

# Horse's eyevew

If your horse won't lunge to the right or jumps to the right when he spooks, it could be due to 'left eye preference', an imbalance of the horse's mind. Kate Farmer reports

Many of us have probably experienced the 'plastic bag syndrome' – ride past it one way and it's totally harmless; go the other way and it turns into a monster! But now researchers are getting to the bottom of the horse's lop-sided view of the world...

Although we go to great lengths to achieve balance and straightness in our horses, most handling practices are decidedly one-sided, yet rarely do we consider why this is. For example...

- We usually lead from the left
- We tack up from the left
- We mount and dismount on the left.

Recent research has shown that horses are actually hard-wired to prefer having people on the left. The study – a joint project by the Universities of St Andrews in Scotland and Regensburg in Germany, and the Harmony Centre in Austria – compared conventionally trained horses (handled mainly from the left) with horses trained and handled on both sides. The researchers found that the horses of both groups preferred to put a human in their left eye.

## Steeped in tradition

This could be why horses seem more settled when we are on the left, and also why some problems – for instance, when the horse turns in to face the person or turns around while lungeing – occur more on the right rein.

Professor Richard Byrne of St Andrews University, who supervised the study, says: "We discovered that they prefer to 'keep an eye on' anything that might be of concern or of interest and it's usually the same eye – for most, the left eye. This is the first time that this sort of preferential use of one eye has been found in a mammal and suggests that horses are aware – probably unconsciously – of which side of the brain does the best job at this important matter of evaluation and assessment."

"The effect may have gone unnoticed in the past, because of the tradition of 'working' a horse from its left side, which allows most horses to keep their left eye on the person; it has been thought that this resulted from a need for cavalry to keep their sword side inwards when mounting. But our results suggest that this convention did not arise from human history, but rather from horse biology."



## Running the tests

To find out more, the researchers tested horses under two conditions – one with a human standing passively and one with a human actively communicating with the horse in a round pen. In both cases, both groups of horses chose overwhelmingly to put the person on the left.

In the passive situation, the preference was more marked in the

## Seeing things!

Kate Farmer, a horse trainer who led the study on interaction with humans, says this evidence suggests that the horse's left eye could be the 'rapid reaction' eye. The horse tries to put anything it's not sure of or afraid of on the left, so it can react as quickly as possible should the object or creature turn out to be hostile.

However, it may also prefer to have another horse or human on the left, where it can react quickly to the signal of a companion in the event of danger. She says this could be part of the horse's flight mechanism, that helps co-ordinate a group of horses under attack from predators, and that it also has some important implications for riders.

## Eye opener

Farmer says: "We need to distinguish between the negative-association behaviour, when the horse keeps us on the left and becomes unsettled or refuses to accept it if we are on the right, and the positive-association behaviour, when the horse may choose to put us on the left, but shows no anxiety if we work on the

conventionally trained horses. In the interactive situation, both groups showed a similarly strong preference for having the person on the left. This means that the tendency horses have to put us on the left is not simply a matter of habit and training, but is actually the horse's natural preference.

When these findings were put with three other studies that examined reactions to inanimate objects, an explanation started to emerge...

- First, the more emotional a horse is, the more likely it is to use its left eye to view a new, potentially frightening, object.
- Second, most horses show a stronger 'startle reaction' to a frightening object (such as an umbrella opening suddenly) when it is presented on the left
- Third, under normal circumstances, horses prefer to use the left eye to view objects with a positive or negative association, and the right eye for neutral objects.

right. This can be an important indicator of the horse's state of mind. If the horse insists on us being on the left, it can be a sign it sees us as a threat. So working towards overcoming this fear until it accepts us on both sides can make for a safer and more harmonious relationship.

"Our study also revealed a few horses in which the trend is reversed, preferring us on the right – they need careful and sympathetic handling. It could be a serious mistake to regard one-sided behaviour as 'naughty' and to punish it, but equally, it should not be ignored. The horse is sending us an important message."

## For more information...

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*Inset photos: Bob Atkins*