

## HORSE SAFETY TIPS FOR YOUR HORSE-GUIDED COACHING EXPERIENCE

*"Horses change lives. They give our young people confidence and self-esteem. They provide peace and tranquility to troubled souls; they give us hope." — Toni Robinson*

1. **Sensitivity:** *Stay calm, quiet, and move gently.* Horses are prey animals that have survived and thrived tens of millions of years by living in herds. Horses have a natural hierarchy, featuring an alpha or lead mare, who is usually a more mature animal, familiar with the terrain and resources available. She usually has priority access to the food and drink, prime pasture locations and often determines the direction of herd movement.

A herd's stallion may stay at the back or periphery of the herd to guard against predators, other males. He stays alert to problems in a herd's migration path while keeping herd together. There are many other variations of herd dynamics in every herd, just as in communities and in families including roles such as uncles, aunts, and friends.

2. **Horse Communication:** *Tune into horse body language as they tune into yours.* When you choose how to approach a horse noting the position of their head, their ears, their body posture, leg positions, the type of eye and eye contact they have with you, and the motion of their tail. For example:

- Ears that are pointed straight up shows alertness and curiosity.
- Ears pointed back indicate irritation or anxiety. In such a case, keep a safe distance and talk calmly and quietly to the horse to reassure her.
- A tail that is hanging straight down with little movement shows calmness and confidence.



Deb, coaching a team with Horseplay at Cavallo Farm, 2013

3. **Approaching a horse:** *From the side.* Horses have extensive peripheral vision with two blind spots: one directly in front of its nose extending around four feet in front of it, and another behind the tail, for about ten feet long. Avoid approaching directly in front and directly behind.

- Greet with a soft, gentle closed fist. When you have something in your hand to offer, keep fingers together as your fingers can look like carrots to a horse, a tasty treat!

4. **Roles, herd order & leading:** *Develop awareness of your role with your horse partner.* Horses have a keen ability to sense change in their surroundings. As social, herd animals, they are sensitive to who is leading at any given moment. That sets up a natural environment for humans to receive helpful feedback as horses respond immediately, without interpretation, unlike humans. Horses react to the congruence of emotions and energy from humans close to them.

### 5. **General horse safety:**

- **Lead lines:** If using a lead line with a horse, stand at their shoulder or their head, and hold the excess rope looped (NOT wrapped) in your right hand, so that it releases if the horse startles.
- **Feet:** Keep your feet at a safe distance from a horse's hoof. Be aware of where your feet are at all times in relation to your horse-coaching partner.
- **Shoes:** Wear sturdy shoes or boots that will protect your feet if your horse or pony steps on them. No sandals or open-toed shoes please!



Lyn Matheson, Owner of Cavallo Equestrian Center, Ypsilanti, Michigan - with the colt, Vito, October 2013