



EQUINE BODY LANGUAGE

and EVOLUTION

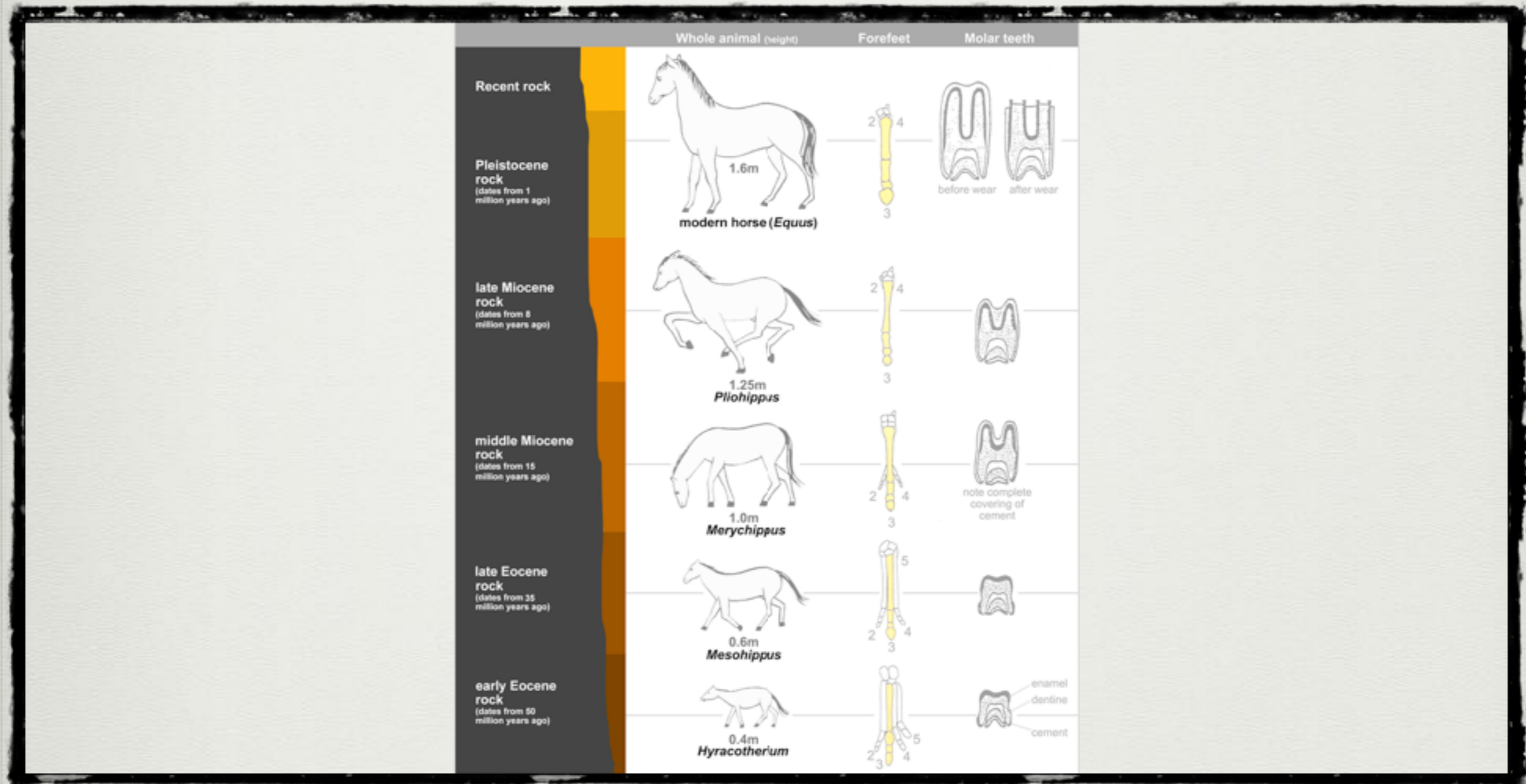
Evolution of the Horse

- The evolution of the horse occurred over a geologic time scale of 50 million years
- The horse went from a small dog sized, forest dwelling Eohippus (early horse), to what we know as the modern horse



