

Horses and Humans

IN THE BEGINNING, HUMAN BEINGS AND HORSES were adversaries—the hunter and the hunted.

Archaeological records suggest that, beginning about fifty thousand years ago, wild horses were a primary source of food for early human beings. (These early horses were generally the size of ponies, not the larger animals we know today.) Historians speculate that human beings scavenged the remains of horses who were killed by other animals.

Eventually hunters learned to drive horses into confined areas where they could be killed with a club, or they simply drove them off a cliff and let them fall to their deaths. At one site near Salutre, France, the remains of some ten thousand horses have been recovered at the base of the cliffs.

But at the same time, and perhaps as a portent, horses appeared in cave paintings as objects of both prey and admiration. Obviously these early hunters not only depended on horses for meat but also admired them for their beauty and fleetness of foot.

From those humble (and somewhat violent) beginnings has emerged a long partnership that has forever changed both species. Human beings owe much of their early progress to the domestication of horses, which allowed them to travel, work the land, and haul goods more easily. Among our relationships with domestic animals, the one we have with horses is unique because of how dramatically it has changed over the millennia—from prey, to beast of burden, to companion and athletic partner.

Domestication and Early Use

The layperson's impression of domestication is confining and taming a wild animal. But the proper use of the term refers to taming and changing an entire population of animals, not just a few select members.

To be truly domesticated, a species must be able to assimilate into human culture. When a species begins to be domesticated, the species itself begins to change and adapt. Some experts believe this is due to natural selection, in which the animals who are naturally inclined to be friendlier toward humans are able to be domesticated and thrive, while other animals are left to take their chances with nature. The changes may also be due to selective breeding. Those animals with traits that people want to keep in the population are bred, and eventually those traits become common.

Horses were among the later species to be domesticated, probably in about 4000 BCE.⁹ The presence of fossilized animal remains among ancient human civilizations indicates at about what point the animals

became part of human society, and physical changes (also observable in the fossil record) often accompany domestication and help differentiate these remains from those of wild animals.

Horses were likely first domesticated as production animals, kept in herds and used to provide meat and milk. Nomadic societies based around these herds migrated from area to area to provide grazing for their horses.

The transition to riding probably happened by chance, when some enterprising tender of a group of horses realized he could herd them more easily when mounted on one of them. Early bridles consisted of cheekpieces made of antlers or bone, and a soft “bit” made of rawhide, sinew, or hemp.¹⁰ In Mesopotamia, a nose ring similar to that used on oxen was used for control instead of a bridle. What we know as snaffle bits first appeared in the Near East around 1500 BCE.¹¹

The first saddles consisted of nothing more than a pad or piece of cloth, which likely explains why riders were just as likely to ride bareback—there wasn’t much difference between the two. Saddles that actually aided a rider’s stability didn’t appear until the first century CE. These saddles had a wooden frame, or tree, which allowed construction of a deep seat that helped the rider stay on the horse. The later addition of stirrups further improved a rider’s security, and made it much easier for him to wield a weapon in battle.¹²

It’s interesting to note that rather sophisticated training and breeding methods also appeared during this time. The first recorded training plan for horses was written in 1345 BCE by Kikkuli, who was responsible for the Hittite king Suppiluliuma’s horses. Written in cuneiform script on clay tablets, the “Kikkuli text” explained how to care for and feed the chariot horse. It used what is now known as interval training, specifying the distances and frequencies horses should be ridden. It also included regular swimming for conditioning and detailed instructions on feeding.

Xenophon, who lived from about 430 to 356 BCE, was a Greek soldier, historian, philosopher, and lifelong horseman, and was known as the father of classical equitation. He wrote the first fully preserved

training manual for riding horses, *The Art of Horsemanship*. In this work, Xenophon became perhaps the first documented advocate of humane care and training for the horse. He emphasized the importance of gentle handling, good management practices, proper tack fit, and an understanding of the horse's mind.

