herd. With this approach, herd-bound energy does not work against you, it works for you. As a horseman, I challenge you to create a no-fear environment between you and your horses. Do not be the predator stalking the herd. Instead, with effectiveness and understanding the trainer becomes a member of the herd; he is the leader of the herd. Your presence should not represent the threat of a predator, but rather the assurance that you are a part of "The Call of the Herd."

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