Evolution

- The early ancestors of the modern horse walked on several spread-out toes
 - This was to accommodate for the soft, moist grounds
- As grass began to appear and flourish, the equids' diets changed from foliage to grasses, leading to large and more durable teeth
 - As more open areas began to appear, the horse had to become faster to outrun predators
 - This led to the lengthening of limbs and the lifting of some toes until they were standing on the longest (3rd) toe



Evolution

Behavioral Differences Amongst Breeds

- There are over 350 different breeds of ponies and horses in the world today
- They fall into 4 major groups:
 - Light horses
 - Heavy (draft) horses
 - Ponies
 - Feral horses

Categories of Breeds

- Light horses
- Horses with small bones and thin legs which weigh less than 1300 pounds
- Examples are Thoroughbreds, Quarter Horses, Morgans, Arabians, Saddlebreds, Tennessee Walkers, etc.



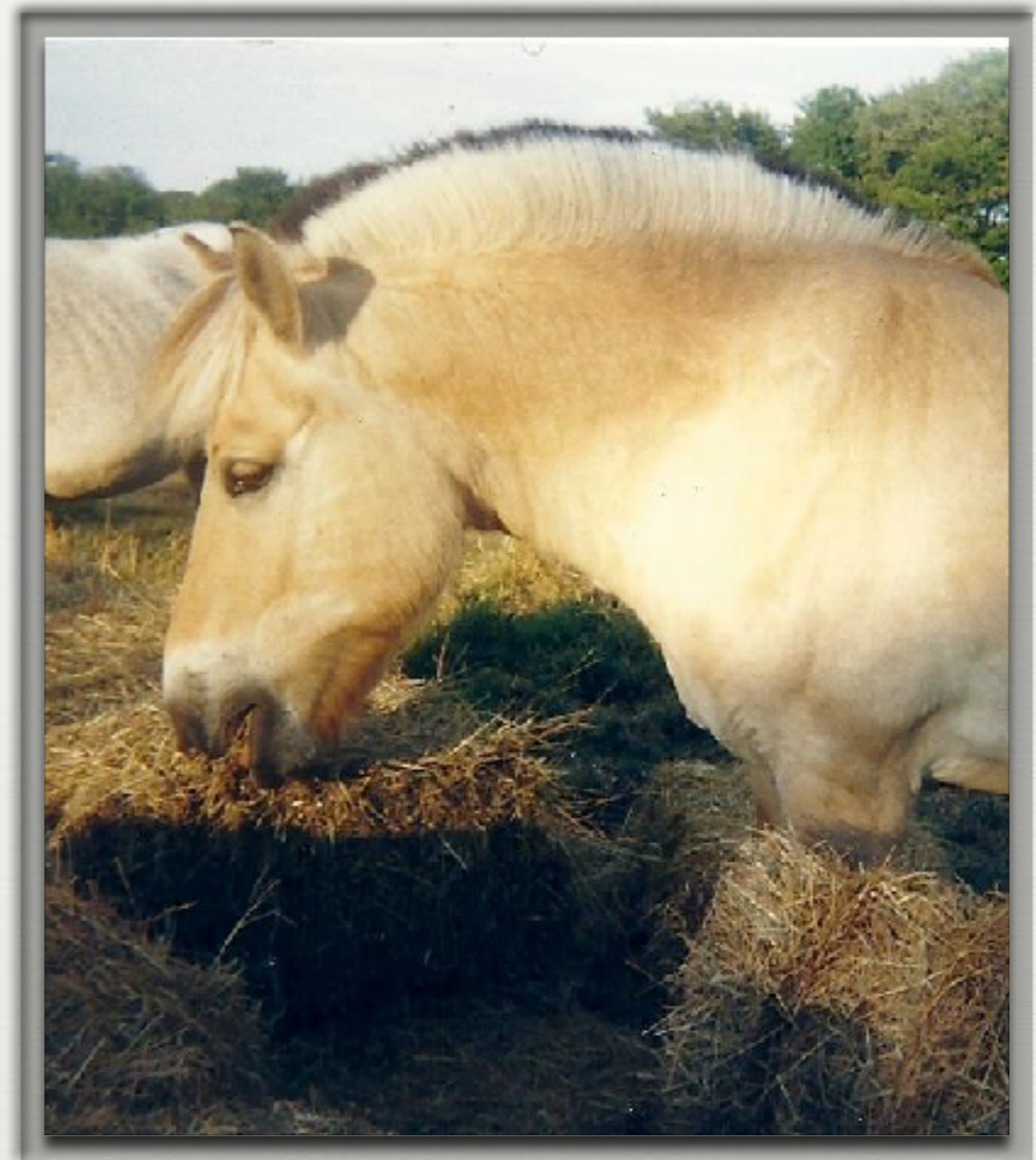
Categories of Breeds

- Heavy horses
 - Draft or large horses weighing up to 2000 pounds
 - Strong with large bones and sturdy legs
 - Examples include the Percheron, Clydesdale, Shire and Belgian



Categories of Breeds

- Ponies
 - Ponies are not usually larger than 14.2 hands, making them smaller than a horse
 - Examples include the Shetland, Haflinger, Fell and Fjord



Warm vs Cold Blooded

- Since horses are mammals, they are all technically warm blooded
- However these terms are often used to group different breeds loosely by their temperament
- Arabians and Thoroughbreds usually fall into the hot-blooded group because they tend to be more nervous and energetic

Warm vs Cold Blooded

- Draft horses tend to fall into the cold-blooded category since they were bred to be used in agricultural work they were selected to have calm temperaments
- Warm blooded horses are produced by crossing hot blooded and cold blooded horses
- For example, the Dutch Warmblood and Hanoverian horses are usually much calmer than thoroughbreds, but have the ability to move more athletically than the heavier draft breeds

Warm vs Cold Blooded

- When working on a horse, it is important to take into consideration if it is hot, warm or cold blooded breed
- Hot blooded breeds will reactive more negatively to sudden motions and will become distracted easier than warm and cold blooded breeds
- Hot blooded breeds may require less invasive modalities (Reiki, Craniosacral Therapy, Swedish Massage) to begin with so that they can relax

Horses are Prey Animals