The one great precept and practice in using a horse is this—never deal with him when you are in a fit of passion. When your horse shies at an object and is unwilling to go up to it, he should be shown that there is nothing fearful in it, least of all to a courageous horse like him; but if this fails, touch the object yourself that seems so dreadful to him, and lead him up to it with gentleness. Compulsion and blows inspire only the more fear; and when horses are at all hurt at such times, they think what they shied at is the cause of the hurt.¹³

Horse sport was already flourishing at the time of Xenophon. The ancient Olympic Games, held every four years in Olympia, Greece, included four-horse chariot racing for the first time in 680 BCE, and two-horse chariot races in 408 BCE. Races on horseback also took place as far back as 648 BCE.¹⁴

It was the Romans, however, who elevated chariot racing to a national passion. Races were held at the Circus Maximus until 549 CE. Twelve races made up a day-long event, although at the height of the sport's popularity, as many as one hundred races were held in a single day.

The horses used in chariot racing were treasured and carefully trained. They were introduced to harness at the age of three, but were not raced until they were five. At one point, the Romans kept a stable of fourteen thousand chariot horses.¹⁵

Human Beings' Use of Horses

It's difficult to imagine how different our history would have been without horses. Horses allowed humans to travel farther and faster than they were able to before, enabling separate cultures to meet, interact, and exchange ideas (or to invade and conquer each other, depending on the culture).

In more modern times, horses were as indispensable and ubiquitous as cars are today. They were part of all aspects of culture, working alongside humans to till the soil, log forests, and build roads; providing transportation, not just to town or to church on Sunday, but also across countries and continents; and providing a form of entertainment and sport.

There's seemingly no aspect of modern human life to which horses have not contributed in some manner.

Warfare

One of the first uses of domesticated horses was to assist one tribe in attacking another, and horses continued to be used in battle up through World War II.

The Hittite empire, which existed from about 1800 to 1200 BCE, used chariots very effectively. The Scythians, a nomadic tribe of marauding horsemen who harassed the Persian Empire, were expert archers who let loose volleys of arrows while galloping at full tilt. The Parthians, descendants of the Scythians, developed a highly effective maneuver: they would feign retreat, then fire arrows back at their enemies over their horses' tails while galloping away.

The Greeks and Romans used chariots and mounted soldiers in war, although primarily as support for foot soldiers. The cavalry scouted ahead of main armies, while draft horses were used to move supplies. The Macedonians used both light and heavy cavalry, the former being lightly armored units that were more mobile and could carry out reconnaissance and raids, and the latter being heavily armed and armored, often used to mount a fearsome charge at opposing armies.

The cavalry truly rose to prominence with Charles the Hammer's defeat of the Moors at the Battle of Poitiers in 732 CE. The Moorish armies relied on light cavalries, using small, agile horses in loose formation. Charles amassed a heavy cavalry, which was able to withstand the Moorish attacks, then decimate their armies with a forceful charge.¹⁶ Their success convinced Charles to use heavy cavalry more extensively, and his armies—and those throughout Western Europe—were transformed to rely on mounted soldiers, a tradition that continued through medieval times.

Later armies returned to the light cavalry tradition primarily, with riders swooping in to mount hit-and-run attacks while a battle was already in progress. As firearms became more prevalent, cavalry units were relegated to a mostly supportive role for the infantry. A role was developed for mounted infantrymen, who rode into battle, then dismounted to fight. Most cavalry use in the American Civil War was of this type.

Although cavalry units were still used in World War I, the advent of machine guns and tanks quickly made them obsolete in conventional warfare, and horses were used primarily to bring supplies to the troops. It's estimated that about six million horses were used in that war, and most of them were killed.

Today the U.S. Army maintains one detachment of horse cavalry for ceremonial uses, but the use of the horse in warfare still hangs on in other parts of the world, even in the era of “smart bombs” and laser-guided missiles. U.S. Army Green Berets rode horses in the rocky hills of Afghanistan in 2001 to conduct reconnaissance and scouting missions.

