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Dear Reader,

Before you start reading this book, I want to personally thank you all for sending in questions. I also just want to explain that many of these answers come from my own experiences with horses. People have different views, they do things differently, and we all have different systems that work for us, so the answers here are from my view point and what I have found works for me and my horses.

I have always tried to stay open-minded, trying out new ideas, seeing if they work or not. One thing is for sure, you never stop learning with horses.

Of course, many of us will have limitations and some may not have the same facilities as others, but I believe that good overall horse management is not about which horse has the smartest rug or biggest stable, it's about giving them the love and care they need.

Finally, one thing we must all remember is that however stressful things get, we choose to be involved with horses and ponies for our own enjoyment. We must never forget that, no matter how much we might want to do something, we have to ask whether it is in our horse's best interests, and we must always remember that horses are not machines. They are individuals in their own way and we must respect that in order for us all to stay happy, confident and above all SAFE.

Happy reading, and happy riding!



ABOUT HORSES



Can you tell us a bit about the history of horses?

It was over five thousand years ago when people decided that they might be able to train and ride horses. Wild horses originally roamed free in herds, but there was always a pecking order. A stallion would keep watch and protect his herd. These wild horses were eventually captured and tamed by humans for domestic use. Fast, 'warm-blooded' horses were a means of travel, and from the beginning changed the way men hunted. They carried soldiers to war, pulled chariots in Egypt, and later, drew beautiful carriages for the nobility and became a form of everyday transport. Slower, 'cold-blooded' horses were used for labour, helping farmers with their planting and other work. There are approximately seventy-five million horses in the world today, and many different breeds. Now, while there are still numerous working horses, the gracefulness, agility, speed and strength of horses mean that they are also used for both pleasure and competitions.

Do horses like being ridden?

Yes, I think horses do enjoy their work. It is important to keep the work varied in order to keep their enjoyment and interest levels up. We turn our horses out in the field as well, so that they can have some essential natural horse time. If you keep your horse's work interesting, fun and within his capabilities then he should stay confident and happy.

Why are horses measured in "hands", and what does it mean?

A hand is a unit of measurement of length equal to 4 inches or 10.16 centimetres. It was originally based on the breadth of a male hand in the days before we had tape measures. A horse is measured from its feet in a straight line up to the highest point of the withers. Try to stand your horse up square on firm, level ground. Once you have his height in inches, you divide by four to get his measurement in hands.

What's the difference between a horse and a pony?

A pony is a small horse that measures less than 14.2 hands high (hh) at the withers. Ponies can be as small as 38 inches (9.2hh) – but the smallest pony ever recorded was a tiny 17 inches (4.1hh). Horses can go up to about 18hh. The largest horse ever recorded was a shire called Mammoth, who was 21.2hh.

Most children learn to ride on ponies and then progress on to horses. Compared to horses, ponies often have thicker manes, tails and coats overall, as well as proportionally shorter legs, wider barrels, heavier bone, thicker necks, and shorter heads with broader foreheads.

What is the average life expectancy for a horse?

Approximately twenty to thirty years, though ponies tend to live longer than horses.

How can you tell a horse's age?

You can estimate a horse's age by his teeth. When horses are born they have a couple of milk teeth, and by the time they are two years old they have a full set. These milk teeth are gradually replaced by permanent teeth, usually by the age of five. After the age of five, the age of a horse can be guessed by studying the shape of the teeth, the angle at which they meet, and general wear and tear, but it is not an exact science, and as they get older it becomes more difficult to age them.

How can you tell what a horse is thinking?

The easiest way to tell what a horse is thinking is by looking at his ears. When his ears are pricked forwards he is alert, happy and interested. When the ears are flat back against his neck, it usually means he is unhappy or annoyed. When his ears are slightly lowered to the side it means he is relaxed, and if his ears are flickering it means he is listening and attentive.

I also think when you know your horse well, you can read his body language and his expression. You'll be able to see in his eyes whether he looks happy and relaxed, or anxious and worried, or even mischievous.

What does it mean when a horse has "good conformation"?

A horse with good conformation makes our job easier! Like people, no horse is perfect, but a well put together horse is more likely to be athletic, well balanced and hopefully stay sound. His neck, back and hip should all be the same length, and there should be a straight line from the top of the front of his legs all the way down to the middle of his hooves. It's good to imagine your horse fitting into a square box. He should have the right amount of bone in proportion with his body. In other words, you don't want a big-framed horse on spindly legs, but with a fine thoroughbred you don't mind.

I have evented many horses with slight conformational faults, but the most important thing is that they can be trained and have a big heart. It's obviously more important for a show horse to have good conformation because that makes up a lot of the marks when being judged.

I know that horses are herd creatures, but do they mind being on their own?

Horses generally prefer to have other horses around them, but it very much depends on the individual horse as to whether they need company.

Some of our horses hate being left on their own in the lorry, whereas others don't mind at all. Our ridden horses are all put out to grass individually, but will normally have other horses in fields next to them. All our homebreds are brought up in herds until they are broken in and get hind shoes on, and then they go on their own in case they get kicked.

In winter when my horses have a proper holiday, they all go out together.

My horse sometimes bites or kicks the other horses in the field. Should I be worried?

It is pretty natural for one horse to be the boss – that's how they decide a pecking order – and the others do normally learn to keep their distance. If you think he is being too aggressive it might be better to regroup the horses, because he could be trying to protect a mare or a particular friend. If he behaves like this mainly when you are around, maybe at feed time or if you have titbits, then you could consider removing him from the field at feed times so he doesn't have to bite or kick to get his share, or upset the other horses and stop them from getting their fair share.

How can I tell if my horse is healthy? What should I look for?

A healthy horse should be bright and interested in his surroundings. His coat should be sleek and shiny and his eyes bright and fully open. His nostrils should be dry and clean. He should have a healthy appetite and drink between five and ten gallons of water a day. When you pinch the skin on your horse's neck, if it takes longer than about a second to go back, this could indicate dehydration. All horses are different so try to get to know your own horse as much as possible – that way it will be easier to pick up if he is unwell.

My mum's horse has got laminitis. How can we prevent it from coming back?

Laminitis is a painful foot condition, when the membranes that hold the bone of the foot in place (the laminae) become inflamed, and it is one of the most common causes of lameness and disability in horses and ponies.

There are lots of reasons why a horse might get laminitis, and obviously prevention is better than cure. Be careful about his diet. Avoid rapidly growing or fertilised grass, and maybe limit your horse's grass intake by using a grazing muzzle. Try not to let him get overweight. You should be able to feel his ribs and he should not have a hard crest. Finally, ensure that rich, concentrated food is locked away so there's no risk of your horse gorging on it.