- Most of the horses we work with are considered to be domesticated, but despite selective breeding for a desirable temperament, horses still possess wild instincts which have helped them survive
 - Desire to avoid predators
 - Desire to seek food and necessary shelter
 - Desire to form a herd and maintain herd integrity
 - Desire to reproduce

Prey Animals

- Horses are constantly assessing the environment for danger
- Some horses have a better instinct for threat assimilation than others



How to Make a Horse Feel Safe

- Stay relaxed
 - If you are calm and relaxed, then the horses can feel that you have already assessed the threat of your current situation and decided it was negligible
 - This will influence their own assessment
 - If you are nervous, they will assume the threat is dangerous and react accordingly to get away from it

How to Make a Horse Feel Safe

- Stay tuned into the horse's awareness
- Become aware of the horse's behavior....is he alert and listening to you?....Is he watching things going on around him?

How to Make a Horse Feel Safe

- If the horse directs its attention away from you and both ears are pointing away, then he is assessing a threat
- Try to see what he is assessing
- Wait until the horse bring its attention back to you to continue working on it

How to Make a Horse Feel Safe

- If the horse perceives the threat as dangerous, then he will spend longer analyzing it and could consider turning to run away from it
- If the threat is perceived by the horse as imminent, then the flight response may be almost immediate
- It is important to be aware of the horse's body language to determine if it is going to move away from the threat

Avoid Being a Perceived Threat

- Like many prey animals, a horse's eyes are located on the sides of their heads, giving them a large visual field
- They cannot, however, see directly behind or in front of them
- It is best to approach a horse from the side
 - Speak softly to announce your presence



Avoid Being a Perceived Threat

- When moving behind a horse, either stay very far away from the hind end or remain very close, touching the hindquarters the entire time
- Physical contact helps the horse remember you are there and staying close benefits you in the event that the horse does kick
- A short kick can't pack much power and is less likely to injure you

Avoid Being a Perceived Threat

- As a prey animal, a horse may perceive any sudden movement, large gesture or loud noise as a threat
- Make sure your manner is confident, your movements slow and deliberate and your voice soft and comforting



