



# HIDDEN PERSONALITIES

How do you know who your horse really is? **Anna Bonnage** talks about identifying a horse's true personality.

**A**t some point during an equine's life they might be branded with an image which isn't entirely true. I hear this all the time: "Billy is a strong horse", "Sonny is stubborn", "Petra is grumpy". I also hear the opposite - people might say that Carlos is amazing, because Carlos jumps high without knocking fences down. They overlook the fact that Carlos drags you out of the stable to the paddock and ten people couldn't stop him if they all hung off the lead rope at the same time! It seems when we especially like or dislike something which a horse does regularly, we then start to identify the horse with that one characteristic or habit.

## Romantic perspective

We very often have a romantic view of our relationship with a horse which we then project onto them. If you ask people to write down three words which describe a rat, you'll read something similar to "smelly, dirty, vicious" written by one person and "cute, intelligent, affectionate" written by another. Our

experiences in life up until this point shape our perspective which we subconsciously project onto everything we see and interact with - unless we have already become aware of this, and are making conscious decisions to change these patterns.

One service which I offer is travelling out to view or ride prospective horses for my clients. I actively encourage people to consider this service as it's a lot of money and time to spend on a horse who may not be suitable once they arrive at your home. Before viewing a prospective horse for someone, I hear people say that they have "fallen for him" or that he looks just like their previous faithful horse Bobby. Occasionally people talk about the horse walking over to them and doing something such as licking their hand, thinking that this is a sign that the horse wants to live with them; but it could well be that the horse thought the person had a treat or, on sniffing their hand, realised it tasted salty.

## A sense of 'knowing'

In this article I hope to help you confirm in your mind who your horse really is and remove some of the negative words which you may associate with them, by seeing the reasons underlying your horse's behaviour - reasons which can be changed.

There is also a sense of 'knowing' which

we can feel in certain situations, around a person or animal. I believe one reason for this intuition comes from the fact that I've spent many years observing horses. At the age of four I started sitting at the end of our garden, picking daisies while watching the horses in the field. I fed them grass over the fence, and when my parents weren't looking I would climb over the gate and sit in the grass watching them graze. So today when I arrive at a yard, glance at a horse and feel within those few seconds that I am aware of who that horse is, it feels as though I'm looking at a map of the horse's life. This all sounds magical and mystical but I believe this sense comes partly from years of observing the connection between a horse's mental state, body development and physical posture, as well as my knowledge of how exercise effects horses for better or worse. I also recognise tension in their face and body, and am able to scan through my years of observations and comparisons, matching together how certain personalities respond to different situations.

## A horse's survival instinct

In order to identify who a horse really is, we first have to recognise their need for self-preservation - their survival instinct. I remember viewing a youngster for myself just a couple of years ago. As soon as we appeared at the gate the filly

was pinning her ears back at us and the other horses. I didn't take it personally, as it was winter and they were eating their morning hay rations. I led her up on the concrete to watch her move. She either pulled back or wanted to rush past me, upset and with her ears flat back. Contrary to the seller's perspective, the filly hadn't been taught to lead properly. Her erratic behaviour was because she was worried; she had no clarity in what was being asked of her. With some understanding of what I was asking, it wouldn't have taken long for her to lead well with a good feeling in her about it. She was frightened of allowing me to be alongside her, unclear on whether it was safe or not. This is very common for young horses, so they either want to keep the human in front of them or rush past. If they are asked to stay next to someone they might panic in an attempt to leave or become aggressive in order to protect themselves. Some people would have returned from viewing the filly thinking that she was a horrid, grumpy and dangerous horse, but it was only her lack of clarity creating the behaviour. She was just two-years-old and it would have been relatively easy to teach her how to gain clarity so that she could feel good about life.

Fear is a huge factor which gets in the way of seeing who a horse really is. At some point, most of us have experienced feeling fearful or even just uneasy enough that we are unable to be ourselves. I get instant memory loss in some social circumstances, such as when I am feeling under pressure in a conversation which I am not comfortable in. On a recent occasion, my new boyfriend and I had attended a live music event and my ex boyfriend was also present. While getting a drink at the bar, I turned around and was surprised to be greeted by my ex boyfriend's mother asking me how I was. I froze up and completely forgot the name of my new boyfriend who was stood next to me! "Let me introduce you to, errr, here he is, here she is," I said as I pointed at him. My brain became overwhelmed and shut down due to how uncomfortable I felt. Thankfully, my now long term boyfriend was able to see the cause of the situation and didn't assume that I had early



Image © Leonita Russel-Stracey

**“Some people would have returned from viewing the filly thinking that she was grumpy and dangerous, but it was only her lack of clarity creating the behaviour. She was just two-years-old and it would have been relatively easy to teach her how to gain clarity so that she could feel good about life.”**

dementia setting in!

So often, I see that a horse's lack of understanding in what we are asking of them triggers fear which creates responses people often don't like; kicking, biting, rearing, bucking, taking off. The horse's self-preservation is taking over and if we're not careful, we let these habits develop and the horse becomes unfairly branded with a negative connotation.

