

The Domestication of Horses and Their Role in Developing Civilization

Our topics for this week are:

- Horses in history
- Mankind's massive debt to the horse

Although the horse (*Equus caballus*) was the last of today's livestock to be domesticated, it, among all domestic animals has held the closest link with humans. Until the last 100 years, few dogs and fewer cats were allowed in homes. Most dogs were not trained for work. Horses had to be contained near human shelters and go through rather extensive training to be useful to humans. In some mideastern cultures favorite horses were sheltered in the same tents as humans. After becoming domesticated, horses provided unsurpassed mobility to humans until the development of steam engine locomotives. Horses enabled the spread of languages and cultures and the advancement of human civilization.

Humans owe horses humane, appropriate handling, at a minimum. They have served humans as beasts of burden for more than 6,000 years, beginning on the Eurasian Steppes, vast grasslands that extend from the Ukraine to southern Siberia and Mongolia. Domestic horses are believed to have evolved from the Przewalski's horse of central Asia, the Tarpan from eastern Europe and the Ukrainian steppes, and the forest horse of northern Europe. The earliest evidence of domestication has been found in Kazakhstan where they were raised initially for food. Horses were the most abundant game in the more arid regions of the Steppes.

Horses were eventually found to expand the strength, speed, and stamina of their drivers and riders in the Middle East. Hittites became superior in military tactics by training horses to pull chariots can carry archers. The first known text on horsemanship was the Hittites' Kikkuli text. Sythians of central Asia and later the Assyrians used mounted archers to create faster military forces that were more mobile over rough ground than chariots. The first book on schooling a riding horse, *On Horsemanship*, was written in about 350 BC by the Greek horseman, historian, and soldier, Xenophon. Many horse handling principles of Xenophon are still used today. Pants were invented as clothing because of the riding of horses.

The domestic horse was brought to the New World (Hispaniola: Dominican Republic and Haiti) with the second voyage in 1493 of Christopher Columbus and introduced to the Americas by the Spanish conquistadors. Hernando Cortez landed on the coast of Mexico in 1519 with 13 horses, the first domestic horses in the Americas. Small numbers of horses may have become feral soon after the Spanish settled New Mexico in 1598, but many were left behind when the Spanish were hastily driven out of the southwestern U.S. by the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. The horses were captured by the Pueblos, who began trading horses with Plains nomads resulting in the spread of horses throughout western North America. The horses which remained in the wild were called mustangs from the Spanish word *mesteño* for "wild and free."

Civilization could not have advanced without the contributions made by the horse. Cavalry was important to the ancient Hittites, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Crusades of the Middle Ages. Horses were essential for the conquests of the Spanish empire and Napoleon. The most successful military in history was the mongol cavalry of Genghis Khan. His horse-mounted

archers, called “the devil’s horsemen,” conquered more than four times the area of the empires of Alexander the Great, the Romans, and the Persians. Empires in the Americas were much smaller than those in Europe and Asia due to the lack of the horse prior to the Spanish conquests.

The price horses have paid for being domesticated and cared for in captivity has been high. For example, perhaps the best horsemen of the American Indians were the Comanches. To contain the Comanches, Colonel Ranald Slidell Mackenzie crushed the Comanche’s capacity for future war by killing more than 7,000 of their horses between September 1874 and June 1875. In 1877 after evading the U.S. Cavalry for 1,400 miles due to the superiority of their Appaloosa horses, the Nez Perce Indians led by Chief Joseph were captured by Colonel Nelson A. Miles. All their horses, more than 1,000, were sold or killed to prevent the Nez Perce from another attempt to escape into Canada. It is estimated that 1.5 million horses died serving in the American Civil War and that more horses and mules suffered casualties than men did in the Union and Confederate armies combined. During World War I, 256,000 British and 68,000 U.S. horses lost their lives. The total loss of horses from World War I on both sides from artillery fire, poison gas, work exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease may have been more than 8 million. Today’s civilization and national boundaries would not have been possible without the horse.

Adult sexually intact male horses are called **stallions**. Castrated males are **geldings**. Adult female horses are **mares**. Nursing baby horses of either sex are **foals**. **Weanlings** are horses of either sex between weaning and 1-year-old. Horses aged between 1- and 2-years-old are **yearlings**. A **colt** is a young male horse and a **filly** is a young female horse both under 4 years of age.

Now, let’s recap the key points to remember from today’s episode:

- **Horses provided the power for men to travel great distance over land, foster international trade, fight wars, and cultivate soil in a scale to promote farming as an industry.**
- **Horses served humans efficiently only if treated with some empathy as a work partner, not callously as just a beast of burden.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don’t forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.