Horses as Herd Animals

- Similar to wild herds of horses, domestic groups of horses will create social hierarchies
- These rankings work to safeguard the herd and determine priority access to resources like food, water and shelter



Herd Dynamics

- In the wild, the stallion has the role of resolving conflicts between other horses
- There is normally one head mare who keeps the herd safe and moving



Herd Hierarchy

- The rest of the herd has a pecking order from the highest ranked horse (after the lead mare and stallion) to the lowest ranked horse



Herd Hierarchy

- When a horse is introduced into the herd, they initially begin at the bottom and have to work their way up (or not) by challenging and gaining respect of the horse above them
- With a human, the horse tries to figure out where the human fits into the pecking order
- Is the horse above or below the human?

Body Language

- It is very important to understand a horse's body language
- Horses communicate through postures, gestures and expressions more so than their vocal cords



Ears Forward

- The horse is alert and paying attention to what is in front of him



Ears Pinned Back

- The horse is angry and is warning that they will bite or kick if the horse or person does not back off



Ears Turned to the Side

- The horse is asleep or relaxed and may not be attuned to what is going on around him
- You shouldn't sneak up on this horse because he may become startled



Ears Turned Back

- If the horse's ears are pointed backward but not pinned, it often means he's listening to something behind him
- He may be decided whether to run away or turn around and check it out



Ears Rapidly Swiveling

- Ears that are flicking back and forth are a sign that the horse is anxious and very alert
- He may be trying to locate the source of a frightening sound or smell, or he may be overwhelmed by too many stimuli

Lowered Head

- A dropped head is a sign of relaxation and that the horse is feeling good
- If he is standing in a stall or pasture with a lowered head, he is probably either resting or asleep



Head Elevated

- An elevated head means the horse is focused on something in the distance and he is trying to figure out whether he should flee, investigate or ignore it