I remember on one of my trips to America, learning from my teacher Harry Whitney. Harry and I had been watching each other work with a filly for a few days. As we put the filly back in her stall, Harry commented: "That's who she really is." We stopped and watched her for a moment. Her head hung low and relaxed, her entire body looked soft, ears gently mobile as she looked around, a soft gaze in her eye as she watched us. I stood there and thought back to four days ago when she arrived at Harry's farm; she had been grumpy, and so tight in her facial expressions that occasionally the skin under her eyes creased up into lines.

Her sudden movements meant it hadn't felt comfortable to stand near to her, wondering if she'd bang you on the head with her jaw when she pushed past you to see her horse friend over the gate. In the understanding which she had gained from Harry and I working with her, she was able to let her self-preservation drop away, feel safe with us, and show us who she really was: a lovely, gentle and sensitive horse who wanted to get along with humans and was willing to try most anything we asked of her.

### Reading a horse's body language

Remember that like us, a horse's behaviour is based on genetics, physical ailments, and their experiences around humans up until this point. It's good to learn to read a horse's body language and have some understanding of what it means. Pat Parelli created a Horseanality Chart for people to categorise their horse's behavioural patterns and adapt their training program depending on this. It reminds me of The Four Temperaments, a proto-psychological theory suggesting



07743 160149

*Helping horse and rider to be relaxed, confident  
and their best in a variety of riding disciplines*

## HORSE & RIDER OSTEOPATHY

*Relax, we've got your back...*

**Specialising in Rider  
Biomechanics**

*Northamptonshire based*

**Georgina Bull**

*BSc (Hons) Ost Med, DO, ND*

**07748 802979**

[www.gbequinetherapy.co.uk](http://www.gbequinetherapy.co.uk)



Barefoot Magazine,  
Website Resource,  
Pro Trimmers List,  
News & Events,  
**Go Team Barefoot!**

**The Horse's  
Hoof**

Bitless Bridles  
Hoofjack/Tooljack  
Strasser Books  
Hoofboots by:  
EasyCare, Cavallo

## Is your horse a STAR? Or a FLOWER?

Either way, your horse will LOVE you when you bridle him/her with the bitless style of the Star Wheel Hackamore or the Zilco Flower Hackamore!



**Star Wheel Hackamore**



**Zilco Flower Hackamore**

**\*UK Shipping for either Star or Flower, just \$35.00 USD!**

Visit **The Bitless Shop** at The Horse's Hoof Store for a full selection of the Star Wheel, the Zilco Flower, and Dr. Cook's Bitless Bridle. Plus learn more about bitless options, bitless classical schooling, bitless training theories—with more to come!

**Subscribe** to *The Horse's Hoof Magazine*, an online publication (50+ pages) about barefoot & better horsecare, for only \$15.00 for 1 year! 4 issues per year; easy to download PDF file. Published since 2000 – covering all bare hoof methods!

Please visit our website at **[www.TheHorsesHoof.com](http://www.TheHorsesHoof.com)**

**The Horse's Hoof**

P.O. Box 1969 • Queen Creek, Arizona, USA 85142

Toll Free: **1-877-594-3365** • e-mail: [editor@TheHorsesHoof.com](mailto:editor@TheHorsesHoof.com)

Follow us on **Facebook**: [www.facebook.com/TheHorsesHoof](http://www.facebook.com/TheHorsesHoof)

there are four fundamental personality types. These days there are a variety of personality tests which we can do online, but viewing a horse or person solely in this way concerns me. If we are not careful, we put them in a box; our expectations then limit what that horse could well become capable of. For example, I hear people say, "Oh no, my horse Holly doesn't like going out for a ride on her own, it's not worth even trying." When we consider a horse's survival instinct, we need to consider that a horse needs one of four things to feel safe:

1. Confidence in knowing their environment
2. Confidence in another horse being near
3. Confidence within themselves
4. Confidence within the human

So with a horse like Holly, I can guarantee without meeting her that she is frightened of leaving the safety of her horse friends and her home because she doesn't have enough good experiences in hacking out alone. This lack of good experience means she does not have confidence in herself and she has no confidence in the rider. If she learnt to gain confidence in the rider and found good experiences hacking out alone, her confidence would grow and she would become willing to hack without another horse.

I think of three main categories when a horse's self-preservation kicks in. Firstly, as a flight animal, they panic and try to get away; they actively react, pushing, pulling, whatever it takes to leave. Secondly, some horses will fight back; biting, kicking or rearing. Thirdly, they disassociate / shut down and become stoic. Their movement becomes slow and heavy or even immovable. They blink less and look as if they are staring into space. This coping mechanism occurs when a horse, mule or donkey experiences a lack of clarity in what we're asking of them and they feel helpless. I've seen horses become confused on the lunge, turn in, and place their head low and close to the human's abdomen. It's as if they're hiding from the reality of being here, hoping no one will ask them to go back out on the lunge if they do that behaviour. Very often people like the horse being so close, but it is a way of escape for the horse; they don't feel present or relaxed.