Transportation

Although the horse was not humans' first mode of transportation (other than their own two feet), until recently he was certainly the most effective one. Able to move along quickly when necessary, but also to cover great distances at a slower pace, the horse enabled early humans to expand their sphere of influence and travel almost anywhere.

During the Roman Empire, thousands of miles of excellent roads were built that allowed for easy travel by chariot. After the fall of the empire, these roads fell into disrepair; it wasn't until the late eighteenth century that a reliable system of roads existed again in Britain, for example, making it possible to use horse-drawn coaches for extensive travel.

As the Industrial Revolution took hold and railroads were built, the horse-drawn coach was no longer needed for long-distance transportation, but horses were needed by the hundreds of thousands to transport passengers, goods, and coal to and from the rail stations. Within growing cities, horses hauled trams, trash carts, fire engines, canal barges, cabs, and hearses.

It's estimated that New York City had between 150,000 and 175,000 horses in 1880, while a smaller city like Milwaukee (population 350,000) had about 12,500. In 1900 an estimated three to five million horses lived and worked in America's cities.

Communication

The Persians established post stations a day's ride apart in the third century BCE. The Greeks, Romans, and Mongols had similar arrangements.

Centuries later, fledgling postal services operated in the same manner in the United States and Britain. Post riders began carrying mail between New York and Boston (a distance of 250 miles) in 1673.¹⁷ Mounted "post-boys" were also used in Britain (from them comes the term "posting," as they invented the practice of rising in their stirrups on every other beat of the trot to make their mounts' rough gaits more comfortable to ride over long distances).¹⁸

The Pony Express route traversed 1,966 miles, from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California, from April 1860 until October 1861. Riders covered seventy-five to a hundred miles apiece at a fast clip, switching to a fresh pony every ten to fifteen miles, then handing the saddlebag specifically designed to carry mail to the next rider at the end of a run. The development of the telegraph doomed the Pony Express, although it lives on in lore.

Farming

Until the 1700s, oxen were preferred for the mundane work of plowing fields. Agricultural technology began to improve during this time, making the work of farming faster and more productive. This new emphasis on volume and speed ushered in the use of the horse, who was capable of doing more work more quickly than oxen.

The early agricultural machinery had to be pulled by teams of horses. As the machines got larger and heavier and they became more complex, even more horses were required. (By 1890 the combine harvester was forty feet wide and required forty-two horses, controlled by six drivers, to pull it.)

In the United States, agriculture was booming at the end of the 1800s, and the horse population was booming right along with it. In 1860 there were about seven million horses in the United States.¹⁹ In 1915 their numbers reached an all-time high of almost 26.5 million.

Just as quickly as the horse population had exploded, it was decimated. The proliferation of the tractor and internal combustion engine spelled the end of the widespread use of horses in agriculture. By 1935, there were just over 16.6 million horses, 10 million fewer than there had been twenty years earlier. By 1950 the population was only 7.6 million, and by 1960, there were only 3 million horses in the United States.²⁰

Horses and other equines, such as mules and donkeys, are still used for agriculture in some parts of the world, and in the United States as well, in small numbers, by the Amish and other small-scale farmers.

Ranching

Cattle ranching was brought to North America by the Spanish conquistadors, and the same population pressures that brought the agriculture boom in the early 1800s also led to a great demand for beef. The wide-open plains of the American West were ideal for raising cattle, although it was not an easy existence for the cowboys who tended them, or for their horses.



A cowboy of Native American ancestry rides the country of his forefathers.

Early cowboys rode Indian ponies or wild mustangs, but the capable Quarter Horse soon supplanted those breeds. The cow ponies were used to move cattle on the range and to cut individuals from the herd when necessary. The ponies were sturdy and hardy; they were also adept at managing the herds and provided able assistance when a cowboy needed to rope a steer.

Horses are still the preferred means of moving cattle today, as they're able to traverse any kind of terrain and are nimble and fast enough to keep up with a herd without spooking the cattle.

Mining

Coal was needed to fuel much of the new machinery that was developed during the Industrial Revolution. Ironically, old-fashioned horsepower helped provide much of this coal.