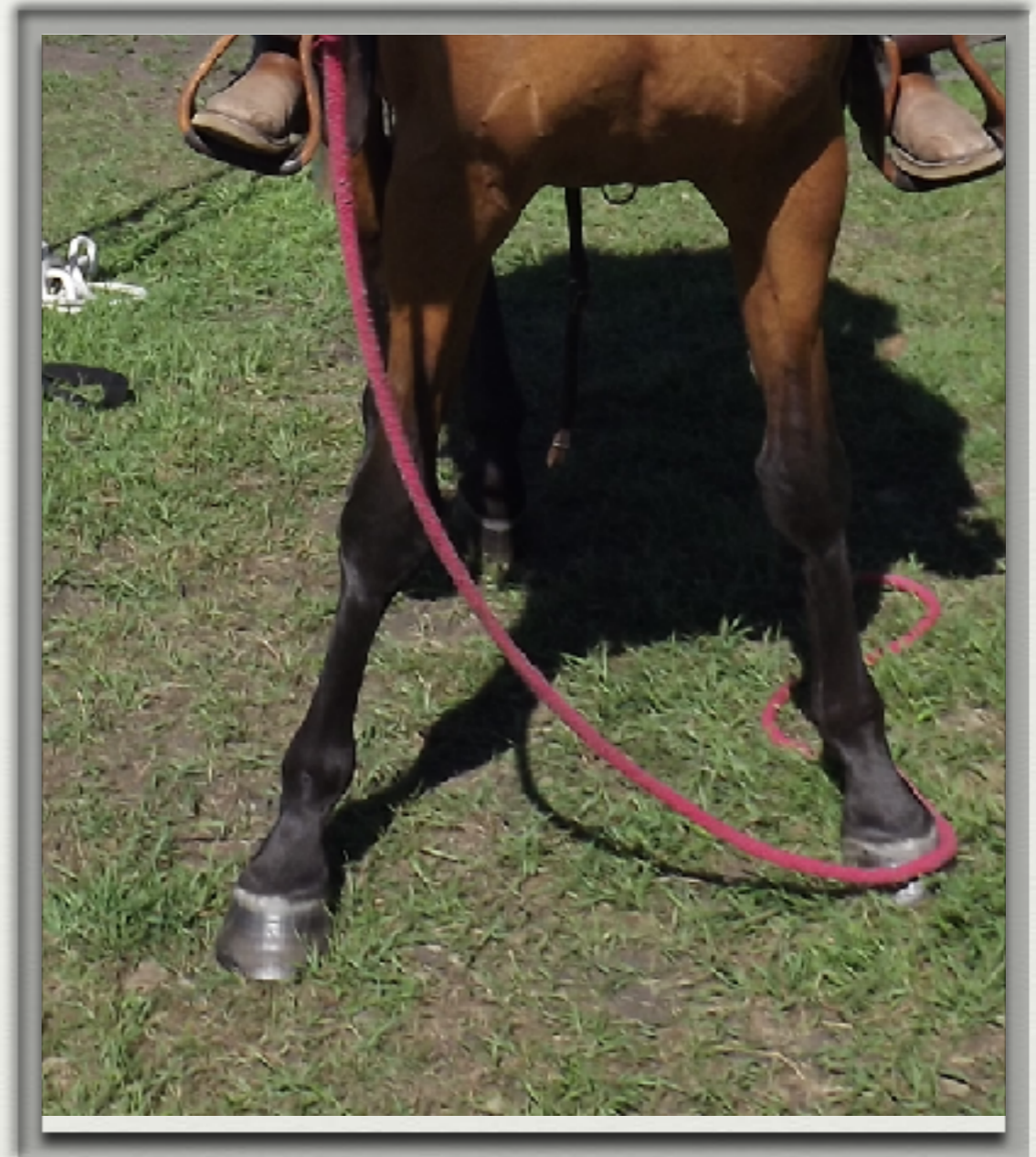
Head Snaking

- Lowering the head slightly and waving the neck from side to side is an aggressive act, often used by stallions who are fighting or herding an uncooperative mare



Standing Splayed Legged

- A horse spreads his front legs out to the sides and leans back a little when scared
- The horse is usually a few seconds away from a spook or bolt



Pawing

- Pawing is a motion the horse does with their front leg that may dig a hole in soft ground
- Can be a sign of boredom, impatience, stress or anxiety



Stomping

- Stomping is raising of the front foot and lowering it down forcefully
- This can indicate irritation (like a fly) or frustration with something you are doing



Striking

- A strike is a forceful forward kick with a front leg that can be either aggressive or defensive
- This is a dangerous action and can cause serious harm
- Fortunately, horses really strike without warnings such as stomping and pawing with pinned back ears



Cocked Hind Leg

- When a horse cocks his hind leg, he rests the leading edge of the hoof on the ground and drops his hip
- This is usually a sign of relaxation



Raised Hind Leg

- A horse may lift a hind leg off the ground to signal irritation
- The cause may be something as minor as a fly or he could be annoyed with a horse or person near him and is threatening to kick
- Intent to kick is usually accompanied with pinned back ears

