

## P for Personality

**Knowing your horse's personality type can help improve your relationship with him and help you tailor your training and goals to meet his needs.**

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There will never be another horse exactly like yours. You know better than anybody that he's an individual with a distinctive personality and characteristics with little quirks and endearing habits. He's the product of a unique combination of influences: heredity, upbringing, training and living environment. And these differ for each horse, making our equine friends diverse and our relationships with them personal and special.

Still, you can generalize about horse temperaments and use these generalizations to strengthen your relationship with your horse. Once you develop a better understanding of your horse's basic nature—the good and the not-so-good—you can tailor his training to best meet his needs. Perhaps even more importantly, you can develop realistic expectations for him. You can recognize and eliminate goals that are too lofty, freeing both you and your horse from the stresses of unattainable expectations. It's a win/win situation.

According to J. Warren Evans in the popular animal science textbook *Horses: A Guide to Selection, Care and Employment*, there are six basic temperament types. He defines them as quiet, interested, nervous, extremely nervous, stubborn and treacherous. While I agree with Dr. Evans that these are the general personality types into which most horses fall, I believe most horses actually fall into more than one category due to their individuality, and that this can vary with the situation and even change over time due to differences in human handling and environmental stimulation.

Do you already have a sense of which category or combination your horse fits into at this point in his life? Here's a rundown on the temperament types and how each is best handled:

**Quiet.** This horse is commonly referred to as bomb-proof by owners and a packer by riding instructors for his unreactive nature. He will tolerate almost anything, from a fluttering flag to an uncoordinated rider with inexperienced hands. This type can generally be trusted to behave safely and to build the confidence of beginner riders, while a more advanced rider might consider him too dull.

When I was a college student in an equine program, most of the horses we rode were young, inexperienced and unpredictable. Once in a while, something would happen to shake the confidence of a student. That's when the unflappable Quarter Horse, Royal, would be called upon to do his stuff. This steady fellow would carry the shaken rider back to her former level of confidence. He would passably plod through any dressage test and quietly take any low fence no matter how he was brought to it. Royal was not dazzling by any stretch of the imagination, but the program director would not sell him for any price. Horses like Royal have an important role to play in developing riders, but they don't come along often. Lack of reactivity is simply not typical of the species.

**Interested** horses are great for riders with a little training and experience. In well-trained hands, these horses pay attention to the rider's aids but aren't upset by them. While they are aware of their environment and respond to things going on around them, it's unusual for them to react with fight-or-flight behavior. As long as this horse is handled with consideration and sensitivity, riders will seldom go wrong with this sort. Many of the horses you see collecting ribbons at local horse shows fit into this category, as they are both animated and dependable.

**Nervous** is the personality type truest to equine nature, and consequently many horses fit into this category. The flight response in nervous horses is well-developed. They spook easily, perhaps even bolting to escape from perceived dangers all around. They tend to carry their heads high, looking for trouble and ready to react. For a quiet and experienced rider, this horse can eventually make a very nice mount. For a tentative rider, he can be a wreck waiting to happen. Most can eventually develop some trust and a sense of security from confident yet sympathetic riders who allow them to progress in training. They require extreme patience and confident handling from the rider. You cannot rush the trust they require before they can progress.

If you can learn to work with the challenge, these horses can be worth it and wonderful to show as they tend to possess an extra brilliance in spirit and movement.

Extremely nervous horses are so reactive that virtually anything can set them off, and even changes in footing or shadows on the ground could cause fearful explosions at any time. Calm, consistent handling while slowly expanding their comfort zones will ultimately benefit them, but the road will be long and often dangerous. You must stay especially alert at all times. These horses are best left to professionals or to individuals with loads of experience and a solid foundation in equine behavior principles.

Stubborn horses tend to resent work and try to find a way out of it. When pushed, they often become irritable and balky, sometimes even exploding in temper. Trainers often encounter behavior that sets back training, requiring repetitions of lessons already learned. These horses also require riders with a lot of patience, but while the nervous horse requires a quiet hand, stubborn horses need a tactful yet firm approach.

Treacherous horses, with the notable exception of a few naturally aggressive stallions, are nearly always either a product of bad handling or benign neglect. They either haven't learned to respect humans or have learned to actively resent them. Such horses may unexpectedly attack humans by kicking, biting or stomping on them. Horses who simply lack an understanding of their place below humans on the dominance hierarchy may sometimes be reformed by the most experienced of handlers. Sadly, euthanasia is sometimes the only safe solution for savage horses. Fortunately, such horses are rare.

Many horses seem to fluctuate daily between types. My mare Duchess oscillates between the interested, nervous and stubborn personality types. Consequently, there are days when she's brilliant and very responsive. Then there are days when she seems to resent her work, prancing or grinding her teeth. I can't force her compliance, but must develop it from her willingly. Each day is another chance to bring out her best. It requires me to use my creativity and to be a gentle and tactful teacher. But this is what makes each ride unique and each day a lesson.