Horses were used aboveground, turning giant winches that hoisted loads of coal from the depths below. They were also used below ground to pull cartloads of coal up from the depths. Known as "pit ponies," these hardy animals (Shetlands in America and Welsh ponies in England) lived

and worked underground for most of their lives. They needed to be sturdy, muscular, and sure-footed, so they could traverse the steep, rocky grades within the mines while hauling loads of coal up toward the surface.

Mining was a dangerous occupation for these ponies. They suffered injuries from accidents, eye and breathing problems caused by coal dust, and hearing loss caused by loud equipment. According to mining lore, the ponies were sometimes able to sense roof collapses before they occurred and would stop in their tracks and refuse to budge, thus saving themselves and the miners working with them.²¹

Entertainment and Sport

Equestrian sports have been part of humans' relationship with the horse from the very beginning.

Polo, one of the world's oldest horse sports, was played in Persia and China in the first millennium BCE. The first recorded match was between the Turkomans and the Persians in 600 BCE.²²

In ancient Rome horses didn't just pull chariots in the circus; they also participated in gladiatorial mounted fights against animals such as bulls and elephants.

In medieval times, the tournament became a source of entertainment. These war games likely originated in France in the eleventh century and later became elaborate events that drew knights from many different countries. The main feature of a tournament was the *mêlée*, a battle (using real weapons) between knights who had been assigned to one of two sides. Jousting also took place at these tournaments.

By the end of the thirteenth century, rules for tournaments had been established, changing them from all-out brawls to organized spectacles with a strict code of chivalry. Jousting and riding at the rings (galloping at a series of suspended rings with a lance, spearing them one by one) eventually replaced the *mêlée* tournaments. These sports remained popular until the seventeenth century.²³

Hunting on horseback was another popular pastime. The tradition began in France and was introduced in Britain, the country with which it is most

associated today, in the eleventh century. At the time, the quarry was usually a stag or boar, but as the number of those species dwindled in the fifteenth century, the fox and the hare became targets.

Although the sport had a practical, if inhumane purpose—foxes were considered vermin and were fond of helping themselves to a farmer's chickens—it became a sport of the aristocracy. The sport was introduced to the United States in 1650, and many of the founding fathers, including George Washington (who had his own pack of hounds) and Thomas Jefferson, enjoyed it.²⁴ Although thirty-five states have recognized hunt clubs, foxhunting is popular in only a handful of states. Many horseman and landowners find the chasing and occasional killing of foxes repugnant, and real estate development has limited the activity's growth as well.

The Impact of Domestication

Historians believe that there were four types of primitive horses: the Forest Horse, a very heavy animal (similar to a smaller version of today's drafts) that lived in northern Europe; the Asian Wild Horse; the Tarpan, which was found in eastern Europe; and the Tundra Horse, which lived near the Arctic Circle. The first three of these primitive horses are believed to have developed into the more modern types—pony-size animals who lived in the cold, wet climates of Europe and Asia, and lighter desert horses who were found in the hot, arid areas of central and western Asia. (The Tundra Horse is not thought to have contributed significantly to the development of modern horses.)²⁵

Domestication allowed for the increased movement and mingling of these early horses, leading to crosses between types and the creation of distinct breeds. The modern horse is found in a nearly mind-boggling array of breeds that are vastly different, ranging from ponies to massive drafts and displaying an enormous variety of coat patterns and colors. These modern breeds owe their existence to selective breeding (see chapter 7).

Amid the flurry of new breeds, however, the primitive types mostly disappeared. Only one has survived in its original form, the Asian Wild

Horse, also known as Przewalski's horse, which was almost hunted to extinction, but survived in zoos and was reintroduced to the wild in its native Mongolia.²⁶ The wild horses in other parts of the world, such as the mustangs in the American West, the ponies who live on Assateague Island off the coast of Virginia, and the brumbies in Australia, are actually feral horses, descendants of domesticated horses who escaped or were turned loose.