Drooping Lip

- A horse standing quietly with his lower lip drooping is relaxed or sleeping



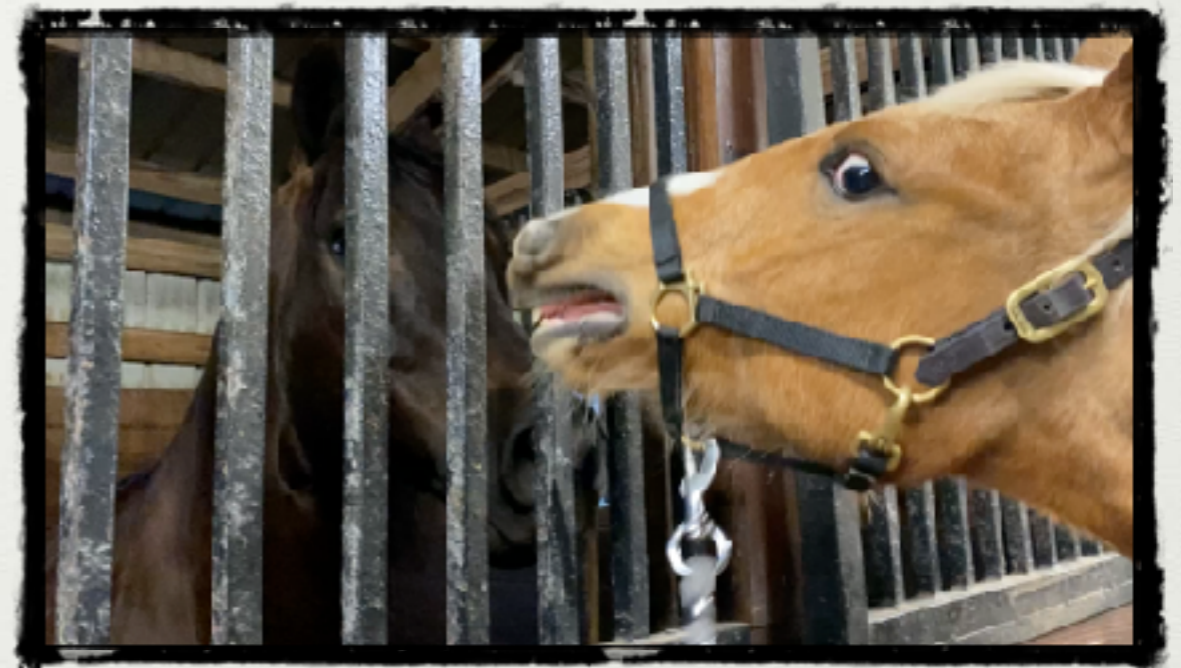
Chewing

- Chewing when not eating is a good sign when working on a horse
- It indicates that he is relaxed and thinking about what you are doing and enjoying it as well!



Clacking Teeth

- A foal will sometimes raise his neck, push his head forward, curl his lip and click his teeth together
- He is telling the other horses that he is a baby and please don't hurt me!



Flehmen Lip

- The Flehmen Lip occurs when a horse smells something, raises his head, curls his lip and breathes in and out
- This allows him to push the scent particles through a structure in his nose called the vomeronasal organ
- This allows the horse to detect pheromones - will often see stallions doing it when a horse is in heat



Flared Nostrils

- A horse will stretch his nostrils wide to draw in more air as he exercises
- Could also be a sign of being nervous
- Horses will “snort” when they are anxious



Tight, Pinched or Pursed Mouth

- This is a subtle sign that the horse is worried, stressed or scared
- This can lead to more aggressive communication such as biting or running away

Gaping Mouth with Visible Teeth

- This gesture can signal different things depending on the context
- If the horse has its ears pinned back, it is likely ready to bite
- It could also indicate pain or choking
 - If choking is suspected, call the veterinary immediately



Tense Eyes

- As with tension around the muzzle, tightening of the muscles around the eyes is a subtle, early sign of stress, fear or discomfort



Rapid Eye Darting

- When a horse's eyes are flicking from side to side, he is probably scared or looking for a way to escape
- The sign may precede a spook or bolt, but if he feels trapped, he may react by biting or kicking in an attempt to get away
- Remove him from the situation or calm him down to keep yourself safe

Whites of Eyes Showing

- When a horse is worked up to the point that the whites of his eyes are showing, he is extremely upset
- If his ears are pinned, then he is angry
- If he's snorting or trembling, then he is scared



Raised Tail

- A raised or flagged tail is one that is carried above the level of the back as a sign of excitement
- Arabians are known to do this, but it can be done with any horse



Clamping Down of Tail

- A nervous or stressed horse will press his tail down and he may tuck his hindquarters as well
- Could also be a sign of pain and discomfort



Rapid Tail Swishing

- Slow slapping of a tail is usually associated with fly control
- When it becomes jerky from side to side or up and down, he is irritated or angry
- This can also be a sign that a buck is coming soon



Whole Body Tension

- When a horse's muscles are rigid and his movements are stiff, he is either in pain, nervous or stressed



Body Trembling

- Shaking is almost always a sign of fear (unless the horse is cold)
- A horse that is so scared that it is trembling will either run or fight to get out of the situation



Touching You

- If a horse reaches out to touch you with his muzzle, he could be trying to nip or bite you or he may just be curious and is checking you out
- The horse may also be nervous and looking for reassurance



Swinging Hindquarters

- When a horse swings his rump from side to side, it can mean one of two things
- He could be warning you that he is going to kick if you do not stop doing what you are doing
- Mares will do this when in heat - trying to get the attention of a stallion

