

# TAKING TERRITORY

Julia Felton developing respect



This is the third of seven waterhole rituals observed and taught by Carolyn Resnick. The first on Sharing Territory, helps you establish a great bond with your horse and trust is built through the second ritual, Say Hello, and together they build a great foundation for the relationship that you want to have with your horse.

As you practice these you will see his natural curiosity emerge and by working with that we can start to shape his behaviour. What you will also discover is that as your relationship develops your horse will seek to push the boundaries and become more dominant, exploring how much he can push you around. It can be as subtle as dropping his shoulder into you when you are leading

him, or bumping into you. We are training our horse all the time we are with him and these actions soon teach a horse that he can violate our personal space if we do not address the situation.

Pushing the boundaries is nothing personal, it happens in all relationships. Both parties usually enter into the relationship respecting each other. They 'dance' with each other whilst establishing the ground rules for the relationship. Then at some point one person pushes the other person's boundaries and that person has to decide how to respond. They either respond and let the person know that their behaviour was unacceptable or they allow it. If the behaviour is allowed it is likely to persist and soon they find that

their relationship is out of balance. The partnership is no longer equal but rather one person, consciously or unconsciously, dominates the other. The same can happen with your horse. So how do we remedy this situation? We use the natural instincts of a horse, of course.

Lead horses manage dominant horse behaviour by catching their rival off guard and driving them off the territory on which they are standing. When the lead horse does this, the dominant horse no longer questions his authority because he has lost face. It is the responsibility of a leader never to be caught off guard. As prey animals, horses have to be acutely aware of what is happening in their surroundings, otherwise they could be

attacked by that mountain lion. So being caught off guard is really humiliating for a horse as it demonstrates he was not paying attention. As Napoleon said, "A leader has a right to be defeated, but never a right to be surprised."

A lead horse will never let another horse get behind him to drive him away from his territory because the lead horse is always on guard. Other horses in the herd soon begin to recognise the lead horse by the fact that they cannot sneak up and surprise him. Merely dominant horses, however, will let their guard down because they are not that committed to being the ultimate leader. They just want to dominate and have a good time doing so. Horses naturally know that the lead horse is most interested in

the safety of the herd. This means the lead horse has the greatest focus so he will know where the predators are. All horses respect any horse that catches them off guard.

Territory snatching is most often seen when horses are engaged in grazing games. It is most noticeable when horses chase other horses from a particular grazing spot. They enjoy this ritual because it involves high drama. Lead horses, however, use this ritual only to create submission and respect or a watchful eye, while dominant horses just enjoy acting dominant with no other thought in mind.

We can develop respect in our relationship with our horse by acting like a lead horse, sneaking up on our horse when he is grazing and Taking Territory from him. In other words we drive our horse from the spot he is grazing on and we keep him away from this place until he has lost interest in grazing there. This is a very effective ritual and typically you only have to do it a few times as your horse will soon learn the need for paying attention at all times.

A few words of warning when Taking Territory. Firstly, you can only Take Territory when your horse is unaware that you are there. If your horse knows you are coming then this is not Taking Territory but rather asking your horse to move.

You must be 100% committed when running up behind your horse and Taking Territory. It is imperative that your horse is surprised and moves off his pile of food

or hay with some gusto. Be prepared that your horse might be shocked by your actions and so could come back and charge at you. Just make sure you keep him out of your personal space by moving towards him and swishing your reed in front of you. Once your horse has lost interest in you and the food pile, go and Say Hello to him. Initially your horse might be aggrieved by the fact that you have surprised him, so read his body language and take the time it takes to Say Hello. It could take a while; be patient.

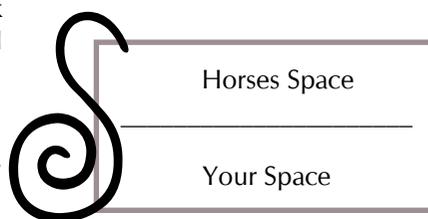
You usually cannot Take Territory on a lead horse because as a leader they are unlikely to let you sneak up on them. That said, I did once Take Territory on a lead mare. She was very domesticated and had been the leader of her herd for some five years and no-one ever challenged her authority. One day when she was grazing on a pile of hay in the arena I surprised her and ran her off the hay. The shock on her face was palpable and she came back at me very aggressively. She was really embarrassed by what had happened.

Many of my students find this the most difficult ritual because they feel that by Taking Territory they will damage the relationship they have with their horse. I understand this but actually the converse is true. Typically your horse is so surprised by what has happened, you have truly demonstrated that you are the leader of the herd, that in fact he wants to be with you

more.

Another great way to develop respect with your horse is to ensure you always respect your horse's personal space. Just like humans, horses have boundaries which define their personal space and these can be flexible. Sometimes your horse might like you to be close to him and sometimes he might prefer you to be further away. Yet all too often we never give our horse a choice in that decision. We march into his personal space with little consideration for what our horse thinks about this.

### The Personal Space Rule



You always have the right to direct the behaviour of others in regard to your personal space.

Therefore, when you are in your horse's personal space you cannot direct his behaviour and if he offers you the leadership role it is a privilege not a right.

Conversely when the horse is in your personal space, leadership is your right not a privilege.

This has massive consequences for how we catch our horses. Just think about it. If you walk into your horse's personal space you have no right to put the halter on him. Remember the horse influences the interaction if you enter this

personal space. However, if your horse comes into your space then you have permission to put the halter on. This is why my horses always catch me.

As the leader, you must always be aware how your horse feels about his personal space when you approach him. You must always ask permission to get closer to him when he is respecting your personal space and keeping an eye on you.

The only time that your horse does not have rights to his personal space is after you have established a bond and he forgets to keep an eye on you. Your horse needs to respect your leadership by being aware of where you are at all times. If he is not respectful, you must ask him to leave the area you are sharing together. Sending him away will cause him to want to come back with respect. Sometimes he may try to come back without your permission, but stop him, and ask him to leave again. It is important to keep your horse out of your territory and personal space until he returns with respect. If you ask him to stop on his return and he is willing to do so,, he is respecting your authority.



Julia Felton teaches people how to develop a better relationship with their horse through communicating with a horse's natural instincts.

Workshops are run across the UK and Europe.  
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