Horses accompanied humans on their early travels, allowing the species to be reintroduced in North America, where it had become extinct some eight thousand years ago for unknown reasons. Hernán Cortés brought sixteen horses with him when he landed in Mexico in 1519; from these animals and later imports from Europe, North American equines were repopulated.²⁷

Domestication ensured that horses, as a whole, proliferated and thrived, even though certain breeds and types died out. But the effects of domestication and selective breeding were not always beneficial.

Although certain cultures have cherished horses and treated them well, horses have been considered expendable property. Untold millions died accompanying humans into war, and many more were worked to death in cities, where cab and coach drivers were more concerned with making a living themselves than with feeding or caring for their horses. Legislating humane treatment for animals is a relatively recent development (Britain passed its first law in 1822), and it is still a foreign concept in many developing countries.

Although selectively crossing horses has produced both remarkable individuals and wonderful breeds, it has also created its share of problems. Breeders often pursue fads to the detriment of horse health or breed horses with significant flaws in favor of more marketable qualities. For example, in Thoroughbreds, the trend has been toward breeding sprinters, since there are more races for sprinters at racetracks nationwide. Sprinters tend to have a slighter body type than do more substantial horses who are capable of longer distances. Although sprinters are able to run at faster speeds at two and three years of age, they often don't stand up to continued hard work later in life.

In the Quarter Horse breed, there has been criticism of horses who are bred specifically to show in halter (classes where horses are judged on looks and conformation, not on movement or performance), because the fad in recent years has been toward very heavy, muscular horses with very straight legs and small feet. Although this type of horse may win lots of halter ribbons, his legs and feet can absorb less concussion, a harbinger of problems later in life.

The Modern Horse Industry

When horses ceased being used for agriculture, the government no longer closely tracked their numbers, so there is no single definitive “horse census” of precisely how many equines live in the United States. Various groups do attempt to estimate the number of horses as well as their uses. The American Horse Council (AHC), a national group dedicated to the promotion of equine-industry interests, conducted a survey that estimated the American horse population to be 9.2 million in 2003, up from 6.9 million a decade before. The horse population has been climbing steadily since the precipitous decline in the mid-twentieth century, with the advent of mechanization, but it still pales in comparison to other farmed animals (there are about one hundred million cattle in the United States at any given time) and is also dwarfed by the populations of household companion animals (seventy-three million dogs and ninety million cats).

The majority of today’s horses—about 42 percent—are used for recreational purposes, with 29 percent used for showing or competition, and 9 percent in racing. Texas has the most horses of any state in the Union, according to the AHC—just shy of one million in 2003. California, Florida, Oklahoma, and Kentucky round out the top five. But raw numbers don’t tell the only story, as the smaller states in the Northeast can assert. Maryland is actually tops for the number of horses per square mile of land area, followed by New Jersey and Connecticut, then Florida and Kentucky. Still another measurement is the number of horses compared with the

number of humans, a metric in which Wyoming claims top honors, with 5.1 people per horse, followed by South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, and North Dakota. While there might not be very many residents in those states, those who do live there are much more likely to be “horsey” than anywhere else.

The Quarter Horse has enjoyed undisputed dominance in the United States for decades. It remains, as popularly billed, “America’s horse,” with approximately 40 percent of the overall equine population. The Thoroughbred is next most common, at around 10 percent.²⁸

Many horse owners joke that they try never to calculate exactly how much money they spend on their horses, for fear of what the amount is. Considering the cost of basic care (boarding, bedding, feed), veterinary care (vaccinations, emergencies), tack and equipment, show and/or training fees, the investment can be quite significant (see chapter 4).

According to the AHC, the horse industry is a \$39-billion-per-year business and has a \$102-billion impact on the U.S. economy, when spending by industry suppliers and employees is factored in. Of this \$102 billion, racing contributes about \$26.1 billion to the gross domestic product, showing about \$28.7 billion, and recreational pursuits around \$31.9 billion. (In other words, “recreational” riding is actually big business.)

