

HORSE SENSE

The whys and hows of the canine-equine bond

He'd been a birthday present for my mother. The Artful Dodger, we called him. A broken-coated Jack Russell Terrier, he sported a lopsided look, with one ear soft and dropped, the other starchy upright in full salute. From the moment we brought Dodger home and posed him atop my old Paint horse, Clyde, for a quick photo-op (Dodger's markings made him look like Clyde's Mini-Me), it was clear that this dog was born to be around horses.

During his 14 years as Head Stable Dog, Dodger led the charge on morning and evening chores. He was frequently underfoot and escaped more than his fair share of flying hooves. But he also knew his job, and was tireless in his efforts to purge our stable of marauding rodents. And whether playing chase with the yearlings or lounging in the sun with the seniors, it was obvious that Dodger not only loved being close to the horses, he also had an innate sense of just how close was too close. Horse sense just seemed to be in his genes. After all, Jack Russells were bred as fox-hunting dogs, designed to run with the horses and follow the fox when it went to ground.

Years later, while working as a horse trainer at a ranch in northern Colorado, I witnessed a different level of interspecies interaction as I watched the cowboys, their horses and their dogs—Border Collies, Heelers and a few “ranch-bred specials”—at work sorting cattle. Whenever a wayward bovine decided to make a break for it, the team of three intensely focused individuals would begin an elaborate dance of ducks and dodges designed to guide the wayward cow back into position.



Spent with her pup pal Perry



As I continued to observe these working dog/horse teams, I began to suspect that the nature of this interspecies interaction was far more complex than what could be described by the classical predator-prey analogy. While both dogs and horses are, at heart, social animals who readily form long-lasting attachments to specific individuals, their reasons for forming social groups are fundamentally different. As prey animals, horses rely on each other for survival. Something you may have noticed if you've ever seen a group of wild (or domesticated) horses at rest in a field: While most of the herd sleeps, there is always one individual who remains alert and watchful, ready to sound the alarm at a moment's notice.

Most wild canids, on the other hand, form packs to better bring down prey, living as a group to hunt more successfully. Hence, for dogs, membership in a pack is desirable but not necessary for survival. As domesticated animals, however, dogs are forced into a constructed social hierarchy that might include one or more dogs, at least one human and, in the case of the working dog, a whole host of other creatures.

Indeed, since their domestication, interspecies relationships between dogs and other animals have become not only possible, but also relatively

commonplace. Part of the reason has to do with an evolutionary process called *neoteny*, in which particular aspects of a species' development slow to the point where adults retain many traits previously seen in juveniles. This process has been at work in dogs since their wolf ancestors first began lingering around human settlements, and is responsible for producing the type of canine we all know and love: that cuddly, playful creature we bring into our homes and often allow to share our beds.

Not surprisingly, this perpetual juvenility curbs the majority of dogs' most aggressive predatory instincts. Herding dogs, for instance, utilize predatory tactics to control their flocks, but fail to follow through on the instinct to bring down an animal in their charge. It is also what allows dogs' work to seem an awful lot like play, and what frequently makes the line between playful pursuit and aggressive harassment more than a little bit blurry.

Merle and Sandi Newton of Crystal Rose Cow Dog College in Red Bluff, Calif., have been professionally training stock dogs for over a quarter of a century. Perennial champions at regional and national cow dog competitions, the couple knows a few things about identifying that fine line between playmate and predator, and what it takes to

foster a good working bond between canines and equines.

Teaching a stock dog to work cattle alongside horses—something that's crucial on vast Western ranches—begins with asking the dog to distinguish between types of prey. "We're actually controlling and curbing a strong predator instinct," explains Merle.

For this reason, establishing the human as the leader is a prerequisite for work with both horses and stock. Once the dog learns to act on his herding instincts only when given the go-ahead, the introduction of horse and dog usually proceeds quite smoothly. "The first time that our dogs see a horse, we want to be aboard [the horse]. That way, the dog starts to think of the horse as part of the human," says Merle. Once the two become accustomed to one another, dogs quickly form bonds with "their" horses. "If someone was to get on my horse and ride off," says Merle, "my dog would follow that horse until I called him away."

Provided neither party is threatened by the other's presence, and especially if there is some mutual benefit like play (or, as in the case of stock dogs, a working activity that feels like play), both horse and dog can certainly begin to view each other as just another member of the pack/herd.



From far left: Dalmatian Tally competes in the speed exercise with UK Trials founder Alison Burgess on Danny in the '09 UK South East Carriage Dog Trials (Tally qualified as a Bronze Road Dog); horse trainer Mark Rashid on Rocky, watched closely by Border Collie Ring, during the '08 UK National Carriage Dog Trials, Fenris, Freya and Munin teamed up with Anne Dickens' pony, Polo, on the endurance course.

Below: Feather and Cody the German Shepherd regularly run across acres of unfenced fields in California.

"But, they're predator and prey, fundamentally," says Anne Dickens, director of publicity for the British Carriage Dog Society, "so why do they get along? I'm convinced it has more to do with the human than with the dog and the horse. Dogs see that the horses are a part of our lives, and therefore a part of their lives as well. And it works both ways. The horses trust the dogs because we trust them."

Whether it is that trust, a working relationship, or simply mutual curiosity, there is little doubt that dogs and horses do form some remarkable bonds. Dickens was witness to one such partnership during the 2008 Carriage Dog Trials in Worcestershire, England (an endurance and obedience event designed to both demonstrate and test the Dalmatian's traditional role as a companion to horses and carriages).

Midway through the 25-mile course, half of her two-pony team had to be retired due to a high heart rate. Having been declared a "jolly fit little pony" by the vet on call, the remaining pony (named Polo) was left to run the second 12 miles on his own. As the team of two dogs, one driver, and now only one horse struggled to finish the course in time, Dickens watched as all began working—for the very first time—as a genuine team.

"With about three miles to go, my dog Fenris picked up on Polo's energy and concentration and fell in beside him, where his harness mate would normally have been," says Dickens. "He stayed there for the next couple of miles, every few moments glancing up at Polo, seemingly urging him on. It was quite extraordinary—especially from a dog who usually keeps his distance from the horses." Eventually, Fenris's sister Freya noticed what was going on and fell into place on Polo's other side. "Now, it might be that they just got excited by the speed and thought it was a jolly game," says Dickens. "But the way they behaved and the look on their faces made me think they knew the stakes were high and we all had to

pull together as a team."

Such partnerships, whether fleeting—like that of Fenris, Freya and Polo—or lasting a lifetime, are a perfect illustration of the depth and breadth of our animals' capacity for understanding and emotion. Doubtless, our ability to enjoy these complex relationships may forever eclipse our capacity to understand the precise evolutionary and behavioral mechanisms that make them possible. But this much is clear: In their openness to the unknown, their tolerance and their willingness to trust, animals may have a thing or two yet to teach us. ☺

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Top: © Anne Dickens; Bottom: © Valerie Wickham