To explain these three main responses, I think of a classroom of children with a cover teacher who has arrived for the day. You'll find one or two children throwing erasers, ripping up their paper, or even running out of the room. A few children might be threatening other children with scissors or pretend paper guns, and then you'll see the few children who are just staring out of the window or at their desk. With humans there are a variety of behaviours between these extremes, but with horses it's much more simple as they just want to feel comfortable and survive. Also, horses live very much in the moment; they're not in the field right now wondering what they will do tomorrow, but they may be carrying a feeling of unease if, every day, a human asks them to do something which they don't fully understand. Due to this,

most horses having a strong desire to get along with humans because their survival depends on being in a herd. When we change our approach to a situation, the horse will change their response. Horses don't resist for the sake of being stubborn, they resist because they are still unclear of the answer. When a horse gains clarity, their behaviour changes immediately for the better and it feels to a human as though horses are very forgiving in this way.

### Displacement behaviour

There is such a thing as displacement behaviour in horses. For example, you appear at the stable door with the saddle and suddenly the horse looks past you and over the hill as if an elephant has just appeared. This occurs when a horse feels unable to leave physically, so instead they leave mentally. Another example would be a horse flipping their top lip on the stable door when you tighten the girth. Displacement behaviour is a sign of stress, it masks who the horse really is.

### Observing behaviour collectively

We've all heard that a horse will lick and chew when they relax. Some training methods even encourage people to wait until a horse licks and chews before they proceed in the training session. I feel it's essential that we put signs into the context of the whole picture. For example when a horse yawns it's commonly thought that this is a sign of a horse relaxing. If their head is hanging low, their tail is relaxed and not clamped down and the yawn is a long, slow, full yawn, then yes it's likely that the horse is relaxing, but if you've just stopped then the horse could be relieved that you are no longer asking anything of them. It would concern me that the horse had felt concerned enough in the work to need to yawn afterwards. But if the horse was in the middle of a movement or on the lunge and started lowering its head, stretching its neck and doing full, long yawns, then I would be pleased that they were able to relax that much during their work. If I'd been working with the horse for three months I'd be concerned that the horse still felt any need to yawn as this would signify that there was a moment during the session which still

**“Some training methods even encourage people to wait until a horse licks and chews before they proceed in the training session. I feel it's essential that we put signs into the context of the whole picture.”**

concerned the horse.

Bridling is an area when I often witness horses yawn. When the bridle appears some horses will raise their head, tighten their posture and do a succession of short, incomplete yawns as the stress builds because they know that the bridle is about to be put on. Then once the bridle is on you sometimes see relief yawns; long, slow, full yawns with a relaxed posture. I've also seen horses disassociate and become stoic when tied up, then once the bridle is put on they wake up out of the stoic state and this creates long relief yawns.

We need to look at the whole picture when we study a horse's body language. When you observe your horse, keep in mind:

1. What happened before what happened (meaning what was the situation before the yawn, before they kicked, before they reared; was it a negative or positive one for the horse and what exactly occurred)
2. Observe all of the horse's body language at the point of the one sign which you have noticed i.e yawning
3. Compare in your mind both of the above on previous occasions when the horse was displaying the same sign

### Discovery

There are a few things which I like to do in order to get a clearer idea of a horse's understanding and, underneath that, their personality. Firstly it's good to see how easily you can handle a horse's feet. For a flight animal, it's a big deal giving you their feet and having your body in close next to their ribs as you pick up a foot. If they struggle with this, it's a great opportunity to help the horse gain trust in you also.

I like to see a horse exposed to a variety of situations. This helps you to identify

the horse's more naturally confident areas. For example some horses arrive for training with me and have never been asked to walk over a tarpaulin before. Some will simply sniff it and walk over, others are terrified but quickly gain confidence if the situation is handled correctly. If a horse really struggles to try and at least sniff or touch the tarpaulin with my help, I consider that someone may have previously attempted it and worried the horse.

I like to watch a horse in their comfort zone and discover where they feel most comfortable. For some this may be out in the field with other horses, and I'll observe where they are within the herd dynamic. For another horse, being in their stable with their horse friend nearby feels the safest place to them. I also find great discovery and opportunity in taking a horse slightly out of their comfort zone. If you're trying out a horse to possibly buy and the horse is already rideable, I'd recommend you watch the current owner ride the horse somewhere that they've never been before, or take the horse yourself if you feel safe. If the horse has only just learnt to lead and isn't rideable I'd recommend leading them within the safety of the property gates but around the stable block or down the drive just out of sight of their friends and normal environment. You'll get an idea of whether the horse wants to leave you or stay close to you when they become concerned. Personally, I'm looking to see if a horse has been educated to look and listen to the human for comfort. If they don't, then remember that this is due to their understanding up until this point; it isn't a true reflection. When you see a horse at their most relaxed, that's when you see who they truly are. 

Anna has experience with many different equines and disciplines, and is a long term student of Harry Whitney. She is based in Devon. [www.AnnaBonnage.com](http://www.AnnaBonnage.com)