About 4.6 million people are involved in the horse industry in some fashion. Two million actually own horses, while others are employees, service providers, or volunteers.²⁹

A Horse’s Many Jobs

Today horses exist in pockets, appearing wherever there is enough land to keep them comfortably and affordably. They are part of niche sports and recreational endeavors that are, for the most part, out of the mainstream. The industry itself is so varied and fragmented, one where those with different interests tend to travel in discrete circles that may not often intersect with others, that even the individuals who are part of the horse world may not be aware of all its aspects.

A Recreational Partner

For the majority of riders, their horses are primarily pleasure mounts. This designation can include horses whose only work is a slow monthly trail ride and those who are ridden, conditioned, and trained just as diligently as any show mount. Some of these “recreational” horses work pretty hard, being loaded up on trailers and hauled off near and far to attend clinics, ride in parades, trail ride in different locales, or participate in demonstrations at expositions. Clearly, no two recreational horses have the same job description.

A Competition Partner

There are horses everywhere who, along with their riders, lay their skills on the line in competition. The lifestyle of an elite equine athlete rivals that of any NFL or NBA star, replete with whirlpool baths for their legs and massage therapy for their aching backs. These horses travel across the United States and the world, earning Olympic medals or millions of dollars in purses for their owners.

Racing is the sport with which most people are familiar, and, indeed, more equine athletes are in use in this sport—whether racing in harness, on the flat, or over steeplechase or timber fences—than in any other, but there are literally dozens of other sports that involve horses regardless of age or breeding. Although some horses are bred specifically for a certain sport, others are simply pressed into service in whatever discipline appeals to their riders at the time. Since racing is a sport for professionals (there are very few amateur riders, although they do exist in steeplechasing), we explore other competitive athletic activities open to amateur as well as professional riders in chapter 6.

Horses may be moved from sport to sport (with the same or different riders) before one is found that best suits their talents. Thoroughbred racehorses in particular often find a second career when they retire from the track (because of injury or lack of speed or competitive spirit), and may end up excelling in sports their breeders might never have imagined.

A Working Partner

Horses who truly work for a living are definitely in the minority, usually falling under the heading “other,” which claimed 19 percent of the horse population in 2003, according to the AHC. They work on ranches, as lesson horses, or in a number of other pursuits.

Police horses are still in wide use in the United States, in both major metropolitan areas and national parks. These well-trained horses are most often pressed into use for crowd control, thanks to their imposing size, but are also used in routine patrols and for ceremonial duties.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the formidable police mounts are therapeutic riding horses, who are called on to bolster the confidence of people with physical or mental disabilities. They are a unique subset of “lesson” or “school” horses, who also qualify as “working horses,” since their services are paid for.

Therapeutic riding, sometimes also called hippotherapy, has been used since the 1950s with often amazing results. Disabled riders are mounted on horses (carefully selected for their quiet and unflappable demeanor) and led around at the walk, generally with an assistant walking on each side for safety and another leading the horse. The movement of the rider’s body in the saddle is similar to the movement of walking, and riding often leads to improvements in the rider’s balance, flexibility, and strength.

A Friend and Companion

Finally, some horses are the equine equivalent of the retiree. They may have been used previously for sport or recreation. They may have sustained an injury early in life that precluded any kind of athletic career. Their owners and riders may have lost interest in actually *riding*, but continue to keep horses as companions, fulfilling their responsibilities to their “companions for life.”

Humorously referred to as “pasture puffs” or “lawn ornaments,” these horses live out their days under their owners’ watchful eyes, receiving the same dutiful care as any competition horse. In some cases, it’s the

conclusion of a long partnership, where the owner is rewarding the horse for efforts from his younger days. In others, the owner might never have known the horse in his previous life, but perhaps rescued him from a slaughter pen or took him in to be a companion for other horses.

Riding is just one aspect of our relationship with horses, and nowhere is it written that a horse must be ridden to be useful or live a valuable life. It can be incredibly rewarding to provide a safe and happy home to a horse with no expectations for anything in return.